

B'NAI GOMBIN

Newsletter of the Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society

Issue 10, August 1999

Editor: Noam Lupu

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The Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society (GJHGS) is a non-profit organization (EIN 33-0762680) that seeks to educate the public about the history and genealogy of the Jews of Gombin. To achieve this goal, the GJHGS collects and publishes relevant materials, encourages historical and genealogical research, and undertakes activities aimed at preserving documents and relics of the culture and history of Jewish Gombin. *B'nai Gombin* is the newsletter of the GJHGS. Everything published in *B'nai Gombin* is meant to provide information for Gombiners and their descendants. Articles, stories, poems, or other genres about Jewish genealogy, Poland, Gombin, or other subjects of interest to Gombiners submitted, may be published in *B'nai Gombin*. The views and opinions expressed in *B'nai Gombin* are not necessarily those of the Gombin Society. For further information or to receive back issues, contact the Gombin Society (GJHGS) by mail at P.O. Box 503052, San Diego, CA 92150, by fax at (925) 274-0927, by e-mail at NoLupu98@aol.com, or by phone: Mindy Prosperi, President, at (914) 928-8211 or Noam Lupu, Secretary, at (925) 930-6588. Visit our website at <<http://www.jewishgen.org/shtetlinks/gombin/gombin.html>>.

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ABOUT THE SOCIETY

The Gombin Jewish Historical and Genealogical Society is a nonprofit organization, open to all people, from all over the world, who have an interest in Gombin Jewish history and genealogy. The goals of the Gombin Society are to:

- Educate the public about the history of the Gombin Jewish community and the genealogy of the Jews of Gombin.
- Collect, teach, disseminate, and publish knowledge and information on the history of the Gombin Jewish community and the genealogy of the Jews of Gombin.
- Encourage all interested persons to pursue historical and genealogical research focused on the Gombin Jewish community.
- Undertake activities aimed at protecting, preserving, and restoring vital records, documents, and physical relics and landmarks of the culture and history of the Gombin Jews.
- Undertake activities to preserve the memory of the Gombin Jews who perished in the Holocaust.
- Assist the activities of all other organizations whose objectives are related to the preservation of the heritage of the Jews of Gombin.

B'nai Gombin is the newsletter of the Gombin Society (GJHGS). Its main purposes are to inform Gombiners of projects and activities of interest to them, as well as to share experiences and writings. Any articles, stories, poems, or other genres may be submitted for publishing. The views and opinions expressed in *B'nai Gombin* are not necessarily those of the Gombin Society. For back issues, contact Noam Lupu at the Gombin Society's address.

Gombin also has a website at <http://www.jewishgen.org/shtetlinks/gombin/gombin.html> including information about Gombin's history, the Holocaust in Gombin, the Gombin Society, the E-mail Mailing List, *B'nai Gombin* and more.

EDITOR'S NOTE

"When you cease making a contribution, you cease living."

—Eleanor Roosevelt

In preparation for this milestone tenth issue of *B'nai Gombin*, I looked over my previous messages, looking to find my inspiration, my motivation for each. Superficially, it seemed like I spent a great deal of time asking for money, for support, for contribution. Yet as I read each message again and again, I found that they were not mere appeals for money, but appeals for community, for continuity, for memory.

We, the Gombiners of 1999, have a community our ancestors in Gombin never dreamed of. We have recreated Jewish Gombin. At the Gombin Jewish cemetery and Chelmno, we remembered it. Here in our homes, at our computers and in our mail, we have renewed it and made it a worldwide community. The Gombin Jewish community of today crosses over borders from the United States to Panama to Germany. It travels phone wires from California to London to Tel-Aviv. It transcends age groups, nationalities and language barriers. All because we share a single piece of our identities: Gombin.

I need not appeal to your pockets and ask you for a contribution to our important cause. You will see for yourselves the 1999 Roll of Sponsors at the end of this issue and come to your own conclusions. I only ask that you ensure Jewish Gombin is still around in the future for your children and your grandchildren.

Noam Lupu

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

written July 29, 1999

Dear Gombiner Family & Friends,

As the song says, "My bags are packed and I'm ready to go." Well, almost ready. In a few short days, I and almost 50 of our Gombin family members will meet in Gombin for the experience of a lifetime. We will walk the streets of our parents' (and grandparents') childhood and try to understand them a little better—what they were like before the atrocity of the Holocaust entered their lives. We will visit the newly restored Gombin Jewish cemetery and pray for the souls of our family members buried there, and go to Chelmo to pray for those who were not. I wish all of you, my Gombin family, could join me there in love and support of our mission. Of course that cannot be. So, it is my hope that you who do attend can bring back the story to share with those of you who remain back home supporting us. We are so very honored that we will have Minna Packer and her team of professionals there recording the ceremonies.

You may not appreciate the magnitude of this professional team now, but you will when you see the tapes of the ceremonies (now available for sale) and perhaps more so when you see the finished documentary "Back to Gombin." This film will be a powerful testimony to our families and our collective spirit. I urge you to support Minna in this effort both by allowing her to tape you and your family members and by making a donation to the Gombin Society earmarked for the "Back to Gombin" project (see insert).

