



# B'NAI GOMBIN

Quarterly Newsletter of  
THE GOMBIN SOCIETY—GJHGS

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**Editor: Noam Lupu**

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The Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society (GJHGS) is a non-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 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.

## ABOUT THE SOCIETY

The Gombin Jewish Historical and Genealogical Society is a non-profit 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.
- To collect, teach, disseminate, and publish knowledge and information on the history of the Gombin Jewish community and the genealogy of the Jews of Gombin.
- To encourage all interested persons to pursue historical and genealogical research focused on the Gombin Jewish community.
- To 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.
- To undertake activities to preserve the memory of the Gombin Jews who perished in the Holocaust.
- To 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 quarterly 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 World Wide Web page at <<http://weber.ucsd.edu/~lzamosc/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

As the new year approaches, we greet our friends with a *Shana Tova*, a happy New Year and hope that this year is better than the last. We all sit in our synagogues on the first day of Rosh Hashana and pray that the new year brings joy and happiness. Ten days later, on Yom Kippur, we again sit in our synagogues and ask for forgiveness from God from our sins this past year. We ask that we be given a clean slate and signed in the book of life for the year to come. We also wish each other a *G'mar Chatima Tova*, to be signed and sealed in God's book of life.

And yet after Yom Kippur ends and we eat our breakfast meal, most of us go back to our regular, routine lifestyle. Few of us actually think of ways we can ourselves improve the year to come for ourselves as well as for others. Few of us end this day of judgement and begin searching for ways to volunteer in our communities, or for charities for us to donate to.

There is a well-known Jewish idea of *tikkun olam*, of helping the world by helping the environment and our fellow men in need. In our times, *tikkun olam* is becoming less and less common, perhaps as our own lives become busier and the time becomes more and more scarce.

But the need for *tikkun olam* has not dissipated; rather, it may be more important now than ever before. We can, and should, all be a part of the crusade to make this world a better place for our children and grandchildren. And so, I urge each of us, fellow Gombiners, to be generous; let us think of how we can help our good causes, our communities and our world in this new year, be it by giving money or by giving of our time.

Noam Lupu

# GOMBINER GATHERING 1997 REPORT

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by Noam Lupu

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The second annual Gombiner Gathering, on August 17, 1997, was a huge success in bringing together Gombiners from around the world as well as in informing all those present of the projects of the Gombiner Society.

The gathering, which was preceded by a genealogy seminar (see page 6 for a report of the genealogy seminar), began at noon with a light lunch and live klezmer music in the Atrium Palace in Fort Lee, New Jersey. Gombiners came from Israel, Germany, England and across the United States. The first hours were spent schmoozing with fellow Gombiners and enjoying the friendly atmosphere of the Atrium Palace, the room rented by organizers Mindy Prosperi and Craig and Renee Weinstein.

A medal for Meritorious Remembrance Activity was presented to Zalman Ben Yitzhak, a Gombiner living in Kibbutz Evron in Israel who has collected an incredible wealth of material on Gombin – its history and its Jewish community. The directors of the Gombin Society then introduced themselves and provided some information on their background as well as their views on why the memory cause of the Gombin Society is so important for Gombiner families today.

For the entire duration of the meeting, a table in the back of the room displayed the many new publications of the Gombin Society being sold at the gathering. From collections of material on the history of Gombin to information on the current situation of Gombin, these publications are indispensable in a Gombiner household. They can still be purchased by mail (see insert form and page 14 for descriptions of the publications).

Rabbi Kurt Stone, one of the distinguished guests, dedicated the 1997 gathering in the memory of Nathan Weiss, who had passed away the day before, August

16, 1997. The gathering continued as those Gombiners who attended Nathan Weiss' funeral arrived.

Rabbi Konikov then discussed how Jewish law views the restoration of a Jewish cemetery, explaining that this type of project is one of the greatest *mitzvot* or good deeds that a Jew can do since it cannot be repaid by the dead being honored. He also explained that according to Jewish law, Jewish cemeteries must be marked as such and made known that they are sacred burial grounds.

Minna Zielonka Packer followed with her audio-visual essay, "What's in a Name?", an intriguing discussion of life meanings in the shadow of the Holocaust (see page 8 for a copy of "What's in a Name?"). Documents from the Society's publication *Gombin ghetto and the Joint* were then read to remember the terrible fate of the Gombiners who perished in the Holocaust.

In the second half of the special awards ceremony, a medal for Meritorious Institutional Service was given to Raymond Boll, president of the Gombiner Young Men of New Jersey for his many years of work with that society and with the Gombiner community at large.

Leon Zamosc then reported on the situation of the Gombin Jewish cemetery and on the Chelmno memorial projects of the Society. Showing some slides from a recent visit to Gombin and Chelmno, he explained the need for restoration and memorial projects at both those sites. He then explained the decision made by the Gombin Society Board of Directors regarding the memorial projects in Poland (see page 7 for more information on those decisions). A public forum ensued in which Gombiners expressed their views regarding these projects and received further clarification from members of the Board of Directors.

The 1997 Gombiner Gathering ended with many expressions of warm feelings and unanimous wishes for many encores in future years.

## REACTIONS TO THE GATHERING

“I speak on behalf of Gill and Seth and Rosa when I say that we found the whole Gombin thing quite overwhelming. The warmth, affinity and collegiate spirit went way beyond anything we could ever have anticipated. It is easy enough to rationalize this by saying, for example, that some relationship was bound to have formed as a result of a few hundred e-mails in the past 4 months. But that falls a long way short of being an adequate, let alone sufficient, explanation. After all, we met perhaps 100 people, but have only e-mailed directly with about a dozen of them. Although I had of some others, most were unknown even by name.

You could say that with the New York/New Jersey history of this group, there was sufficient integration already available to allow a few strangers to come in and feel at home. Life has taught me that, generally, the converse is true. The integrated block out the novices in most situations.

We might argue that common purpose explains the affability of the group. The problem there is whether or not there is, in reality, quite the unity of purpose implicit in such an explanation.

