

B'NAI GOMBIN

Newsletter of the Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society

Issue 13, December 2001

Editor: Noam Lupu

Table of Contents

About the Society	page 2
Editor's Note	page 2
President's Message	page 3
Discovering the Matzevah of Pinchus Chaja (1930-1938)	page 4
by Bernie Guyer	
Rajzel Zychlinsky, z"l	page 5
by Marek Kanter	
Back to Gombin - After September 11	page 6
by Minna Packer	
A Treasure of Information	page 7
Konin Memorial Plaque	page 7

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 320 County Route 105, Highland Mills, NY 10930 or by email at info@gombin.org.

Visit our website at www.gombin.org.

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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 Mailing List, *B'nai Gombin* and more.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Nearly six years ago, we Gombiners set out to do something, to perform an act of remembrance. We decided to recover and rededicate the Gombin Jewish cemetery. And we decided to erect a memorial at Chelmno to the thousands we lost. Four years later, some of us traveled to Gombin and Chelmno for our memorial ceremonies.

It was, for many of us, a paradoxical 'return'. Minna Packer has titled her documentary film, which is visually guided by footage from the trip, *Back to Gombin*. I say paradoxical because only two in our group were actually born in Gombin. Another handful perhaps had visited once before. The vast majority, however — second and third generationers — had only heard of Gombin.

And yet the trip to Gombin was certainly a 'return'. It can only be described in such words of repetition as reclamation, rededication, rediscovery, resolution, remembrance. We took an unnoticed grassy field and 're-turned' it into a cemetery. We took the unmarked mass grave of thousands and 'returned' a portion of their identity. We took a town filled with the ghosts of the past and 'returned' to it a living community.

Two years later, we have 'returned' to our homes away from Gombin, and to our daily lives. We have 'returned' to our own occupations and preoccupations. But we are now in danger of losing Gombin yet again.

The Gombin Society has lost some steam. The memorial projects in Poland were intensive and many of us who had committed to their completion have had to 'return' our attention to other aspects of our lives. This is understandable.

Yet the Gombin Society was not formed solely to build memorials in Poland. Memory is an ongoing task. We are a living community that continues to produce and continues to remember.

I hope that you, my fellow Gombiners, will continue to support the Society with your membership, your donations, your interest, and your initiative.

Noam Lupu

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Gombiner Family & Friends,

It's a pleasure to write you once again with a new issue of *B'nai Gombin*. Some technical difficulties in accessing our mailing list have been solved and we are back!

Much work has gone on since the publication of the last newsletter, a year ago. Our Board of Directors still 'meets' via our Internet connection, and many of our projects have moved on... some to completion! I had the honor of attending the viewing of Minna Packer's *Back to Gombin* at the Polish Consulate in New York on September 13th. I cannot begin to tell you how moving it was to be there, with the sounds of 'war' in the background, watching this amazing film. I cannot recreate this experience for you but, in this newsletter, you will learn how you can purchase a copy for your own library. I strongly suggest that you do.

During this year we had important losses in our lives... Zygmunt Nissenbaum died. The Nissenbaum Foundation was instrumental in saving the Jewish cemetery in Gombin. Mr. Nissenbaum's organization provided not only funding for us but also education and support for this project. Although his organization will live on, we mourn the loss of this great man.

Also lost to us this year was one of our great women, Rajzel Zychlinsky the poet of Gombin. We are so lucky that Minna Packer was able to interview Ms. Zychlinsky for her film. Her books of poetry are available through Word & Quill Press at 1275 Fourth Street, 247B, Santa Rosa, CA 95404. In this newsletter, there is more about both of these wonderful people and updates on current projects, including the Konin Memorial.

My closing message to you: membership. This year cannot match the excitement of 1999, with its trip to Poland. But this year, particularly, the Gombin Society needs your involvement, your help and your dues! We are the kind of organization that only survives through dedication to our cause and funding for our projects. Over the next few months, we will need to have elections for all of our executive positions. All need to be filled... by you.

We are all children and grandchildren of survivors. Like people all over the world, and particularly in the US, the events of September 11th have been a call to renew and strengthen our values and commitments. We must all find the time — perhaps no more than an hour a month — to participate. I am asking you ALL to think about this. Please be ready to step forward to help out when we call on you and please be ready to send your dues check when we ask that of you.

Wishing you all a very Happy Hannukah and a wonderful and hopeful New Year.