Oh how far we have come so very fast! You are now reading the 10th issue of *B'nai Gombin*, the newsletter of our society. Through 10 seasons, nearly three years, we have grown and stretched and achieved. And through each of these seasons our secretary Noam Lupu has written (and typed) and reminded us to get our articles in on time. And then his family copied and taped and folded and mailed to be sure each of us could read of our progress and triumphs. My sincere thanks to the Lupu family for continuing to make this wonderful newsletter a possibility for all of us!

But although the labor to do this newsletter is a labor of love, the ink and the paper and the stamps are not. Our organization is running on a shoestring but it is becoming frayed! Our society is currently run solely on the required dues of the board members and the random donations of the rest of you. We have done this so that no one feels that they cannot be a member of our society, if they cannot afford to. We are open to every person who is a descendent of Jewish Gombin and all others who are interested in learning about us. However, this requires that we meet the needs of many people with the donations of a few.

I would like to ask each and every person who is reading this newsletter to think of our organization differently. Think of yourselves and your families as dues paying members of the Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society. I would further like to ask each family to send in \$100 per year. For this year, we will donate part of that money to the "Back to Gombin" project, part to other projects (to be discussed and agreed upon throughout the year) and part to plain old maintenance, like issue 11 of *B'nai Gombin*. I ask you to send in your tax-deductible donation today.

Thank you again for the honor of being a part of this wonderful organization and for your support of the work that we do. I look forward to seeing each of you in the next few weeks either in Gombin (unbelievable!) or at the Summer Gathering.

Sincerely,
Mindy S. Prosperi, President

KONIN LABOR CAMP & CHELMNO MEMORIAL MONUMENT

Sunday, August 15, 1999

by Harold Boll

We left Warsaw around 8:30 AM and headed out toward Konin, the site of a forced labor camp where about 85 Gombin Jews perished. The tombstone to the thousands of Jews who died in this camp in total is right at the edge of a large Polish Catholic cemetery. Our procession of one bus and five cars amounted to about 50 people and when we marched to the site through the maze of tombstones we received some curious but polite stares from the locals.

The most poignant point of the ceremony was when Ada Holtzman read the names of some of those Jews, including several Gombiners, who died at this site, while Rabbi Yehoshua Witt uttered a prayer in a low voice. Ada's voice had a sad, plaintive quality to it which was mirrored by the pained and sorrowful look on the Rabbi's face. At one point, the Rabbi put his hand to his face and cried. I admired his capacity to resonate with the horrific events which once occurred at this place. Halfway through the readings, on what had otherwise been a calm day, a powerful wind kicked up, rustling through leaves in the trees, knocking over some nearby candle holders and kicking up some leaves and dust. I considered it portentous. All and all, it was a very moving service.

We departed for Chelmno, the death camp where most of the Gombin Jews perished in the spring of 1942. It was about an hour's drive and there were two separate sites which we visited. When we pulled off the rode and into the first site, I spied only one or two buildings and a roped off area where archeological excavation work was obviously being performed. As I later learned, the Germans leveled many of the concentration camps in an effort to hide the monstrous

deeds they had committed. This site had only been relatively recently identified as the place where Jews were brought upon their arrival.

They were told that they were going to do farm work here and then ordered to take a shower before being issued camp clothes. They were stripped naked and their clothes and other possessions neatly placed in piles. These lies offering false hope of survival were intended to keep the captives docile, a strategy they effectively employed at other camps as well. From the courtyard, they were ushered into the large basement of the adjoining "Castle," a large building which was later demolished by the Germans. As they were brought into that room naked, they were brutally beaten and herded into the back of a van, the door closed and driven four miles to a site in the black forest where most of them had died of the poisonous exhaust gas which was piped into their enclosure. At this site the van was emptied and the bodies were cremated. Over 300,000 Jews died in this manner.

Simcha Keller, cantor of the local synagogue in Lodz, related this story to us as we stood over the excavations of the "Castle." We briefly visited the small museum at the site where excavated artifacts were shown: marbles, combs, dentures, shards of glass and other odds and ends taken from the victims.

We boarded the bus for the short ride to the next site, where our memorial stood. As we disembarked the bus, many of us walked through the archway of the crematorium wall which still remains intact from the original structure. It is now called the Wall of Remembrance and on it are small plaques from the descendants of those who perished here. There was a section containing plaques from we Gombiners honoring the memory of slain family members.

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This site was a groomed grassy field, far larger than the other previous site. About 50 yards beyond the wall stood our memorial, draped by a large sheet emblazoned with the Star of David, awaiting our arrival. Nearby stood the memorial structures erected by two other communities of descendants. Before walking over to await the start of the ceremonies, I glanced down and picked up a bit of soil; amidst the dirt and pebbles were shards of bone, a testimony to the grim purpose of the crematorium.