Where this is all leading is that the components individuals of this group turned out to be, for us, quite the most charming people. Perhaps common heritage, common genes, common experiences contribute to this. We see it differently, we think you are all jolly decent chaps. To the extent that we were strangers in a strange land, we pay tribute to the collective and to each and every one of the people we met for the kindness and hospitality we were shown.”

– *Jeremy Freedman, England*

“I wish to applaud you and all others involved in the production of the Gathering. It was a huge success in achieving the necessary dissemination of exactly what

your agenda is. Until now I personally found it to be unclear. The entire production was choreographed, conducted and presented in a way that was entertaining, interesting and enlightening. . . Once again, I offer my congratulations on a job well done! *Yasher koach!*”

– *Milton Kleinert, New Jersey*

“I thank everyone involved in making this meeting happen. And even in the face of an unexpected tragedy, I believe we showed the kind of resilience which is the hallmark of Gombiners. The untimely death of my uncle, Nathan Weiss, was indeed a sad event, but the ceremony at the funeral and the words spoken there and the large turnout are a testimony to the fact that after walking out of the ashes of Auschwitz he went on to rebuild his life and earn the love of his family and respect of many friends. I’m glad we were able to honor him at the Gombiner gathering as well. In this respect, the timing was appropriate and perhaps there are forces in the universe which influenced it as well.”

– *Harold Boll, Massachusetts*

# SCENES FROM THE GATHERING

Leon Zamosc (left) presents the award for Meritorious Institutional Service to Raymond Boll, president of the Gombiner Young Men of New Jersey (middle) as GJHGS president, Harold Boll (right) looks on.

Steve Tadelis (left) and Zalman Ben Yitzhak (right) enjoy a funny moment after Zalman was presented with the Meritorious Remembrance Activity award for his years of research and study of the history of Gombin.

A group of Gombiners from New Jersey, California, Florida and Germany gather for one last smile at the end of the gathering. The 1997 gathering was a heart-lifting experience for all those who attended.

*photos by Gayle Frankel Sciacca*

# THOUGHTS ON THE GOMBINER MEETINGS

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Rabbi Kurt Stone

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On the Shabbat immediately preceding Rosh Chodesh, the New Moon, Jews the world over recite a prayer asking God for blessings in the coming month. Included in the prayer's several paragraphs is the expression *Chaverim Kol Yisrael* – which can be variously translated “all Jews are a fellowship,” “all Jews are colleagues,” or perhaps “all Jews are Family.”

This phrase, *Chaverim Kol Yisrael*, kept wending its way in and out of my conscious mind during the recent Gombin conference in New Jersey. Although I am not “of” Gombin (my family's roots are primarily English and German), and am not the child of survivors (again, my family has been in America for four generations), I nonetheless felt a tremendous kinship with all the Gombiners. *Chaverim kol Yisrael*.

Dinner the night before the meeting of the executive board is a case in point. Around a long table in a local deli sat Gombiners from Israel, Germany and America, from Argentina, Poland and France. We must have driven our poor waiters crazy, conversing in English, French, Spanish, Yiddish, German and Hebrew. Sitting across from me was a woman who spoke only Yiddish and French, having a marvelous conversation with a woman who spoke only Spanish and a smattering of English. Next to me was an elderly Israeli gentleman having an animated chat with two men who spoke not a word of Hebrew. And yet, despite the seeming barriers, communication was free and easy, filled with emotion and understanding. *Chaverim kol Yisrael*.

The executive board meeting took the better part of a day. Sitting around a large dining table, one witnessed the Society's heart and soul, its younger generation of American, English and South American-born Gombiners. Jewishly speaking, the board runs the gamut from the truly Orthodox to those whose only connection to

the ancestral faith is the accident of birth and the calamity of Gombin. And yet, around that table, sat members of a single family, the family of Gombin, the family of Abraham and Sarah. From late morning till early evening, the young Gombiners argued and debated, listened and opined on a host of issues that would be presented the next day in Ft. Lee. One of the major (and most drawn-out) debates involved the wording of the plaque to be placed at Chelmino. Each phrase, indeed each word, was dissected and debated with all the care and concern that consuls and attaches put into their diplomatic cables. Agreement was hard fought and hard won as the board considered various verbal scenarios. Should the plaque contain the words “we shall always remember” or “we shall never forgive”? Would translating the plaque into German be an unconscionable affront to the murdered? And should the murderers be mentioned by name? The debate ran on until dinner.

The Sunday gathering in Ft. Lee brought three, perhaps four, generations together. Here, the magic and mystery of memory was on constant display. Sitting at a back table piled high with archival materials, one saw the look of recognition as an elder would read a name tag, look at a young face and say: “I knew your grandfather,” or “you must be the daughter of . . .” Hugs and handshakes, laughter and tears, all the ingredients of a long overdue family reunion.

We Jews are perhaps the only people in the history of the planet who include amongst our religious imperatives, the commandment to remember. “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” “Remember that you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” “Remember what Amalek did to you.” The act of collective memory serves to hold us together and give a seemingly disparate people a feeling of kinship, of unified purpose. *Chaverim kol Yisrael*.

—*THOUGHTS* continued page 13

# DIRECTORS APPROVE MEMORIAL INITIATIVE IN GOMBIN AND CHELMNO

After over a year of consultations, exploratory visits to Poland, and intense internal deliberations, the Gombin Society is now formally committed to the realization of a memorial project that is aimed at protecting the relics of Jewish Gombin and preserving the memory of the Gombiners who were murdered in the Holocaust.

At their Annual Board Meeting, which took place in New Jersey on August 16, 1997, the directors of the Gombin Society discussed, modified, and approved a set of proposals that had been submitted by the society's Memorial Committee. In essence, it was decided that the Gombiner memorial initiative in Poland will have two components: installing a memorial plaque for the Gombin Jews at the forest site in Chelmno, and taking steps to save and protect the Jewish cemetery of Gombin.

