

# B'NAI GOMBIN

Newsletter of the Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society

The Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society (GJHGS) is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization 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 descendents. 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, contact the Gombin Society by mail at 320 County Route 105, Highland Mills NY 10930 or by email. [www.gombinsociety.org](http://www.gombinsociety.org)

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The officers and board members of the Gombin Society and their families wish you a good, healthy and sweet New Year, 5768  
*L'Shanah Tovah Tikatevu*

## Planning for Gombin Synagogue Memorial Nears Completion; Construction in 2008

By Arthur A. Gertzman

The Gombin Society proposes to build a fitting monument to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Gombin Synagogue. The Gombin Synagogue was destroyed by fire in September, 1939. It was located on Kilinskiega Street, between the Nida River and the main square. It was an extraordinary example of "oriental" architectural design and was listed by the Polish Government for historical preservation.

In November, 2006, Mindy Proserpi and I traveled to Gombin to seek permission from the municipal government to place a monument on the site of the original Synagogue. We were assisted by Mr. Sebastian Balko, a Polish Gombiner who studied in the U.S. and has been a close friend of Mindy's family (Bernie Guyer stayed in the Balko family home during a Gombin visit in 2005).

The Gombin Mayor, Mr. Krzysztof Jadczyk, met with us on November 6. We explained our desire to build a monument to commemorate the Synagogue, the centuries of Jewish presence in Gombin and the significant impact on the town provided by the hundreds of Jewish families who lived there.

After World War II, Polish laws permitted the restitution of Jewish property. Petitions were required to apply for (continued on page 2)

## Gombin Synagogue Memorial (continued)

legal recognition of ownership. The members of the Gombin Societies at the time were either unaware of the procedure or, more likely, harbored a deep seated revulsion to all things Polish. Consequently, no petitions for the Synagogue land were submitted. Legal ownership of the land passed to the Polish government, and eventually, a market was built on the site. Mindy and I found a major construction project underway to expand the store. Hence, it was not possible or even desirable to place the monument on the Synagogue site.

An alternate site was considered at a city park in Gombin not far from the Synagogue site and the town square. This park has a large monument to World War I soldiers from Gombin killed in that war. The balance of the park was empty except for grass and several tree-covered squares.

Mindy and I conceived of a monument with a bronze image of the Synagogue and, an engraved text, in Polish and English briefly stating the existence of the Synagogue and Jews in Gombin. A design for the monument

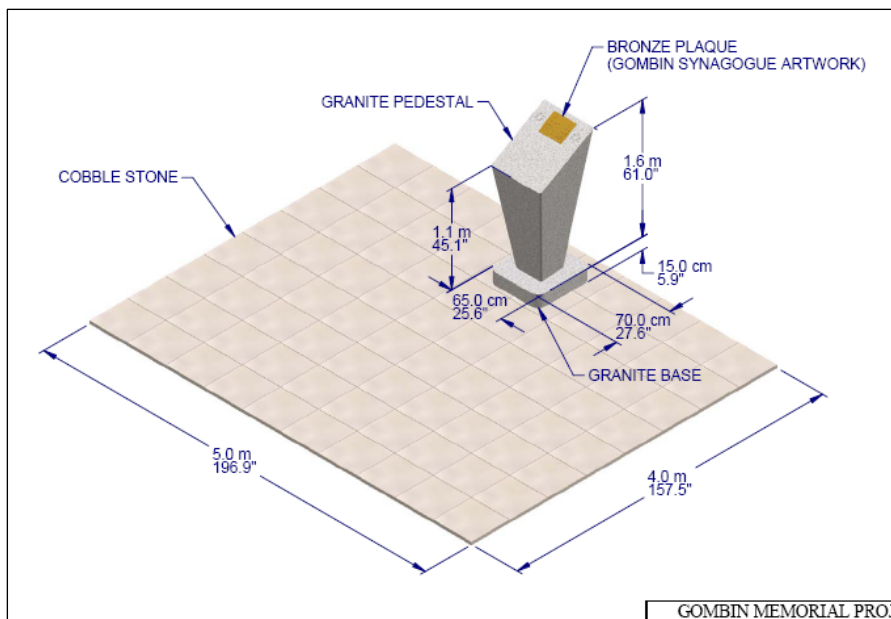
is shown below. It includes a granite pedestal, five feet tall, an engraved inscription and an image of the Synagogue in bronze. The pedestal will stand on a small granite base upon a cobblestone or brick platform.