Standing before a microphone in front of our draped obelisk-like memorial, Leon Zamosc initiated the ceremonies by greeting everyone and then provided some background information as to who we were. He also thanked everyone who made this project possible including local Polish people. Dr. Lucja Nowak, director of the Konin museum, then spoke; she was quite helpful to us in this project. Next came the cantor of Lodz, Simcha Keller, who sang a Hebrew psalm in the most beautiful voice I had ever heard. It was sad, crying and lamenting, all those qualities wrapped up in one; it was a stirring moment. The Catholic priest of Gombin came to say some words in Polish. Unfortunately no translation was provided, but we all appreciated his participation in this ceremony.

When it came time to remove the cloaking sheet, Leon called upon his son Gabriel. Unfortunately, it got caught at the end of a menorah candle at the top of the structure. Fortunately, Lawrence Guyer was quick witted enough to come up with an ingenious solution—he grabbed an Israeli Flag, pole and all, and gently lifted the stuck sheet free to the sound of applause from a grateful audience.

At the very end, Rabbi Witt of our group led the afternoon *Mincha* service; at this time, the chanting of *Kaddish* and singing of *Ose Shalom* was an emotional moment for all of us.

There had been a fair amount of local publicity of this event and a large number of Poles were in attendance. As I looked around the area during the cer-

emonies I estimated that over 100 people were there, including Polish press, TV and radio.

Gill Freedman was kind enough to share with me some thoughts she wrote while at the ceremony. I felt it captured some of the feelings and emotions of the day:

Yet in the clearing within the ring of forest stand stone monuments, testaments to shtetls long cleared of Jews whose ashes lie beneath my feet in this peaceful place. The sun shines down warm upon this ceremony of unveiling. An introduction in Polish. A response in English. The Rabbi sings El Maleh Rachamim, followed by singing Ose Shalom and a Kaddish. The Galach speaks and prays beautifully although his dark glasses give him the look of the mafia. The dignitaries lay flowers and bow as at the Cenotaph on war memorial day (place where British war dead are honored). As Leon states, "it was chaotic but perfect." And now Rabbi Witt leads Mincha in the dying sunlight. Rest in peace Gombiners.

GOMBIN JEWISH CEMETERY REDEDICATION CEREMONY

Monday, August 16, 1999

by Gayle Frankel Sokoloff

The years of fundraising, planning, convincing, persuading and cajoling finally came to fruition. The common thread that has tenuously bound our international group of Gombiners has strengthened since our poignant experience in Chelmnno... we are truly brothers and sisters. The bus ride from Plock to Gombin was very pleasant and picturesque. Our hotel, the Starex in Plock, was located on the Vistula River, which was absolutely breathtaking.

We arrived at our destination, the Stary Rynek in Gombin, at 9:15 AM, where we met the Zamosces, Temansons and Lupus. When we disembarked from the bus, it occurred to me that this was probably the first time, in the history of Gombin, that a tour bus, loaded with 50 international—not to mention Jewish—passengers arrived in the town square, the site of the old market place seen in Sam Rafel's 1937 film.

We had a full schedule of events planned, beginning with speeches by several Gombiners, both Jewish and Gentile. The messages were warm, friendly and inviting. First to greet us was Mr. Lukaszewski, founder of a local museum which chronicles the history of Gombin. He was most helpful in assisting us in the cemetery project. An assistant to Mr. Lukaszewski spoke next about what occurred when the German Nazis occupied the town. At the time he was a boy of 11, but he still remembered them vividly enough to provide eyewitness accounts of those awful events. As the speeches were being made, a ring of Polish senior citizens began to close the distance with our group.

After a while, numerous one-on-one conversations began to take place between our group and them. These senior citizens of Gombin were receptive, helpful, curi-

ous and excited at the same time. Fortunately, we had three wonderful translators, students of our American friend in Gombin, Jerry Temanson. These boys bridged the gap for us in our efforts to communicate with the Poles. We asked questions, showed old photographs, walked together and reminisced. The day had started off in a very positive fashion.

A walking tour of the town was the next on the agenda including sites such as the Jewish School, the site of the magnificent synagogue where there is now just rubble, the rebuilt Catholic church (destroyed by Nazis), and several buildings dating back to pre-WWII. In our party was Itzhak Stern from Israel who left Gombin at the age of 17 and until now never returned these past 60 years. Down a narrow side street he saw the house his grandparents lived in and became very excited.

In my mind's eye, I had envisioned Gombin to be a dreary, slow and depressing village with one or two cars, no shops and dilapidated, old buildings. I think that we were all pleasantly surprised to see that the town was just charming.