Sincerely,
Mindy S. Prospero, President

DISCOVERING THE MATZEVAH OF PINCHAS CHAJA (1930-1938)

On the tour bus riding to Gombin, we were stunned when Ada Holtzman read out the name “Pinchas Chaja” from a recovered matzevah in the Gombin cemetery. This was the name of my mother’s first born, the brother whom I had only known as a small boy in old family photos. Jane and I found the stone among those in the cemetery memorial. When I laid my hand on it, I felt as if I were touching my brother. His is the story of the survival of our family.

My mother, Chana Ryzman, and my father, Simcha Chaja, were married in Gombin in 1929. Pinchas was born in 1930 and my sister, Evelyn, in 1932. In 1937, my father left Poland to go to Uruguay; the plan was for him to work for 3 years, and then send for the rest of the family. My mother moved in with her father, Manele Ryzman, to his house on Kilinskeigo Street.

Pinchas became ill with fever in 1938. There’s no knowing today what the illness was. He died in the hospital in Plock and was buried in the Gombin cemetery. The period after Pinchas’ death was very hard for my mother. She visited the cemetery every morning in a distraught state.

When news of Pinchas’ death reached my father, he sent word for my mother and Evelyn to join him in Montevideo. They left Gombin in the winter of 1938/39. Benny Guyer helped them get the train to Danzig. My mother and sister were delayed for 6 months at the Jews’ Temporary Shelter in London before continuing the journey. The family passed the war in Uruguay, where I was born in 1942. They emigrated to Detroit in 1945, sponsored by my mother’s brother, Max Rissman. My sister, Marilyn, was born in 1948.

So, the story of Pinchas’ death is truly the story of the survival of our family. Without the sense of urgency caused by his death, my mother and sister would have remained in Gombin to perish with the rest of her family — my grandfather Manele and others — presumably at Chelmno.

Jane and I made a rubbing of the matzevah to take to the family. It was like bringing home our brother. My mother had never seen the matzevah erected by her father a year after Pinchas’ death. She had already left by then and never knew it actually existed. The Yiddish inscription reads: “*du reht undzer leeb kind, Pinchas, gesht[orbin] elter 8 yor.*” Translated: “Here rests our beloved child, Pinchas, [who] died [at] 8 years old.” The family name, “Chaja,” is only partially visible in the upper corner of the broken stone; only someone like Ada, knowledgeable in the family names of Gombin, could have recognized it.

The reactions to this discovery of Pinchas’ matzevah have been fascinating. Evelyn connected emotionally with the older brother whom she had known. Others were moved to tears by the story. None of us can fully know the emotions felt by my 94-year old mother on seeing the rubbing. We did get some insight into the painful memories of that time, however, when she expressed to Minna Packer, not only the grief over the loss of her first child, but also the fear that her husband might have blamed her for the death and abandoned her.

As miraculous as it seems, our brother Pinchas ‘survived’ Hitler’s attempt to destroy all signs of Jewish life in Poland. One can only feel it was *bashert* that of all the thousand matzevot originally in that cemetery, one of the few to survive in an identifiable state was that of Pinchas. It was destined that Ada Holtzman was there to research the ‘universe behind each name’. And, of course, it was *bashert* that Jane and I were on that bus riding to Gombin when Ada announced the name, and that we were among the few people in the whole world who could bring that name to life! As Evelyn said, “that stone survived so that you could find it!”

by Bernie Guyer
Baltimore, January 8, 2001

RAJZEL ZYCHLINSKY, ז'ל

Rajzel Zychlinsky, the famous Yiddish poet passed away on June 13, 2001 in Concord, California, after a long struggle with pneumonia.

She would have been 91 on July 27, 2001. She was well known for her Holocaust poetry and received the Manger prize in 1975 in Israel. One of relatively few living Yiddish poets, the widely published Zychlinsky has been writing since the 1920s. Between 1939 and 1993 she published seven books of poetry in Yiddish. A collection of poems, *God Hid His Face*, was translated to English and published in 1998. She has been extensively translated and anthologized. She was included in Aaron Kramer's well known anthology: *A Century of Yiddish Poetry*.