The drawings and request for approval were submitted to the Mayor's office in December 2006. Several delays led to the eventual review by the council on 16 March 2007. They approved the monument design and the text. However, the plan to place the monument in the city park was rejected. Needless to say we were very disappointed.

We had attempted to anticipate the local government's sensitivity to the park location and accordingly, designed the monument to be significantly smaller than the World War I monument already in the park. It was also to be placed considerably apart from the War monument. This strategy did not work. The government requested that the Synagogue monument be located in the Jewish Cemetery grounds. The formal document dated 18<sup>th</sup> April 2007 approving the Synagogue monument and directing the location to the Gombin Jewish

Cemetery included the following statement (translated by Sebastian Balko):

*“Responding to the earlier correspondence and request to organize and build a memorial monument, rejuvenating that presence of the Jewish community in Gombin and its efforts in city development (before 1945), and also to pay tribute to all the people that were affected and killed by Nazis in the holocaust.”*



## Gombin Synagogue Memorial (continued)

*-The location and planned development of a memorial monument in Gabin was discussed by the City Council and Board on 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2007*

*-The City Board and the Council has agreed to give permission to build the Gabin Jewish Synagogue Memorial giving it a case number (42/V/2007).*

*-The location for this project the city board has pointed the Jewish Cemetery in Gabin, which is currently at your disposition.*

*-Because the location of the place is different than requested, we would like you to consider the new place as a City Board decision.*

*-The memorial is for remembering the Jewish community and its indisputable impact on Gabin city development.”*

The GJHGS Board discussed this decision at length. The Board eventually decided that a well designed monument would be a fitting tribute to the Synagogue and 250 years of Jewish history – even if located in the Cemetery. Any protest to the municipal government could have lead to rejection of the approved monument.

The construction project plan is now at a final stage and will include the following:

- 1.A granite monument with engraved text and bronze Synagogue image.
- 2.A brick walk from the front gate of the Cemetery to be integrated with the already existing Cemetery monument.
- 3.Repainting the fence around the entire cemetery perimeter.

All this is expected to cost about \$20,000. We are planning to apply to the Nissenbaum Foundation for financial support for this project. They are the organization in Warsaw that generously funded and managed the construction of the Cemetery Monument built in 1999.

Minna Packer and I will coordinate the construction phase with onsite supervision by Sebastian Balko, who now lives in Warsaw. I will be there in early October to determine the precise location of the monument. onstruction could be completed in spring of 2008.

The GJHGS Board believes this is a worthwhile project which will commemorate the Synagogue and the Jews of Gombin. They are our collective ancestors who lived there for centuries and who are now gone. We, their children and grandchildren now living in many countries dedicate this monument to their memory.

### **Gertzman Grandson Raises Funds for Synagogue Memorial**

Ben Dafilou is Arthur Gertzman’s grandson. For his Bar Mitzvah his synagogue, Har Sinai in Pennington NJ, required a mitzvah project. Ben decided to do some fundraising on behalf of the Gombin Society. The theme he chose was the current project for a memorial to the Gombin Synagogue.

The letter he used to solicit funds described the history of the Synagogue and included the design of the plaque. He raised \$520 from local businesses.

# New Gombin Film Project: “The Lilliput; the story of Umchzek Kerber, the dwarf of Gombin”

by Minna Zielonka-Packer

I recently received word that I have been selected as a Fulbright Scholar to create the film, “The Lilliput”, from my original script. I plan to film in Lodz, Gombin, and other locations in Poland. I have interviewed several prominent dwarf actors in the U.S., and it is likely that Mark Povinelli, who starred as “Toulouse Lautrec” at Lincoln Center in New York City last year will come to Poland to play the role of Umchzek Kerber. The rest of the cast will be recruited from the drama department of the National Film School and other actors I meet in Poland and Israel. (I am hoping to film in Kibbutz Evron, where many Gombin survivors emigrated).