The Cemetery Dedication Ceremony was well-attended, including Gombin town officials, Mr. and Mrs. Nissenbaum, their American friends, our group of Gombin descendants and well over 250 townspeople—young and old, some carrying flowers and later placing them at our ancestors' graves in memory of their neighbors, schoolmates and friends. Jeremy Freedman was the first speaker and master of ceremonies and in his eloquent style greeted everyone. Rabbi Yehoshua Witt did the Memorial Prayer and then led the group in the Mourner's *Kaddish* and a rousing and spirited rendition of *Ose Shalom*. Next, Mindy was introduced as our president and gave a very sin-

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cere and inclusive speech. Her first words were to encourage those people outside the gates to come in and join us in this joyous ceremony. Her next words were “I can’t believe we’re here, we’re really here!” It was a fitting theme for all of us given how quickly these projects all came together.

Mr. Nissenbaum was then invited to the rostrum and spoke in Polish. Through his foundation, he has dedicated his life to helping groups like ours secure and restore fading cemeteries in Poland. We owe him an enormous debt of gratitude for his assistance in all its forms, both financial and administrative. Nissenbaum cajoled the mayor to make sure that this cemetery would not be desecrated. After Nissenbaum, the mayor of Gombin came to the microphone and responded to Nissenbaum’s appeal to protect the cemetery. He appeared to be mildly defensive and perhaps a bit perturbed by Nissenbaum’s words. He said that Poles have suffered greatly in their history and also have cemeteries in other lands and would of course realize how important it is to be respectful of the final resting place of one’s ancestors.

The cantor from Lodz, Simcha Keller, was invited up next; he also sang beautifully at the Chelmno ceremonies. Once again, the sound of his sad, plaintive voice brought a tear to my eyes. Leon Zamosc then came up and gave out awards to: 1) Lukaszewski, director of the Gombin Land Lovers association (museum); 2) Nissenbaum, who received it and called up a woman who did the actual work; 3) Meir Holtzman, which was received by his daughter Ada.

Ada then gave a book signed by all the Gombiner participants to Maria Maciejko Kaminska, already a recipient of the “Righteous Among the Nations” recognition for her family’s courageous actions during the Holocaust. They saved the lives of the two Wolfowicz sisters of Gombin during the Holocaust. Ms. Kaminska accepted it in English with a lot of grace and dignity.

Prior to the start of the ceremonies, two matsevo (tombstones) were found; one by Rae Kaminitz in the garden of a woman she was talking to; the other by

Minna Packer’s nephew, Joey, who walked onto a construction site, noticed a large flat rock covered by dirt, turned it over and found the large matzevah weighing at least 200 lbs. We loaded it into the cargo compartment of our bus. As our group left the bus to walk over to the lapidarium where the microphone was set up, four Gombiners carried the stone into the cemetery.

As I anticipated, the time spent in Poland was filled with a wide range of emotions. Lifelong friendships were reestablished and new ties were made. Every one of them will always hold a place that is near and dear to my heart. We will meet again, my friends, perhaps next year in Jerusalem!

WE ARE STILL HERE

by Ada Holtzman

After more than half a century we are still here,
Back to Gombin, with a smile and a tear,
Descendants, survivors from five countries flew,
To visit the hometown so old and so new.

Birth place of fathers and mothers,
Of uncles and aunts, cousins and others,
We all share the same past, same common history,
And remember the *shtetl* and its lost faded glory.

United in grief, together we prayed,
And the *Kaddish* again loudly was said,
We swear it will never happen again,
And we shall not forget, Amen and Amen...

GOMBIN DOCUMENTARY

An Appeal to all Gombiners

Description: "Back to Gombin"

The documentary "Back To Gombin" chronicles the tragic history of the Jews of Gombin, a small town in Central Poland and the birthplace of Michael Zielonka (Michael Godola Ber), my father.

Interviews of remaining survivors are interwoven with illuminating, historic footage filmed in 1937 by Sam Rafel on his trip to Gombin. We travel on an odyssey back to Poland. The Gombin Jewish cemetery rededication is attended by Poles, Jews and dignitaries involved in the memory cause. We go to the site of the Chelmno extermination camp where a monument has been erected to the thousands of victims from Gombin. We visit Konin, the site of the slave labor camp where a plaque has been laid at the mass grave.

In Gombin, we walk the streets where no Jews live today, visiting the former homes and sites of the victims and the survivors. Interviews with Jews and non-Jews reveal differing aspects of acceptance of Jewish memory, guilt and blame. Returning to the U.S., interviews with the second and third generation reveal stories of assimilation, suicide and suppressed rage, interwoven with tales of success, religious and social freedom.

A new concept in Holocaust documentaries, "Back to Gombin" explores the many aftereffects that the Holocaust experience continues to create. Upon completion, this work will be a major resource for Holocaust education.

Funding the Project

For The Gombin Jewish Historical and Genealogical Society and I, this is a costly undertaking. Costs involved include equipment rental; hiring professional crews in New York, New Jersey, Florida, California and Poland; transportation; tape stock and film; duplication and editing.