## Chelmno Memorial Plaque

The Konin Regional Museum, which is in charge of the exhibit and the compounds of the Chelmno extermination camp, facilitates the installation of memorials to those who wish to perpetuate and honor the memory of the Holocaust victims from their shtetls. Landsmen and descendants have erected monuments and plaques for many other shtetls of the region, but nothing has been done to memorialize the Gombin Jews who were killed at Chelmno.

In fulfillment of the organization's mandate, the directors of the Gombin Society have taken action, approving the project that will finally dedicate the Gombiner plaque in Chelmno. It was decided that the tablet's shape will be reminiscent of a classic Jewish Eastern European matzevah. It will include an engraved image of the Gombin wooden shul, and it will bear the fol-

lowing inscription in Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish and English:

### *Gombin In Eternal Memory*

*In this place of horror, the valley of the shadow of death, Chelmno in the spring of 1942, over 2,000 Jews from Gombin men and women, young and old were gassed and burned by the accursed Nazis.*

*"If only my head was filled with water and my eyes were a fountain of tears Then I would weep by day and night Over the destruction of the flower of my people."*  
(Jeremiah Ch.8 v.23)

*We are still here.  
We shall never forget.*

*Survivors and descendants of Gombin  
from all over the world*

## Gombin Jewish Cemetery

The condition of the abandoned Gombin Jewish cemetery is simply appalling. The oaks planted by our ancestors are still standing, but the site is desecrated on a daily basis because of its lack of protection. The central section is used by children to play soccer, the area is littered with fragments of bottles left behind by drunkards, and a recent study has listed the Gombin cemetery as endangered by pollution and nearby development. The gravestones quarried by the Germans can be seen everywhere: they were used to build roads, sidewalks, and even a bridge near the center of town.

—*MEMORIAL continued page 18*

# WHAT'S IN A NAME?

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by Minna Zielonka Packer

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When I was born way back in the fifties, the popular American girl's names were, Linda, Susan, Debbie, Carol, Rene, Andrea. Certainly Minna was not a popular name. What's Minna got to do with being an American girl in pre-feminist New York City?

Minna is the name given to me in remembrance of my father's sister. She was a beautiful young married woman named Minna Ber-Danziger. She married Meyer and they had just had a baby daughter when the Nazis occupied Gombin. As the story goes, she and Meyer and the baby girl, Pesa, attempted to cross the border in 1939 into unoccupied Russia, by horse and carriage. The carriage developed a mechanical problem and they turned back. By 1942, after shuffling between Gombin, Lodz and Zachrocyn (near Warsaw), looking for a safe haven, they were deported on separate trains to Auschwitz.

I know this much, because her husband, Meyer, survived Auschwitz. He told the story of Minna and Pesa's demise to my father, Michael. He told him how Minna refused to give up her baby and was sent, with child, into the gas chamber. She was known as *Da Shyna Minya*, which means the beautiful Minna. She was twenty-eight when she was killed.

When my Tante Rosie, (who is my father and Minna's maternal aunt) who now lives in Israel, met me before my marriage to Wayne, my father asked her what she thought of me. I heard her say, with some trepidation, "It's Minya", in a tone that meant full well that this waif, this American hippie child, could never be *Da Shyna Minya*. I accepted this ranking. How dare I try to expropriate the tragic power of this beautiful martyr for whom I was named? Her beauty, her memory and history were so much larger than I could ever hope to be.

Like all children of survivors, I grew up in the shadow of history. In her shadow, I felt infinitesimally small, but with a mazel, (luck) she did not possess. Quite simply, I was alive and she was not. Traditionally, Jews are named in honor of the beloved departed. The problem for us, the children of survivors, is having and maintaining our own identity in the face of those beloved dead ones. My sister, the first born to my parents, was named Leah Dina (which was Anglicized into Lillian and more recently changed back to the Hebraic, Dina Leah) for both of her grandmothers. Leah Gershonovitch, my maternal grandmother, died in Kasakstan, during the war, of starvation, dysentery and a completely broken spirit. My mother, Sonia, buried her without a coffin, with her hands, placing her into the dirt. Dina, was my paternal grandma and a brave and charitable woman of Gombin. She worked to help the Jewish poor and was also in charge of raising dowries for young brides whose Jewish families were of modest means. Presumably it was 1939 when she was shot with her son, my father's younger brother, Chaim, in front of the temple in Gombin. The date is speculative as the synagogue was soon burned down by the Nazis. Her husband, my Grandpa Shyah was killed at Chelmno in 1942.

So my sister Lillian, the first born, was given not only the names of both grandmothers, but so named, was also instilled with the responsibility to mother her orphaned parents. There is beauty and sadness in the honor of carrying these names. There is also a great burden. We can never be these people. To the victims, the living victims, the survivors, we are the replacements. Is it fair to have to grow up in the shadow of death? Isn't it somehow abnormal to have our identity endowed with this tragic history?

