

History of Gombin Societies in America: 90th Anniversary

by

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<slide 1: title page>

In her 1996 book, then first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton said, "It takes a village to raise a child". Growing up in New Jersey back in the 1950's, I had a village help raise me. That village stemmed from Gombin - our ancestral homeland.

<slide 2: NJ Gombin Society #1>

And here are some of the Gombin Villagers who had a hand in shaping me as a child coming of age in the streets of Newark. How did they help? First and foremost, I had an extended family which went beyond my immediate family and blood relatives. To me family meant any and all Gombiners. There was little distinction made between blood relations and those who were Gombin survivors. We Gombiner Yidn were a clannish people back then; always coming together for various events; visiting, calling, seeing one another.

I have fond memories of the many Sundays we had grand picnics in the Orange Mountains of West Orange. My father would pack a cooler with ice and fill it with Hoffman soda bottles, miniature versions of the giant bottle sitting atop the Hoffman packing plant on South Orange avenue. There were Sunday day trips to Lake Hopatcong and week-long vacations at Bradley beach down the shore. And then there were parties, visits and dinners at our homes, many of which were in the Weequahic section of Newark, a neighborhood made famous by author Philip Roth.

I had a good childhood; a happy childhood. I possessed a sense of belonging to a larger family; a Gombiner family. A family that was there for me, to fill the void left by those who perished in the war.

<slide 3: Yizkor book>

The generations of Gombiners who came before us undertook the sacred task of keeping the memory of their beloved stehtl alive by publishing this Yizkor book in 1969. In it individual members tell their stories in separate chapters and collectively the story of Gombin is recounted in both English and Yiddish.

In the opening introductory chapter of the Yizkor book, Jack Zicklin, President of the New York Society was most eloquent in describing the motivation behind the creation of the Yizkor book.

"This memorial volume is published as a sacred obligation to the memory of our beloved city which together with hundreds and hundreds of Jewish cities and towns throughout Poland shared the horrible fate of the Nazi holocaust."

"Our goal was to erect a monument through which the coming generations - the children and grandchildren of the Gombiner Jews - would be able to acquaint themselves with the ancient past of Gombin and the roots of their origin."

"I conclude with the hope that this "Pincus" will be found in the home of every Gombiner. In this manner the memory of our beloved birthplace will forever survive in the hearts and minds of our people."

Were Jack Zicklin still alive, I would have been overjoyed to tell him that his wish has come true. The entire book has been scanned and is available online at the New York Public library web site (<http://yizkor.nypl.org/index.php?id=2127>).

<slide 4: Sam Rafel >

The history of the US Gombin Societies is inextricably wrapped up with the story of Sam Rafel. He was the main driving force behind their creation and is given special recognition and praise by many of the people who contributed to the making of the Yizkor book.

In the introductory chapter of the Yizkor book, Jack Zicklin was most eloquent in talking about Sam Rafel:

"... it is impossible not to give special mention to our dear Sam Rafel, our former President. Sam was most active and enthusiastic about this projected. He was devoted heart and soul to the idea of the Gombiner Memorial Book as he was previously devoted to helping our needy brethren in a Gombin alive with the vitality of a living Jewish community.

Unfortunately, he did not live to see the appearance of this book, but we want it to be known that it contains much of his effort, loyalty and warm devotion. With the publication of this Memorial Book we pay a debt to his shining memory."

The 2nd chapter entitled "Deserved Recognition" and written by Louis Pochecha, the president of the Detroit Gombin Society, is devoted entirely to honoring the efforts of Sam Rafel. He gives homage with the following words:

"Sam Rafel is a well known name and is synonymous with the activities of the Gombiner Societies in New York and Newark."

"He encouraged our activists even in Detroit whenever measures needed to be taken to ascertain a successful monetary campaign.

"The personality of Sam Rafel has revealed itself to me not exclusively in fund raising matters but mainly for his individual idealism ... and devotion to "Gombiner Activities" - that were near and dear to him for many, many years."

"He was always in a jubilant festive mood, he was a man of the people, our unforgettable Sam Rafel."

Sam Rafel, the son of a tailor, left Gombin, Poland in 1913 at the age of 17 and immigrated by ship to New York. It was a time when visas were not required; one only had to show on arrival in New York that you possessed 25 dollars. During that first year he worked at a number of menial jobs in lower Manhattan and had a hard time adjusting to life in NY; he felt like a real "greenhorn". He planned for his move to be temporary, but with the outbreak of WW1 return to Gombin was impossible. Furthermore, what little savings he had managed to accrue was lost when the bank he used went bankrupt. Upon moving to Newark, however, his fortunes began to improve. He met his wife, Yetta, who was born in Gombin and

came to this country in 1910 as a young child with her parents. In 1916 he became the recording secretary International Ladies Garment Workers Union and thereby considerably improving his financial condition.

<slide 5: Montage of past Gombin Presidents>

Soon he began to think about his native Gombin and the needy Jews who lived there. He became the key catalyst in organizing Gombiners living in the NY/NJ metropolitan area to form the early philanthropic organization known as the Gombin Relief Committee whose charter was to provide financial aid and support to the Jews of Gombin. Among the early activists was Max Jacklin, the entire Kraut family (father Simon and sons, Alex and Philip), Louis and Max Green, Nathan Kleinert and many others.