Why have I undertaken such an enormous responsibility? One reason is that I feel the clock ticking and a sense of urgency to record the remaining survivors from Gombin. I also feel compelled to tell the story of the Jews of Gombin and its survivors after the war, incorporating the struggles of the subsequent generations in a timeless, living medium. It is essential to advance this project quickly as a film or video documentary. A film or video can travel to every corner of the world, reaching children and adults via television, theater, schools, college campuses, community centers and federations. Our story, the story of Gombin, the survivors, the children of the survivors, going back to Poland to reclaim the Jewish cemetery in a project of mutual understanding, is a stirring tale. It is the story of the history of our people but also a tale of history in the making.

Anti-Semitism still exists in every corner of the globe. We cannot allow the horrors of the Holocaust to fade from world consciousness. The story of Gombin helps teach history's most vital lesson: that hatred and violence must not be tolerated.

Many of the Gombin Society members have expressed considerable support for the importance of this living testimony of our people. Support has been especially generous from a number of good friends at GJHGS. This funding helped to bring a camera person to Poland; enabled me to hire a sound specialist and bring him to Poland, assuring good audio; a donation of 1200ft of 16mm film will enable the incorporation of contemporary film footage of Gombin into the documentary, complementing the 1937 Rafel film; a donation of round trip airfare to California to tape Rajzel Zychlinsky, the great Yiddish poetess of Gombin, Mendele Rubel and Hy and Anna Russak will assure us documentation of these dear individuals. I even had the great pleasure of taping a reunion between boy-

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hood friends Ben Guyer and Michael Zielonka in July. As an added bonus, we were joined by survivor Sam Weiss, his daughter Hannah and Ben's son, Sam. I have accomplished, not just for myself, but for the Gombin Society Jewish community at large, a living tribute to the victims.

I am thankful to the many friends who have helped bring this documentary into being. These cherished individuals have kept our story alive. They felt, as I do, that to produce a documentary about Jewish Gombin is to bring alive our history and forever preserve our rich heritage.

The Next Step

Finishing funds are critical in a work like this and require generous financial support. I am blessed to be working with top professionals. Award winning New York editor Harry Kafka will be editing this work for many months, transcribing over 100 hours of tape and editing this into a 60 minute documentary. Dick Hyman, musical arranger for Woody Allan, will compose and orchestrate the music.

I invite you to personally participate in this ambitious project. In effect, you are being asked to become an honorary producer. With your support, we will bring alive this history for all to see.

Your generous, immediate support is absolutely crucial to the success of this innovative effort. PLEASE send your tax-deductible contribution in support of the "Back To Gombin" documentary TODAY! A donation form is enclosed in the insert of this newsletter.

Your commitment has helped to create the GJHGS and achieve its worthy objectives. Now, we are turning to you again for help in bringing this documentary to completion. With your help, this documentary will contribute to the way the world learns about race, religion, history and humanity.

Sincerely,
Minna Zielonka-Packer
Director of "Back To Gombin"

"It will be of major interest to the entire Jewish community and all those who seek to explore the Holocaust's contemporary meaning."

—*Rabbi Robert Scheinberg, United Synagogue of Hoboken*

"Your video documentary will be a very precious contribution to our scientific research on the fate of the Jewish population during the Holocaust."

—*Dr. Lucja Nowak, Director of the District Museum in Konin, Poland*

"This is a critically important chronicle of our history. We urge you to visit the website."

—*Joan Herman, Young Leadership Division, United Jewish Appeal (UJA)*

For more information, visit the "Back to Gombin" website at <http://pages.prodigy.net/madisonpark/>

THREE GENERATIONS RETURN

by Noam Lupu

It was a dark, autumnal night only weeks after Nazi troops entered the tiny town, when Sara Laks said good-bye to Gombin. In 1939, no one could have imagined the magnitude of the inhumanity that would ensue in the proceeding years. Perhaps her mother and father, the proud owners of a successful bakery that catered to Jew and Pole alike, had a premonition of the danger involved. But could she truly have realized that this would be the last time she would see her lovely Gombin for nearly 60 years?

As we pulled into Gombin on Monday, August 16, my grandmother was aware of the dramatic changes that had taken place in the village she once called home. The irony of the atmosphere—newly white cottages neighboring the old wooden houses of Sholom Aleichem, a colorful luster of blossoming flowers mingled with the heavy weight of death in the air—was something I had not expected.

We met the Gombiner bus in the town square, joined them for the meeting held in the town's museum. But as the bus made its way to Plock for lunch, we remained in Gombin—my grandmother (Sara Laks Fajgenbaum), my mother and myself. We were invited to the home of Anna Lenzion, a Polish woman who had introduced herself to my grandmother just after the meeting. Anna's eyes lit up when she heard my grandmother's surname, saying that her own mother often speaks the name in her reminiscences. And so we were invited to her home to meet the mother, long-ago intimate of my grandmother's older sister, Yochevet Laks.

Aside from the tears and the occasional translation, I understood little of my grandmother's conversation with the old woman, as sweet and lovingly concerned a *Yiddishe Mame* as any Jewish woman of her age.

The two of them cried, recalling a past long since locked away like a Pandora's box. Over babka and Nescafe, we passed around photographs, including one of the sisters Grynblatt whom my grandmother remembered fondly.