I guess it depends on how well one has lived up to or exceeded the expectations of our parents. If we've  
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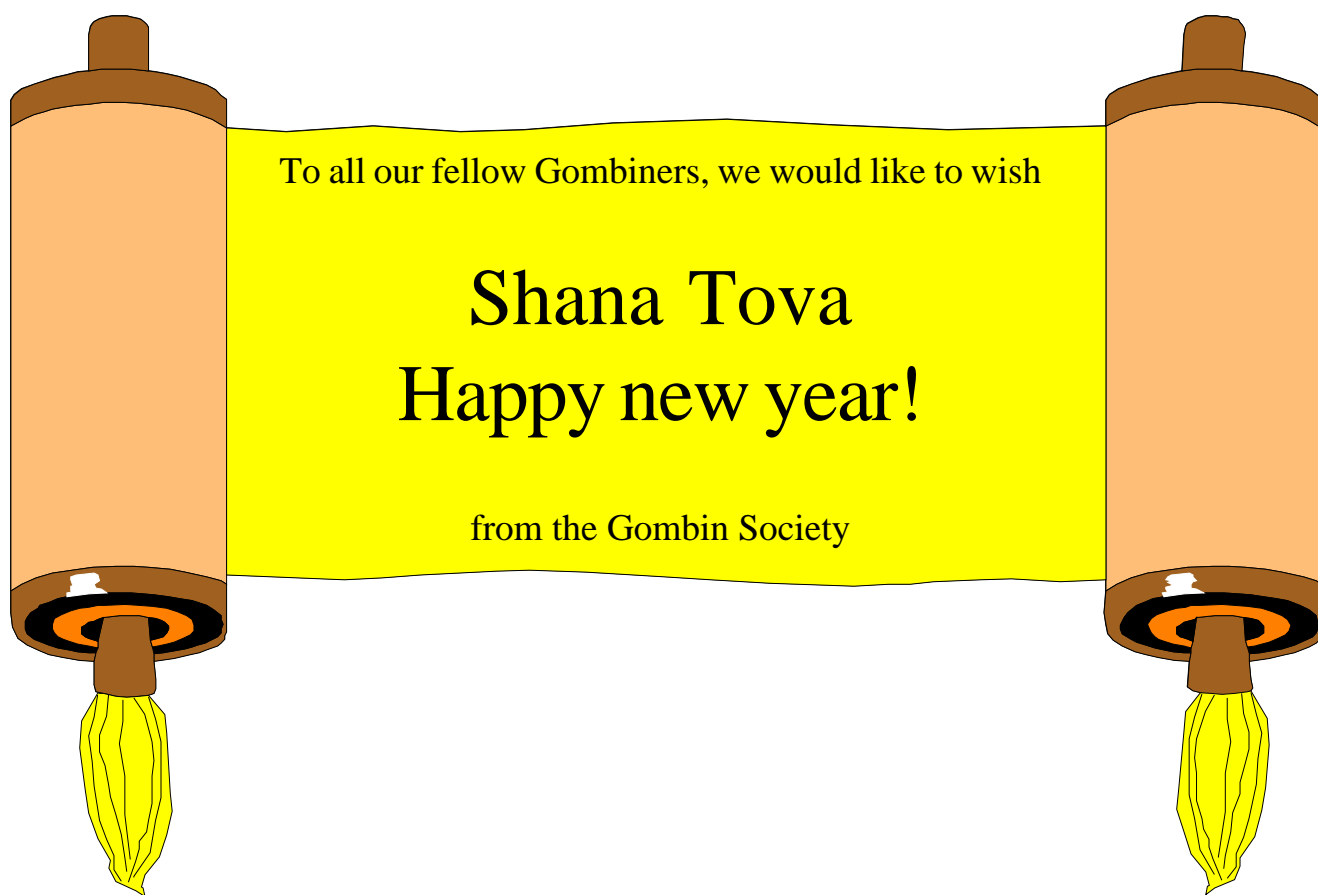
done well, we've applied a salve to the wounds of war. If we've failed, we are a disappointment to the dead as well as the living.

When my dad came to America he adopted his mother's last name, Zielonka. He rationalized that he would drop his given surname, Ber, because his cousin Machel, also a survivor, carried that name. He said there were no more Zielonkas and so he would be one. I think it also has to do with his great love for his mother and the attempt to hang on to her by adopting her name. I sometimes think if I had been Ber, I would be Minna Ber, or perhaps Minna Zielonka-Ber, or with my married name Minna Zielonka Ber-Packer. What a mouthful! In grade school, I wanted to be named "Diane". It's obviously not a Jewish name but I loved it, thinking a Diane is popular, pretty and sophisticated. A "Diane" doesn't have immigrant parents with ac-

cents. A "Diane" fits seamlessly into post war American culture. A "Minna" requires much explaining.

Later, with the arrival of Barbie dolls, it was not just Barbie's name I wanted. It was her turned up nose, her long blonde hair, the blue eyes, slim hips and buxom body. I longed to be reincarnated as a shiksa goddess. I ironed my curly hair, wore white lipstick, black eyeliner and mini skirts trying desperately to hide my ethnicity.

As an adult I'm still defining my individuality. Now, I'm doing so through a lens that accepts the self as part of the Jewish time continuum. I accept the name Minna as a beautiful name that I share with the memory of my aunt. And I mourn her, the Minna who died so young, at the hands of killers of Jews. In the process of separating my identity from hers, as well as from the needs of my survivor parents, I have the strange sensation of, psychically, giving birth to myself.



# MY FATHER, JACOB M. ROTHBART

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by David Rothbart

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To his family and intimates he was called Meyer – his middle name. He was representative of certain genre of Gombin youth in the last 15 years of the 19th century and the first 6 years of the 20th. He was a Bundist activist, a leader of defending the town against threatening pogromists ad intent on deposing the Czar. Typically, he rebelled against formal, ritualized religion by age 12. By then his indoctrination was complete. He was thoroughly grounded in the Talmud, in the lore and emotions of shul and in Jewish holidays. His native tongue was Yiddish. Yet he was universalist in outlook. When he escaped Poland in 1906, just ahead of the police and came to America, among the few possessions he brought with him was a book of poems in Polish written by a Polish poetess. He left behind his father, mother and sister Rivka. In 1927, he brought over to Canada all who remained of the family after the typhoid fever plague of 1918, including his mother, sister Rivka together with her husband Shlomye Adler, their children Deena, Jack and Abe, and Deena’s husband Isadore Eiley.

In America, Jacob settled in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1908 and in 1912 married Pearl Bloch who had immigrated from Lithuania in 1908. They had four children: Saul, David, Roselie and Deborah. The four children gave them to date 11 grandchildren, 19 great-grandchildren and one recently born great-great-grandchild named Gabriel Rothbart.

Jacob was employed for 64 years as an agent for the New York Life Insurance Company. He regarded the profession as providing a life-sustaining service. For many of his working years there was no such thing as social security. When the main provider of the family died or became incapacitated, the only thing that kept the family from becoming destitute was life and disabil-

ity income insurance. Yet insurance was a tough sell, an intangible that few people ever bought. It had to be sold; a piece of paper to be put away yet paid for periodically during times when it was a struggle for the worker just to pay the rent and put food on the table. But when the need came, his clients regarded him as their saint and savior.