One of the most miraculous stories of survival is that of Umchzek Kerber (born Abraham; “Umchzek” was his nickname) who survived the war, hiding in garbage cans and cartons at the Warsaw railway station for years. Both of my parents knew him, and I used to ask my mother who he was, sitting next to her in an old black and white photograph she kept. George Zolna and his daughter Rane Weinsten, sent me a picture recently, of Umchzek and George in “Lodz House” in 1945.

The Gombiners referred to Umchzek Kerber as ‘the lilliput’, which means ‘dwarf’, in Polish. I was intrigued about



*1935 in Gombin: Umchzek Kerber, Ryczia Holtzman and unidentified friend*

him and found out what I could, although exact details proved elusive. He didn’t marry and had no children, and was the only survivor of his immediate family. He lived in Israel until the 1980’s and was a photographer there, as he had been in Poland before the war. He is remembered visiting Kibbutz Evron in the 1950’s. With the aid of Ada Holtzman, our genealogical expert on all matters Gombin, whose mother, Ryczia, was a cousin of Umchzek, and with the memoir of Izchak Weitzman (which is on Ada’s website), I gathered photographs and wrote my script. Since the script is inspired by the life of Kerber, I have taken the narrative liberty to chart his survival in Gombin at the beginning of the war, and then in Lodz and Warsaw, where he was in hiding. This enabled me to illuminate others Gombiner stories in the script, and include aspects of the ghettos in Lodz and Warsaw, and the numerous train

## **The Dwarf of Gombin Film (Continued)**

transports from those cities to Chelmno, Auschwitz and Treblinka.

The video companion, which I will shoot during our stay in Poland, will focus on the experiences and narrative of my 16 year old daughter, Mimi, who will be with me during the entire ten months. As an American grandchild of Holocaust survivors from this place, her video diary will be directed to the MTV generation audience. Overcoming this generational gap in knowledge of the Holocaust to the 3rd generation, is a struggle that this video aims to overcome, by embracing a style that is intimate and welcome to teenage viewers.

Fundraising for the film will continue in the U.S. and Europe, with the capable assistance of my assistant director, Eduardo Vilchez. Eduardo and New Jersey City University will assist by contributing to the costs of financing his

participation on this. Eduardo is helping to create a website that will have a fundraising button for individual donations. An independent filmmaker website, [www.IndieGoGo.com](http://www.IndieGoGo.com) will be featuring our film for individual donations from the filmmaker community.

The Gombin Society is providing a grant of \$10,000 toward the project. In kind donations include housing accommodations from the University of Lodz for the duration of the Fulbright, and accommodations in Israel are provided by Gombiner granddaughter, Joyce Boll, who is a producer in Tel Aviv. The National Film School of Lodz, will provide technical support.

For further information, please contact the filmmaker at 201-993-8264 cell or email [minna.packer@gmail.com](mailto:minna.packer@gmail.com). The webpage for "The Lilliput" is [www.myspace.com/theliliput](http://www.myspace.com/theliliput).

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## **Another Gombiner was a Fulbright Recipient!**

Michael Lewis was born in London in 1957. His father was the son of two Gombiners, Esther Gelbert and Meyer Wladoshevky. Michael's father Monty was a first cousin to Rivka Aloni who was active among the Israel Gombiners. Michael graduated medical school in London in 1983. He was active in Habonim-Dror, a Labor Zionist youth movement. After graduation he made Aliyah to Israel, where he met his future wife Judy Telles. They have been married for 21 years. They have three daughters Dafna (8), Adina (13) and Miika (18) who is now a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1995 Michael joined the faculty at the University of Miami. He is now the Program Director in Anesthesiology. During the 2006-2007 academic years he was a Fulbright Scholar at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His academic interest is in the area of perioperative care of the elderly. During his Fulbright sabbatical, apart from renewing family ties (all Gombiners), he built a web page to teach Anesthesiology residents about the anesthetic care of the elderly.