Irca Grynblatt, the youngest of the three Polish sisters, was a close friend of my grandmother's who helped her cross the border into Russia twice during the occupation. The two had kept in touch for years after the war until Irca's death only a few years ago. She inquired about the other Grynblatt sisters and found out that Henia, the middle sister, was still living in Gombin. Anna immediately went to the phone and arranged for the two to meet at the ceremony that afternoon at the Jewish cemetery. The anticipation hung over us for the rest of the day.

There is one moment in the exchange of photographs that I think is necessary to mention. Anna's mother had a photograph containing a young Polish man whom my grandmother recognized as the man who revealed to the Nazis the hiding place of her sister Yochevet. She stared at that face for a long time, as if searching in the resin for an answer to the infinite question of that time: why? I saw Anna become uneasy, not knowing how to handle the situation. As my mother and I reached for my grandmother's hands, Anna asked if she wanted the photograph. It was certainly an offer none of us expected, much less wanted to take her up on. But it is testament to the confusion of the Poles when it comes to these delicate situations, which we descendants of survivors have been faced with daily.

After leaving Anna's house, we went to the square on which the proud Laks bakery—remembered by every Gombiner I have met, including non-Jews, for its pastries—and household once stood. Houses surrounded the once beautiful park, now sparsely dotted with young trees lazy in its desolation. It had used to be —*THREE* continued page 14

THE AARONSON DIARY OF KONIN

by Ada Holtzman

Rabbi Moshe Aaronson, rabbi of Sanicki, wrote a diary during the dark days in the Konin labor camp, where men from Gombin and other towns in the Warthegau were transported for forced labor in March of 1942. The Hebrew book *Alei Merorot (Leaves of Bitterness)*, includes remnants of his diary, published by his son Y. Aaronson in 1996.

The diary is a rare document, belonging to those types of documents which were written by the victims while the events took place, a desperate effort to leave traces for the future generations of what happened in the Holocaust. It has a special additional value to all the descendants and survivors from Gombin for many Gombiners passed through this camp and only few survived it.

The lists compiled by Rabbi Aaronson, include: lists of victims transported in two *aktionen* to the Chelmno Death Camp, list of the transport to Andrzejwo near Lodz on February 24, 1943 (not published in *Alei Merorot*), list of the 60 prisoners in the Konin camp still alive on August 7, 1943 (eve of the camp revolt), index of other names and places mentioned in the diary, list of the victims buried in a mass grave in the Konin Catholic cemetery. The book also contains a detailed description of the forgotten, yet very heroic revolt which took place in August of 1943, after which the camp was closed.

Behind the published names were living people, with a face and a soul, some of them are still alive, and most of them perished and remembered by living Gombiners. Like the hair cutter Abraham Rogorzinski, who died in Konin, tortured to death by the Germans. My late father remembered him and how he cut his hair so many times. Where else is this man's name ever mentioned?

The list of victims buried in the Konin mass grave can be found on page 14. If you know of someone who was murdered at Konin and is not on the list of victims, please let me know as soon as possible (by e-mail: ada@netvision.net.il) so that they may be mentioned on the plaque we are in the stages of preparing.

Some Gombin-related excerpts:

June 11, 1942—Lajb Luria and Abraham Rosenberg from Gombin were arrested for the suspicion of stealing flour from a passengers train and were executed the very same day.

June 28, 1942—Abraham Frankel from Gombin killed.

July 1, 1942—In a corn field not far from the Warta river, lied the dead Abraham Rogozinski, hair cutter from Gombin, for committing the “sin” of walking without permission. We took him from there to burial.

Rabbi Aaronson also recorded in his diary a description of the mass grave: “We buried the dead of the Konin camp as best we could according to Jewish rites and tradition. In every grave I tried to place a bottle in which there was a note giving the name of the dead and date of death. On July 17, 1942, some twenty men were taken from us for work in the Polish cemetery. Some Jews had been buried in special graves among those of the Poles, and the mayor of Konin ordered these bodies exhumed and reburied in a communal grave at the southwest corner.

There, a pit was dug, about twenty meters long and two meters wide. Into this pit were placed all the dead who had previously been buried separately on a hill opposite. The work was hard, as well as sickeningly painful, more so as it was carried out under the supervision of an armed guard who obliged the Jews to la—*AARONSON continued page 13*

CHEVRA MIKRAH OF GOMBIN

by Noam Lupu

In October of 1998, I was approached by Jeremy Freedman and Ada Holtzman regarding the whereabouts of the Schechter Library of New York. A student at Columbia University, I would have access to this library—which we soon discovered housed in the Jewish Theological Seminary of America only blocks from my dorm—and to its Gombiner treasures.