At the same time, he remained a passionate idealist, the kind who worked almost as hard to advance the things he believed in as at making a living. Jewish culture was foremost in his thoughts. He was an ardent Yiddishist. He was among a handful in the country who concentrated on supporting authors of fine ethnic literature, music, art and gifted lecturers. In addition, he spent much of his precious time in raising money for the United States Jewish Appeal and similar causes. For many years he was a nurturing Board of Directors member of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research after it moved from Vilna to New York in 1940.

In all his 94 years, until he departed in 1979 to re-join his wife Pearl in a better world, Jacob maintained contact with his friends from Gombin, many of whom had moved to America in the early years of the 20th century. His memoirs dwell expansively on his experiences with them and his recollections of their characteristics and personalities. He always expressed a warm nostalgia for Gombin where he was born and raised in a typical small East European shtetl where Jews constitutes about a two-thirds of the population.

# FISHELE LEHRER AND HIS SECULAR SCHOOL

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from the memoirs of Jacob M. Rothbart

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Until Fishele opened his secular school in Gombin, all the Jewish children's knowledge was strictly in a religious form. From early life, starting at three or four years, a child received his education from the *melamed* (teacher) who ran the *cheder* (religious school). Occasionally the *melamed* also taught the children a little reading and writing, but that was not obligatory. The main thing was teaching religion in all its aspects – the Bible, the Prophets, holidays, customs and other religious subjects.

Fishele, on the other hand, taught only the secular subjects – reading, writing and even several foreign languages such as Polish, German and Russian.

The progress of his pupils varied depending on the ability of the individual students. At the same time, the religious school was not ignored by this new school of secular subjects. There was an understanding between the parents and the religious *melamed* that several times a week, at certain hours, the pupils were to be released to go and learn the secular subjects.

The world Fishel is a very well-known Jewish name, but the word Fishele indicates a certain sentiment bestowed by Fishele's class of younger children.

The small town of Gombin had a population of about 5,000, about two-thirds Jews and the rest Poles, with a small number of Germans and Russian police. The town was laid out in such a way that through the heart of it ran a creek called the Buch (German for creek). This creek served all kinds of purposes for the population of Gombin. The widest part of it was between 25 to 30 feet, and ran by the Jewish settlement. At the top of one 200-foot bank sat the synagogue and the *Beit Midrash* (House of Learning). At one time, at another point on the creek's bank, the Jewish slaughterhouse

was built so blood could run down the creek to be carried 6 miles to Poland's largest river, the Vistula. A fabric dyer who needed a lot of cleaner water dammed off a section of the creek for himself, and from there the water continued in a steady flow, coming down from wells or hills miles and miles east of the city.

In the summertime, Jewish girls helping their mothers came down to the creek to wash their clothes. Jewish youngsters, mainly boys, had their first experience of running rowboats in the creek. Where did they get their rowboats? They got a hold of wide boards and sticks to steer them with, and had the most enjoyable time riding on them. They kept their so-called rowboats and "oars" hidden in high grass growing from melted snow which turned that innocent creek into a large river with high water – hiding the bank, but fortunately, as far as I remember, never affecting the houses built nearby.

But ordinarily, the creek was innocent without dangers. In the winter it was the life of the youngsters again. They had the finest ice-skating "rink" but skates were usually their own shoes and some thought-up way of pieces of wood with wire underneath. Not all of the children had these additions, however; not all could build these contraptions.

Fishele Lehrer had his school in a yard right above the hill across from the synagogue, and whenever his pupils had a chance to run down and do some skating, they did.

One day while I and the rest of the boys were at Fishele's school, he was called away to some important place and asked his students to please have patience.

"I'll return as soon as possible and we'll continue with our learning," he said. As soon as Fishele left the door, the whole class, in the below-zero weather, got their little coats and ran down the hill to skate.

—*FISHELE* continued page 18

# AN AMERICAN IN GOMBIN

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by Jerry Temanson

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I came to Poland in August 1993, to teach English. I soon met Zbigniew Lukaszewski. He had been interested in the history of Gombin and had collected many things. In his collection were books, articles, letters and pictures of the Jewish life which had been in Gombin. I read the memorial book GOMBIN - The Life and Destruction of a Jewish Town in Poland.

From all that I had learned that there were Gombiner organizations in America, but my first contact with the Gombin Society was in March 1997, when Leon Zamosc was preparing to make an official visit here. When he came, we arranged to meet at the Polonia Hotel in Warsaw. Our correspondence prior to his coming to Poland had served as introductions so I was ready to meet a person who was coming to build bridges and establish relationships.

Leon's visit coincided with Easter, which is a three day event in Poland and made the scheduling of meetings difficult. However, people were understanding and meetings were arranged with Priest Drozdowski, Mayor Jan Ciastek, the Gombin Land Lovers Association, and the director of the Chelmno Museum, Dr. Lucja Pawlicka-Nowak.

The first encounter was with Priest Drozdowski. The conversation began with comments about where Leon's family had lived, and about a paint store which had had the Zamosc family name above the door. Priest Drozdowski was supportive of the restoration of the Jewish cemetery, even before Leon's arrival.

In the meetings Leon straightforwardly stated his intentions and requests. With Mayor Ciastek, he brought up information obtained from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, about places in Gombin where headstones from the Jewish cemetery had been used for public works. He also stated the need to recover as

many of them as possible. Leon asked for a map of the cemetery, and he proposed a joint effort between a Jewish group coming from abroad and a local group from Gombin, who would work together in the cemetery restoration project. This was agreeable to everybody. On behalf of his organization, Leon gave the Town of Gombin an aerial photograph of the town, taken in 1944. This was greatly appreciated by Mayor Ciastek and by the people of Gombin.

Later, Zbigniew Lukaszewski showed us about 125 headstones, whole or fragments, which were used in buildings and sidewalks. The headstones are easily recoverable. This disclosure of the location of headstones and the offer to return them is more than a simple gesture. It is a clear indication of willingness to cooperate when there is leadership and an agreed plan.