For the last two years she resided in a nursing home in Walnut Creek, where her son Marek Kanter paid her weekly visits. On these occasions she enjoyed being read poems from her book *God Hid His Face*. One of her favorite poems was about a neighbor across the street, when she lived in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. It was performed by the Travelling Jewish Theater in San Francisco as part of their production *Diamonds in the Rough*:

The Undarkened Window

In the daytime, I see him in the street
in a dark suit,
shaved,
combed,
wearing a tie -
at night the light shines in his window
across from my window.
A survivor
of Hitler's gas chambers,
he sails at night around
his undarkened window -
a wandering ship
on oceans of darkness,
and no port
allows it to enter,
so it may anchor
and darken.
Only in the mornings
does it go out,

the sickly yellow light
in his window.

Rajzel Zychlinsky was born in Gombin, Poland in 1910. She emigrated to the United States in 1950 with her husband and son, having survived the Holocaust by fleeing to Russia. On the occasion of her 90th birthday her son sent the following poem from *God Hid His Face* to be placed in the Gombin website alongside her other poems already archived there.

I Remember

I remember-
It was a day
like today-
I was alone in a park.
The benches were empty and abandoned,
as if they knew
that never again
would anyone sit on them.
Slowly the leaves were falling,
counting the autumns on the earth.
Silence was all around,
as before a storm.
In what country was that?
In what city?
It was a temple
without a God
and without worshipers.
And how did I rise up from there
and save myself?

Rajzel Zychlinsky continued to suggest changes and corrections to her poems till four months before her death. Most visits to the nursing home ended with the recital of one of the most powerful of her poems.

God Hid His Face

All the roads led to death, all the roads.
All the winds breathed betrayal, all the winds.
At all the doorways angry dogs barked, at all the doorways.
All the waters laughed at us, all the waters.

—ZYCHLINSKY continued next page

BACK TO GOMBIN - AFTER SEPTEMBER 11

Despite the shock we were all feeling after September 11, the Polish Consul General and I decided to go ahead with our screening of *Back To Gombin* on September 13 at the consulate in New York City on Madison Avenue and 37th Street. Unfortunately, the Polish Foreign Minister was unable to enter the country and likewise many that planned to attend could not be there. However, our loyal Gombiners did attend, as well as many newcomers who have an affiliation with the Consulate. There were survivors from Poland I had never met. I was interviewed by Polish television for a news segment on the film. It was a very successful screening and we had over 50 persons in the audience in the beautiful castle-like setting of the Polish Consulate.

The question and answer period after the screening was also very interesting. The director of the Jewish Claims Conference was there and he posed the tough question of why I made the film and what is its validity in the context of other post-Holocaust films. Obviously ‘we’ Gombiners know the importance of this film, but when faced with Jews from other shtetls, there is sometimes a scrutiny that we don’t apply. The heart of the matter is that Gombin and this film tell the story of a town in Poland that is really much like the hundreds, thousands of others destroyed. Our story is, in a very real sense, their story as well! However it is also different, unique, and with the Rafel footage, we are so fortunate to have been able to show the past and the present in this film. We have been able to focus on the remaining survivors (painfully both Rajzel Zychlinsky, our beautiful poet, and Bella Boll, our Gombin matriarch, have died since I taped them for the film). We witness the heart wrenching truth of what it’s like to be a child of these survivors and a descendent, in interviews with second and third generation. We now have the mesmerizing, beautiful musical score prepared by Rob Harari.

I’ve recently been showing the film to professors and the like for their evaluation. The following is a message I received from Dr. Daniel Harris, Ph.D., and Professor

of English at Rutgers University:

“I just watched *Back To Gombin* and thought it was really splendid, in all kinds of ways. Your labors of love and skill have really paid off. There is so much that is excellent in this film, particularly the responses you got from the second generation, the mixing of black and white and color, especially as some contemporary footage in black and white matches the 1937 clips, so extraordinary also. Thank you so much for sharing this film with me. It is really much better than others I’ve seen — depth, poignancy of commentary, swift/slow terrific cutting.”

Back To Gombin is being booked to screen at a number of national and international venues.

The upcoming screening at Hebrew Union College — Jewish Institute of Religion, Brookdale Center at One West Fourth Street in New York City — is scheduled for February 28, 2002 at 7 PM. Please put this one on your calendars if you will be in the New York City area.

Other upcoming screenings include Columbia University, and several planned for Washington D.C., Los Angeles and Chicago. Remember to check the website for upcoming dates and screenings of the film (click on production updates) at

<http://pages.prodigy.net/madisonpark>

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A message from Minna Packer, Director of the film

—*ZYCHLINSKY* continued from page 5

All the nights fattened on our dread, all the nights.
And the heavens were bare and empty, all the heavens.
God hid his face.