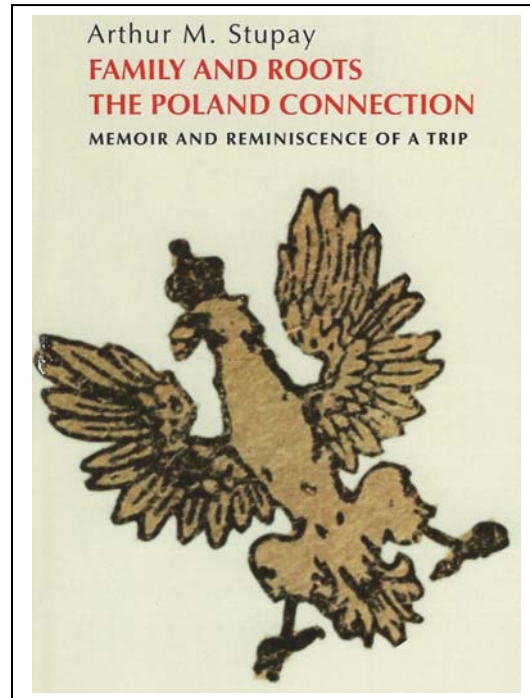
**Arthur Stupay: Family and Roots; The Poland Connection, Memoir and Reminiscence of a trip. 2007.  
Summary (page 60)**

This was my first trip to Poland. I have been to Europe many times and feel comfortable in London, Paris and Rome. Warsaw and Poland are different; they are off the beaten path for many Americans, who know little about Eastern Europe and care less, even though many have family roots there. Maybe the turmoil that engulfed the region, two world wars and the Holocaust, have made Americans nervous about traveling there.

I found it eye-opening. I was impressed with the reconstruction from the devastation. Poles have also made remarkable strides in resurrecting Polish culture after the Nazis and Communists tried to obliterate it. I liked the Poles whom we met. They were cognizant of the tragic history of Jews in Poland and wanted to engage with us and discuss the war and its impact.

I was surprised by the number of “Silent Jews,” who survived the war and who have become part of the fabric of the society, avoiding contact with institutional Judaism. While this strategy helped them negotiate a vicious anti-Semitic environment, their children have become curious and even interested in Jewish life and culture. It is equally astonishing that a Yiddish theater in Warsaw thrives, even though there is only a small Jewish population.

Poland is a land of daunting problems. Its economy has not recovered from the devastation of both the Nazis and the Communists. Unemployment is high



and young people are not able to find jobs; many leave when they are old enough to work. The roads and rails systems are well behind the standards of Western Europe; the education system has not been effective in the early grades; local industry and entrepreneurship lag.

Poland has made an enormous effort to become part of the European Union, though it is not yet part of the Euro system. Poland's help to the U.S. in Iraq and the war on terror has been notable and it seeks even closer ties to Western Europe. Nevertheless, it is super sensitive to any verbal slights or threats from Germany and Russia, and for good reason.

After ten centuries of settlement, there

## Stupay: Family and Roots. 2007 (Continued)

are virtually no minorities in Poland. There are few Poles who identify themselves as Jews- less than 25,000. There are limited efforts to engage with Jews at the national level and no effort to make restitution. Previous Polish Governments have avoided creating a "Truth Commission" to uncover Polish collaboration with the Nazis; they have refused to investigate Polish murder of Jews during the war.

Maybe it is too late to seek justice for the victims and their families. Maybe Poland will continue to be known for the emigration of its people. The Poles have been resilient and may learn from their past failures, especially from their negative attitudes towards minorities. Also, they have to overcome the bitter legacy of Communism. Yet the growing relationship with the EU is the strongest evidence that they want to embrace change and become a tolerant society.

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### Attend the upcoming annual Gombin Society meeting, December 9, 2007 in New York City

This year's annual Gombin Society annual membership meeting is being planned for December 9, 2007 in New York City. More information about the location and activities will be forthcoming in October. At the annual meeting, the membership will vote for new officers and learn about current activities, including the Gombin Synagogue memorial project. The annual meeting is also the time to meet other Gombiners, exchange stories and remembrances, and propose new activities. We especially welcome Gombiner grandchildren to learn more about their historic past.

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### The Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society

Renew your membership: U.S. member- \$36\_\_\_\_\_ ; International member- \$36\_\_\_\_\_ ;

Student member- \$10\_\_\_\_\_ ; Board member- \$60\_\_\_\_\_ .

Special donation for the Gombin Synagogue project:\_\_\_\_\_ .

Special donation for the new film "Lilliput" project: \_\_\_\_\_ .

Other special donations: \_\_\_\_\_ .

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Make check to: Gombin Society (GJHGS)

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