Pictures have a way of touching people when words fall short. The people of Gombin were very anxious to see the pictures Leon was bringing, especially the film scenes of Gombin in 1937. The film could not have been a bigger hit. It prompted much talk about the names of the streets, the buildings, etc. I saw people who were pleased, smiled, and were able to recover a bit of their past without being asked to feel shame or guilt.

We met Dr. Pawlicka-Nowak at the Chelmno Museum. The wind was blowing and a bit of snow was falling. Dr. Pawlicka-Nowak was warm and friendly. We were given a walking tour and informed as to how memorial plaques could be erected. She agreed to set aside an area for a Gombin memorial. Last year, 50,000 people visited the Exhibit at the Chelmno Memorial.

In every meeting and private conversation, Leon encountered people who were willing to listen and offered assistance. At no time did I see evidence of opposition or rejection to anything Leon presented. Understanding from the people of Gombin comes from

—continued next page

the fact that the Poles have also suffered. Millions died in the First and Second World Wars, and millions more were relocated and forced to rebuild their lives. Most Polish families in Gombin can talk about relatives who died in the wars.

There is graffiti in Gombin as in any city in the world. It is a mistake to conclude that this graffiti reflects the way most people think. And the graffiti one can see is not directed against any particular group. There is graffiti on the walls of the Catholic cemetery, and also in places designated as Polish remembrances.

I had heard about tensions between Poles and Jews but had no first hand knowledge. If they existed, these things should have been obvious to me, since I had been living in Poland for several years. So, I asked my young English students what they knew about the Jews. Most of them looked at me with blank faces. They simply had no thought on the subject. The few who did speak, referred to stories that had been told to them by their grandparents, and the conflicts they mentioned were normal conflicts which one could expect from any peoples living close to each other.

It must be remembered that there had been a history of coexistence for hundreds of years. When I look at old photographs of Poles and Jews I am unable to identify either group based only on physical characteristics. These groups even shared the same language. The wedge which drove them apart came from without and forced people to make choices which had not been asked of them before the Great Wars.

People planning to visit their heritage would do well to do the necessary preparations to meet and spend time with individuals or families while in Poland. They will find understanding, and relationships waiting to be developed. Leon demonstrated that when people approach in a personal way they are able to identify with the sufferings and longings of others. While in Gombin Leon demonstrated willingness to work for cooperation. He was also willing to listen to others. Poles and

Jews have common interests which can overshadow their differences.

Leon's coming to Gombin has set the groundwork for cooperation and understanding. His efforts should not be taken lightly. The friendliness of the people of Gombin should likewise not be viewed simply as a fleeting gesture of hospitality. There exists an opportunity for dialogue, cooperation and friendship. History which destroyed lives and separated people can be brought back together in a meaningful way. Both Poles and Jews consider the past to be extremely important and meaningful. But it is also important to work together to build a future. Leon was received very well in Gombin.

I would like to thank the people who sent books for my students, and I look forward to corresponding with individuals and meeting all those who choose to come here. Most of all I would like to thank Leon for being able to come and touch so many people. I hope there will be many more of these positive experiences.

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—*THOUGHTS from page 7*

To the best of my knowledge, there is no group quite like the Gombin Society. Strictly speaking, you are sui generis. Oh yes, there are innumerable landsmanshaft collectives, but none with this group's purpose: to keep the memory, character and historic reality of a dismembered community alive. Judaically speaking, the Gombiners are serving in the age-old, traditional role of witness, witnesses to the past, clarions for the future. May the survivors and descendants of other destroyed communities learn from your outstanding work and follow suit. We shall always remember. We shall never Forget. Say it in Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, German, French, Spanish and English. Say it in Swahili, Cantonese or Basque if you are able. For the most important role of the witness is to teach the world "Never Again!" Not for Jews or Janes, gays or gypsies. . . not for any people on the face of God's good earth.

*Chaverim Kol Yisrael.*

# PUBLICATIONS OF THE GOMBIN SOCIETY

The main goal of the Gombin Society is to educate all Gombiner descendants, as well as the public at large, about the history and genealogy of the Jews from Gombin. In pursuit of this goal, our society encourages the collection of information, stimulates research, and undertakes the publication and distribution of a variety of written and pictorial materials related to the history of the Gombin Jewish community.

To disseminate knowledge and guarantee that the memory of Jewish Gombin is preserved, the Gombin Society has embarked on an ambitious program to donate copies of its main publications to Jewish history libraries and Holocaust-related museums and research centers. At the same time, our society is keen on making sure that its materials are accessible to Gombiner descendants and to all persons interested in the history and genealogy of the Jews from Gombin. The publications of the Gombin Society carry modest prices, and all sale proceeds are devoted to producing new materials and sponsoring their donation to libraries and institutions.

Over the last couple of years, the Gombin Society has published and reprinted a variety of materials. The purpose of this note is to present and briefly describe these publications, all of which can be directly obtained by mail (see insert for information on how to order the materials by mail).

**Gombin, Life and Destruction of a Jewish Town in Poland:** (book, 162 pages in English and 228 pages in Yiddish, 276 photographs, first published in 1969). Reprint of the Gombin Memorial Book, which was originally published in New York by the Gombiner Landsmanschaft in America, under coordination of Jack Zychlin. The Yizkor Book is the most important source of knowledge about Jewish society and culture in Gombin, and its destruction during the Holocaust. It contains a variety of writings by Gombiners, including rec-

ollections of landseit who emigrated before the war and testimonies of Holocaust survivors. The Yizkor section mentions the names hundreds of Gombiners and includes photographs of dozens of families from the shtetl.

**Remember Gombin:** (book with illustrated cover, 33 pages, first published in 1996). The first collection of Gombin-related materials published by the Gombin Society. Contains the Gombin card from the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the description of the Warsaw region and the Gombin entry of Pinkas Hakehilot (the Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities), and documents about the Chelmno extermination camp.