In a 1946 Hebrew book called *Reshumot: A Collection of Memories, Folklore and Ethnography in Israel*, Rabbi Yehuda Lajb Zlotnick (rabbi of Gombin from 1911 to 1919) published an article entitled, “Remnants of the Jewish Community of Gombin.” There, Rabbi Zlotnick recorded Hasidic tales and brief recountings of the living culture of Gombin Jewry. He wrote in length about the unique Gombin synagogue, founded in 1712 and later burned by the Nazis in 1939. In passing, Rabbi Zlotnick mentions two pinkasim (notebooks) kept by the Chevra Mikrah of Gombin, which he sent for safe keeping to a friend in Warsaw, who later donated them to the Schechter Library in New York.

Like any other *shtetl* of its time, Gombin’s Jewish community was run by the religious leadership. Everything from birth records to marriage certificates to burial rituals to community taxes to donations were kept by the synagogue. The Chevra Mikrah (literally the “Group of Scribes”) was in charge of keeping that information recorded—everything from the purchase of prayer books to the tombstone engravings upon a death in the community is recorded. And so we began the search for what are formally called in the JTS online catalog of holdings, “Pinkasim of the Chevra Mikrah of Gombin.” On my visit to the Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection of the JTS Library, I held both these books in

my hands, perhaps the first Gombiner to flip through their aging pages in 80 years.

There are two pinkasim kept by the Chevrah Mikra from their founding in 1792. The first log is dated 1792-1860, the second 1860-1892. Each page basically gives a formulaic statement about some record, most predominantly of death, including absolution from all debts and the donations made in the deceased’s name to the community (such as prayer books and *chumashim*). Each page is then signed by the members of the society who are present, which are usually 10 to 16 signatures.

The first five pages of the first book contain what appears to be a constitution or mission of the Chevrah Mikra upon their formation, signed by 22 men. Having been written nearly two centuries ago, not a single signee has a last name. Instead, each is “so-and-so son of so-and-so.” Toward the end of the book is a page with *El Maleh Rachamim*, the prayer for the dead, in which they have inserted a line to mention the Chevra Mikrah’s donation in the deceased’s name.

In the second book, which is structured exactly like the first, I found many recognizable surnames including: Holtzman, Manchyk, Zeidman, Frankel, Berl, Zielonka, Zolna, Tibber, Teiffel, Hodis, Tadelis, Rozga

Clearly, these pinkasim are of incredible historical, and very possibly also genealogical, value to all Gombiners. On my recent return to the JTS Library, I found out that microfilms of the pinkasim were made in 1954. I have ordered copies of these from JTS as photocopying the pinkasim is not allowed. As soon as I have the microfilm, I can print out the exposures of each page of the pinkasim and we can begin to translate these vital records of our lost community.

SUMMER GATHERING 1999 REPORT

by Gail Salomon and Harold Boll

The Third Gombiner Gathering was held at Gail Salomon and Janet Ballen's temple in Cranford, New Jersey on Sunday, August 22. Over 40 Gombiners attended the event and I believe most people came away with at least an appreciation of our accomplishments in Poland. Two Gombiners from Detroit, Jan Wanetick and Ruth Goldstein came for the first time. Mother and daughter had a weekend in New York City and came to New Jersey for the gathering.

After a brief welcome and introduction by host Gail Salomon, Harold Boll started off the program with a talk about his recent experiences at the Dedication Ceremonies in Poland. He then read some unedited excerpts from the journal he had kept during the trip and ended his presentation by reading the English translation of Meir Holtzman's last letter. It was warmly received by all who heard it. His speech was wonderful and expressed what truly must have been a phenomenal experience.

Harold then invited Leon Zamosc up to the podium to answer questions about the trip to Poland. One question regarded the behavior of the Gombin Poles upon our arrival. Harold said that, for the most part, the group was greeted with aloof curiosity by most residents, but that its interactions with those residents who came forward to socialize were generally quite cordial. Leon gave a more comprehensive analysis of Polish-Jewish relations.

Next, Minna Zielonka Packer showed two videos. The first was an edited trailer for "Back to Gombin," featuring interviews with Gombiner elders, their children and their grandchildren, artfully interspersed with shots from the enhanced 1937 Rafel Film and photographs. Supporting the visuals was a beautifully orchestrated soundtrack, a Chopin piece played by Minna's

son. The project is truly worth our attention and support! The second video was an unedited view of the events filmed in Poland as her crew shot it. Her rough footage was very interesting and we got to see some of the ceremonies at Chelmno and Gombin. An edited version of the Poland footage is available from the Gombin Society for \$30, including shipping.

Many who attended the meeting also purchased publications and photographs on sale from the Gombin Society. Among the older publications, all still available for sale, was a new one with documents and information relating to the Memorial Projects in Poland.

We do want to thank both Gail Salomon and Janet Ballen, as well as their families for the effort they expended in making our gathering a success. It was a wonderful day to meet and greet friends and share the wonder of the trip to Poland.

—*AARONSON continued from page 11*

bor to the end of their strength. He would not allow a single minute to be spent on taking a look at the bodies of the martyrs. This was the method of removal: the bodies were lifted by garden forks poked into the eye holes or the skull or body. Then lime was thrown onto each body before it was thrust into the pit. Those who carried out this work included relatives of the dead.."