As she requested, she will be cremated and her ashes will be scattered in the ocean. A poem from her book, *God Hid His Face*, will be read at the ceremony. She is survived by her son, Marek Kanter.

■

by Marek Kanter

A TREASURE OF INFORMATION

Ada Holtzman continues to provide us with a treasure of information about our ancestors from Gombin. This year she has added to her website the Registration Book of Gombin 1888-1930 (AKT 454). There is now a collection of registries and censuses in which to search for lost relatives and friends. The documents have been collected by Ada and translated with the help of her late father, Meir, and others.

These registries are available at www.geocities.com/Paris/Rue/4017. The following registries, with their source and some characteristics, are available:

Old Registry Book of Gombin 1888-1930; AKT 454 (Mieszkaucy Gabina: A Book of Gombiner Names) (multiple volumes). Polish State Archive in Plock: This index was begun in the late 19th century and updated until 1930. The earliest part of the document is in Russian script and the latter part in Roman alphabet. The volumes are organized alphabetically, but some of the surnames are missing (e.g. J., M., Z., G.). Other pages have been torn and damaged. This document is available as both a listing and as a searchable database in Excel. The database is organized by last name, transliterated into English. Each individual is listed with first name, date of birth, place of birth, name of parents, date of death, place of death, and notes.

Recruit List of Gombin Men (1866-1899); AKT 507: This document, originally in Russian, is linked to a supplement dated 1916. It contains the names of 911 Gombin men born between 1866 and 1899. It may have been prepared as a list of recruits into the czarist army or for taxing or other civil purposes. The supplement is organized alphabetically and includes surnames, first names and birth dates.

The Business Directory of Gabin, 1925: This document is organized in two ways: (1) list according to surnames in alphabetical order and (2) list according to professions and occupations. A total of 283 names are included, of which 182 were thought to be Jewish. Occupations include “pot menders,” “makers of spats for

shoes,” “feltcher,” and many tailors. The document lists the trade, in both Polish and English translation, and the individuals’ names.

List of Men and their Occupations: Gombin 1891-1893: This is a much shorter document — about 4 pages in German — submitted by Mr. Zbigniew Lukaszewski in 1999. Listed are surnames, first names, profession and marital status.

The Czarist Voter Duma List of Gombin, 1907: This list includes all men over 25 years of age who had the right to vote for the Czarist Duma (parliament) as recorded in 1907. This is a short document on the website with only a list of names. The original document also contains names from regions around Gombin and is available from Ada.

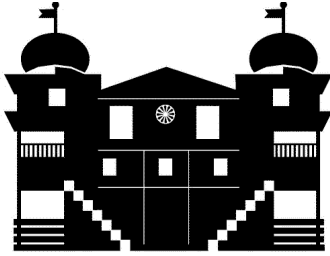
KONIN MEMORIAL PLAQUE

Earlier this year, the Gombin Society contracted with Dr. Lucja Nowak of the Konin Museum to erect a new plaque at the mass grave where Jews from the infamous Konin forced labor camp were buried in the Konin Catholic Cemetery (a small Polish monument already exists at the grave). The site was visited during the Gombin Society trip to Poland in 1999. The inscription on the plaque reads:

Here lie the remains of Jewish prisoners murdered by the German Nazis at the Konin Forced Labor Camp in 1942 and 1943. Being Jewish was their only crime. May they find eternal peace. We shall not forget you!

The plaque lists the names of 62 Jewish Gombiners who survived, based on the diary of Rabbi Aaronson of Sanniki and other survivor testimonies. In addition, the plaque recognizes “the anonymous Jewish victims whose names were not documented.”

Rabbi Yehoshua Moshe Aaronson published his memoir, *Alei Merorot* (Leaves of Bitterness), including “Scrolls from the Slavery House;” diary from the Konin Concentration Camp. Bnei Brak, 1996.



GOMBIN JEWISH HISTORICAL & GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

President: Mindy Prosperi

Secretary: Noam Lupu

Treasurer: Steve Tadelis

Board of Directors: Harold Boll, Jeremy Freedman, Bernie Guyer, Marty Guyer, Noam Lupu, Minna Packer, Mindy Prosperi, Gail Salomon, Gayle Frankel Sokoloff and Steve Tadelis

Executive Committee: Harold Boll, Noam Lupu, Mindy Prosperi and Steve Tadelis

Representative in Israel: Ada Holtzman

Representative in Britain: Jeremy Freedman

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