**Gombin Ghetto and the Joint, 1940:** (book with illustrated cover, 148 pages, first published in 1997). Facsimile copies and English description/rendering of original documents from Gombin ghetto (in Yiddish, Polish, and German), featuring the correspondence between the Jewish Help Committee in Gombin and the American Joint Distribution Committee office in Warsaw. Includes reports on events and conditions in Gombin during the first year of the German occupation, and detailed lists of names of Jewish families, their children, and their situation. The material is supplemented with background readings on Jewish institutions under the German Occupation and the activities of American Joint Distribution Committee in Poland during the war.

**Gombiner Jewish Names in a Polish Business Directory of the 1920s:** (book with illustrated cover, 50 pages, first published in 1997). The Gombin “yellow pages” of the 1920s, featuring a general description of the infrastructure of production and services, and a detailed list of the merchants and artisans who were economically active in the town during the inter-

—*continued next page*

war period. The material is supplemented with background readings on the demography and economics of the Polish Jews, and on their role in commerce and in the artisanal industry.

**Conditions for Gombiner Preservation and Memorial Projects in Poland:** (book with illustrated cover, 45 pages, 50 photographs, first published in 1997). An illustrated report of a fact-finding mission to Warsaw, Gombin, and Chelmno in March 1997. Includes descriptions of Gombin-related materials obtained at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, and narrative characterizations of the condition of the Gombin Jewish cemetery and the Rzuchowski forest site at Chelmno, where the Gombin Jews were murdered in the Spring of 1942.

**Gombin in 1937: Scenes Filmed by Sam Rafel:** (VHS video with time counter, regular speed 13m, slow version 30m). A unique film, containing scenes captured by Sam Rafel in Gombin during a visit two years before the German invasion of Poland. Sam Rafel was the most devoted activist of the Gombiner organizations in America. He led the effort to provide relief in Gombin and, after the Holocaust, he helped the resettlement of survivors and the establishment of a Gombiner House in Israel. In a note that was published shortly after his death he wrote: "During that period the Gombin Jews suffered of grinding poverty and of anti-semitism, the latter inspired by the Polish government. I made a film of what I saw and later showed it on many occasions in America and in Israel. This film, I believe, has both historical and cultural value. . ."

**Wooden Synagogue photograph:** (sepia photograph, 8 x 12 enlargement). The Gombin wooden synagogue, built in 1710, was regarded in Poland as a landmark historical building, part of the national cultural heritage that was under special supervision of the government's Department of Museums. This beautiful

photograph comes from a book on masterpieces of Jewish art in the Russian Empire, published in Moscow in 1991.

**World War II Aerial photograph:** (black & white, 11 x 11 enlargement). At the end of the war, the US Army captured more than 1.5 million prints of aerial photographs taken by the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) all over Europe. The collection was later transferred to the Cartographic and Architectural Branch of the National Archives in Washington. In 1995 the collection was scanned to retrieve this aerial image of Gombin.

**Postcard set:** (ten 4 x 6 postcards per set). Includes pictures of the Gombin wooden shul, market day in Gombin, Jewish leather workers in Gombin, the Gombin Rynek, buildings on Pieracki street, map showing location of Gombin ghetto, and paintings of the Gombin schul by Alojzy Balcerzak (Sources: Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and the Land Lovers Association in Gombin).

**Pre-World War II Map set:** (five maps, various sizes). Each set includes maps of the Gombin ghetto, the town center, Gombin and immediate rural surroundings, Gombin area including Plock, and the larger region including Gombin, Plock, Lodz, and Warsaw.

Every Gombiner household should have copies of these important historical publications.

**See the insert order form to purchase your copies!**

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Looking for Klopman

I read with much interest the Web pages published by your society and I want to get in touch with you for the following matter: My wife's family formerly lived in Gombin and left that town in the years preceding World War I to settle in Geneva, Switzerland.

The head of the family was then Josef David Klopman (also written Klepman or Klapman) and his wife, born Gila Kucinska. Six children were born to that family (four sons and two daughters) mainly in the 1890s: Aryeh, Frumet, Hinda, Menachem Yoel, Hemuel Eliyahu, Yitzhak. Some of them remained in Switzerland, others settled in France or Israel.

*Jacques Kohn  
35d rue Charles Dumont  
21000 Dijon, France*

## Gombiners in Miami Beach Memorial

Anybody of Gombiner descent visiting the Holocaust Memorial in Miami Beach, please give respect to our *kedoshim* who are inscribed on tablet 48: Rabbi Nussen Nutte Nutkewitch and my family Ber, the five brothers: Avram, Shaja, Moishe, Jankel and Hersh Leib. Also included is Moishe Zielonka, who was a prisoner with me in the second World War and later a fighter in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943.

*Michael Zielonka*

## Telling the Next Generation

Please share with others my congratulations for putting out a beautiful *B'nai Gombin* quarterly newsletter issue number 4, spring 1997. It included one of my father's memoirs, "The Synagogue Chandelier by Jacob M. Rothbart." You ask, how did he get his grandchildren to toil so happily for him in the memory business? He explained it himself, comparing his grandchildren to passing clouds in the sky. Sometimes they descended briefly to visit him, whereupon he promptly said, "I have a story to tell about my experiences. Start writing as I talk." He had a commanding personality and they had great love and respect for him, and so made time to do as he requested. They are forever proud of having done so.

*David Rothbart*

## Donation Acknowledged by Javne Fund

On behalf of The Javne Fund, I want to thank you for your organization's contribution of \$200. We are delighted to report to you these funds will be used exclusively for archival preservation at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

For the first time in half a century, Eastern European archives are open to Jewish researchers. Vast collections of genealogical and historical material that were presumed lost or destroyed or whose existence was denied for political reasons are now freely available. The Javne Fund seeks to help the Jewish Historical Institute find the funding to physically preserve and catalogue its collections while it aspires to assist individuals in better understanding their own family sagas within the scope of Polish Jewish life.

Thank you for joining us in working towards honoring Poland's Jewish past as we continue to build the foundation for future generations. We look forward to your ongoing involvement in this special project.