On August 15, 1999, just before the dedication ceremony in Chelmno, the group of Gombiners gathered in the Konin Catholic Cemetery, at the site of the monument erected in 1945, and a Memorial Service was held. It was perhaps the first time in 55 years that memorial prayers were recited there.

—*THREE* continued from page 10

magnificent, filled with pine trees and bushes where residents set up hammocks on cool spring afternoons. At its center, a kiosk sold pastries and ice cream, easily becoming a favorite spot for the teenaged. Of the cement building that once housed the Laks family of seven, not a sign remained.

By the late afternoon, we were at the Gombin Jewish cemetery, the first of the international Gombiner group to arrive at the site of the upcoming ceremonies. As we waited for the bus from Plock, the Polish residents of Gombin, invitations in hand, began to arrive. It was not long before Henia Grynblatt—the representation of all that my grandmother had sealed off in her mind forever, held within a short woman stricken with Parkinson's—arrived at the ceremony. After sixty years, they recognized each other and embraced. Immediately, my grandmother became the center of a circle of elderly people who had all overhead her surname Laks and wanted to share a recollection, a thought, a tear.

It was an overwhelming experience for each of us. For my grandmother, it was a return to the community she once knew, seeing once more the faces and names she had so abruptly left behind. For my mother and I, it was the slightest hint at an understanding of the community that once existed in Gombin, of the life my grandmother once led with no foreshadow of the oncoming terror.

Yet there was something so important, so reconciling, about the three of us being there. We were three generations returning to the home of our ancestors, telling them that we have continued where they were so brutally forced to leave off. It was a recreation of the family my grandmother once had, living with her parents and grandparents, in this very place. As we returned to Warsaw, my grandmother realized the meaning of this trip—that it had closed the book, perhaps even written the last chapter, of that dark era of her life.

VICTIMS BURIED IN THE KONIN MASS GRAVE

Ajzik, Szlomo

Akavia, ?

Akavia, ?

Alterman, Azriel

Bed, Szaja

Blambam, Abraham

Boczko, Zeew

Bristowski, Lipa

Cimerman, Chajm

Mordechai

Dzjedzic, Meir Szmue

Dzyk, Nathan

Erdberg, Moshe

Feinzilber, Josef

Filipson, Chuno

Frenkel, Abraham

Fuks, Szmuel

Gelbert, Nahum

Goldberg, Nachum

Hodys, Icchak

Holcberg, Cwi

Jakobowicz, Zew

Kamlazh, Feiwisz

Kazimierski, Lajb

Kerber, Meir

Kleinot, Getzel

Knopf, Dr. Hans

Kot, Moshe

Kowent, Icchak

Laski, Moshe

Lasman Eliezer (Lajzer)

Lewkowicz, Josef

Lipszic, Szlomo

Markowicz, Katriel

Michalski, Shlomo

Motil, Jakob Lajb

Munczek, Lajb

Neudorf, Abraham

Nusenowicz, Abraham

Nusenowicz, Zalman

Poznanski, Chaim

Pytrokowski, Dawid

Rak, Moshe Jakob

Rejzman, Jechiel Meir

Rogozinski, Wolf

Rogozinski, Abraham

Rozenholc, Lajb

Seif, Abraham

Szczawinski, Melech

Szymbaum, Abraham

Sziniak, Szimon

Szlang, Moshe

Szurejn, Josef

Tabacnik, Abraham

Aharon

Tiber, Jakob

Tiber, Gerszon

Tiber, Jechiel Meir

Wejcner, Abraham

Widawsky, Chaim Cwi

Wiksel, Abraham

Wolman, Lajbisz

Wroble, Sender

(Aleksander)

Zielonka, Philip Fiszel

Ber

Ziger, Rewen

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This list below includes all the Gombiners who mailed back their 1999 Sponsorship form with contribution checks. The Gombin Society wishes to thank you all. We hope that next year we will count on the same level of support from you, and that we will receive additional sponsorship contributions from the Gombiner families whose names are not on the list.

We want to remind you all that the Gombin Society is a non-profit educational foundation. We depend completely on your good will, on your decision to become a sponsor because you understand that the free newsletter, the donation of our Gombin publications to libraries, and all the other things we are doing are indeed important to preserve our identity.

So next year, when we circulate the little yellow forms asking for your sponsorship, please do respond. Please pledge your support at the highest level you can afford. Please keep in mind that remembering Jewish Gombin and the Gombiners murdered in the Holocaust is an important cause, something that is personally related to you, your children, your grandchildren, and the memory of your parents and ancestors.

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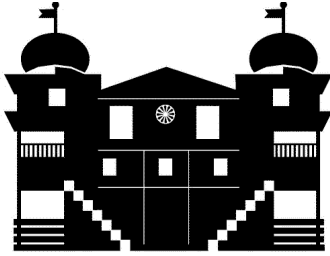
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