*Karen S. Lavine  
President, The Javne Fund*

## Information on Loivitch

My grandfather, Sender Green, came to England in 1912 to escape going into the Polish army. My grandmother agreed to go with him. They met when my grandfather went to Loivitch to learn the trade of tailoring. Her family came from Loivitch and the family name was Amsell. I am not sure of the spelling and as far as my mother knows none of her family survived the Holocaust. She has tried to trace them and has contacted Yad Vashem but with no success. I don't know whether any of your members can help. . .

I would be grateful if you could, in your next newsletter, ask if anyone knows anything about Loivitch and if so if they could get in touch.

*Sandra Barnett  
8 Eridge Road  
Hove, East Sussex BN37AD, England*



# GENEALOGY SEMINAR REPORT

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by Mindy Prosperi

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In keeping with the goals of The Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society (The Gombin Society), the annual meeting, held August 10, 1997 in Fort Lee, New Jersey included a seminar on genealogy research. Although we have a number of members with a great deal of experience in genealogy research, most of us (due to our association with The Gombin Society?) are new to this area of study. Our speaker, Ms. Evan Stolbach, President of the Jewish Genealogy Society of North Jersey took all our experience (or lack thereof!) in to consideration and introduced a seminar with information of interest to all in attendance.

Ms. Stolbach explained the problems associated with such research (including the changing of names and dates of birth to meet immigration requirements) as well as the “tricks of the trade” for finding missing information. She gave out copies of forms required to place an inquiry with the Mormon Church, holder of an astounding amount of genealogical information from peoples the world over. Additionally, she gave all in attendance copies the US Government’s Freedom of Information ACT forms to help in the search for family members who may have immigrated into the United States. In addition, she gave us tips on some good genealogy software programs; Family Origins from Parsons Technology (\$29) came highly recommended.

She explained the use of the Soundex Coding System, an index system that is based on the way a name sounds rather than how it is spelled. Using this system, you can easily find an individual name among the millions listed in the censuses of 1900 and 1910. After explaining how to use the system we each received a copy of the Soundex Coding guide to bring home with us. Ms. Stolbach brought a copy of The Family Finder, which lists all persons searching for the same name,

thus helping families find each other just by the act of searching! I personally found this to be an exciting part of the seminar as I did find another person searching for the name Bigeleisen.

Ms. Stolbach used her own family and her own data as example which make the topic more interesting and “real” as she explained the trials, tribulations and successes of her personal search. She has successfully traced branches of her family tree back into the 1700’s using the same methods that she discussed with us.

The one request she had of us was “ask your family now.” She asked that anyone who still had family members who can add to the global family history of the holocaust survivors. . . ask them now! Tape conversations, get names and dates and write down what we cannot tape. Some of the information cannot and will not be saved if it is not saved now. She was very pleased to know that The Gombin Society has also taken on this as a group project.

In summary, the seminar was educational and rewarding. It opened new avenues of study and of hope for many of us who are “in search of” . . .

Check out the GJHGS Web page for information on the Gombin Society, Gombin history, and for links to important genealogy sites like JewishGen!

<http://weber.ucsd.edu/~lزامosc/gombin.html>

—*MEMORIAL* from page 7

The Gombin Society directors, convinced that this situation cannot stand, have committed themselves to do everything possible to protect the cemetery site. In doing so, they have joined an ongoing, broader movement: throughout Poland, dozens of cemeteries have been already restored or are now being restored by landsmen and descendants who are coming to reclaim their Jewish heritage.

The project to save the Gombin Jewish cemetery will be carried out by the Gombin Society in partnership with the Gabin Land Lovers Association (a Polish local history group) and the Warsaw-based Remembrance Foundation (which works to protect the relics of the Polish Jews). The project will have three basic elements: enclosing the entire area of the cemetery with a wire fence, installing an iron gate, and bringing back to the place as many gravestones as possible.

#### Final Negotiations and Fund-raising Campaign

To clarify all the details, ascertain the final costs, and establish the procedures that will be followed to carry out the Chelмно memorial and the Gombin cemetery projects, the Gombin Society has designated three representatives who will conduct the necessary negotiations with the Polish side. Ada Holtzman will visit Chelмно in mid-September, and Leon Zamosc and Jeremy Freedman will go to Warsaw and Gombin in late October.

It can be expected, then, that by the end of the year the Gombin Society will be ready to launch a special fund-raising campaign for the Gombiner memorial initiative in Poland. We advise readers to await for the next issue of *B'nai Gombin*, which will contain all the details and information. When the time comes, we will contact all Gombiner families soliciting their help for these important projects, and we are convinced that we will have an overwhelming response. After all, we are all Gombiners, we are all Jews, and it is a mitzvah to remember our Holocaust victims and protect the cemetery of our ancestors.

—*FISHELE* from page 11

They were so enthused by the skating that even when Fishele's helper came down and said that the teacher was back and that they should come back to school, none of us paid attention.

Then Mrs. Fishele, with the helper, came back down and warned us, "Remember, the teacher will not stand for this." But still there was a lot of hesitation until we finally decided to go back to school.

Usually Fishele was a very mild person and not of robust build. But this time when his school came back, he got so aggravated that his eyes stuck out and he took down his *kantscik*, a whip with several leather strings which always hung on the wall and seldom was used.

The mild Fishele was plainly mad. He upturned a chair and pulled each of the young children up to the chair, laying them down on the chair and beating their behinds. Those children were yelling as though the world came to an end; everybody was crying.

When it came to my turn, they called out my name. I do not know what came over me, but I got a feeling of fun – I did not wait until anyone yelled at me or pulled me up. I walked up to the chair myself, unbuttoned my knee pants and let them down and lay on the chair. When I did that, Fishele, his wife, his helper and the other children began shouting out with such language they could hardly hold themselves down. And what can I tell you? My behind was saved from the beating – and everyone laughed so much there was no room left for beating anybody!

# Roll of Sponsors 1997

The list below includes all the Gombiners who mailed back their 1997 Sponsorship form with their contribution checks. The Gombin Society wishes to thank you all. We hope that next year we will count with 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 do not have members who are under obligation to pay dues. . . 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 Jewish identity and the identity of our children.

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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