<slide 6: all four executive committees: NY, NJ, Detroit, Chicago>

In 1923 that organization morphed into the Young Men's Benevolent Association centered in New York. Jack Zicklin, who was president of the NY organization at the time the Yizkor book was published, describes the early days of organizing. The idea of forming a Gombiner organization spread like wildfire among the Gombiner landsleit in New York.

<slide 7: NY Gombin Society>

At the time there were about 40 families from Gombin who emigrated to the United States. And in October of 1923 a meeting was called at the Astoria Hall in New York which marked the beginning of the NY organization.

<slide 8: NJ/NY Gombin Society>

Around 1937, after being with the NY organization for about 13 yrs, dissatisfaction arose among the New Jersey members. Some argued that it was too far to travel from New Jersey; other opined that the number of NJ members argued for a separate group in the Garden State. The first meeting was held at the home of S. Lasky; A. Kesselman, a prominent lawyer, was elected first President and Nathan Kleinert was elected secretary. A year later, Max Jacklin was elected president and worked assiduously in raising money for the Gombin Relief Fund.

The Detroit organization was founded in 1936 and also was active in keeping touch with Gombin and providing aid. Louis Philips wrote the chapter on the Detroit Society in the Yizkor book and credits the following people for playing key roles in the formation of the society. First mentioned was Shmuel Gayer; his son Sidney Gayer, who, as Philips puts it "*... in the thirties collected funds and kept up a correspondence with landsleit in Gombin*". Also active was Jack Gayer, Julius Green, Max Rifman and Mordechai Schwartzberg.

<slide 9: Chicago Gombiners 1935>

I have no information concerning the founding of the Chicago Society. But as you'll see in this group picture, there appear to have been a sizeable membership back in 1935, so I suspect they, like the New Jersey and Detroit organizations, were also formed some time during the early 1930's.

<slide 10: Yetta Rafel & Ladies Auxiliary>

Mrs. Yetta Rafel, wife of Sam Rafel, was the president of the NJ Ladies Auxiliary organization of the Gombin Society. Its main purpose was to help in raising monies for the Relief Fund and to furnish social activities. The following charming passage is excerpted from the chapter written by Mrs. Rafel in the Yizkor book:

"The Purim-parties were gay and colorful. Who will forget the choosing of the Queen Esther. The woman who got the highest number of votes was crowned Esther. There was great competition among the men, everybody wanting his wife to receive the royal title. However, there was no jealousy and no one was hurt as there was great comradeship and sportsmanship and the consciousness of purpose. Thus money was again raised for relief."

<slide 11: montage of 1937 B/W Gombin Film>

Sam Rafel went back to Gombin twice to coordinate the relief efforts. The first visit occurred in 1930, when he arrived back after an absence of 17 yrs to see his parents, brother, sisters and close friends. He brought a sizeable amount of cash which he gave to Jewish lending institutions.

He returned a second time with his wife 7 years later in 1937 and brought with him a 16 mm b/w movie camera with which he made the now famous film depicting the people of Gombin. When he arrived, an affair was held in his honor at which three thousand people attended, virtually the entire population of Jewish Gombin. Once again he brought money to be distributed. During that period the people the people of Gombin were suffering under the dual hardships of grinding poverty and government sponsored anti-semitism. To alleviate some of their suffering, Rafel made an agreement with a local doctor that he minister free of charge to poor and sick Jews of the town and send the bill to the US Gombin Society.

<slide 12: B/W Gombin Film, magnified pix >

In retrospect, as we all know now, his visits was only 2 yrs away from the outbreak of WWII and the beginnings of the holocaust. As Rafel writes in the Yizkor book:

"All this transpired in 1937 when none of us even remotely suspected that in two years Gombin and the other little towns and villages of Poland would be swallowed by the flames of a cruel war."

After the war he oversaw the efforts to cut through the red tape and managed to sponsor the immigration of over 50 families from Polish and German detainee camps to immigrate to America. My parents may have been beneficiaries of these efforts. Moreover he spearheaded the project to build the Gombiner House in Tel Aviv as a center for Israelis Gombiners and as a memento to the stehtl of Gombin.

Sadly Sam Rafel passed away shortly before the Yizkor book was published. In my view, he personified what the Yiddish word 'Mensch' is meant to convey - a compassionate and caring human being who worked tirelessly to help others.

<slide 13: handwritten minutes from NJ meetings>

My father, Raymond Boll, was the last President of the Gombiner Young Men of New Jersey and when he passed away 7 years ago I took charge of the Gombiner

papers, records and photographs in his possession. One of the fascinating items I came across when going through the archives in preparation for this talk is shown in the above slide - a hardbound and numbered notebook containing hand-written Minutes of the Board Meetings. The first entry on page 3 is dated December 14th 1939, just after the outbreak of WWII. The last entry on page 299 is dated June 8, 1944 - just 2 days after D-day, the invasion of Normandy. Looking through the notebook and scanning the entries made for some fascinating reading. Most of the topics dealt with fund raising, new membership recruitment and planning social events. Sam Rafel's presence was evident in encouraging all Gombiners to dig deep to aid their brethren in Poland. The recording secretary was an E.Unger whose very legible hand writing made reading the Minutes quite easy. References to other Gombiners were preceded with the honorific titles of 'Brother' or 'Sister', i.e. Brother Rafel or Sister Kleinert. Meetings were held at the homes of members on the 2nd and 4th Thursdays of the month. The first Thursday was intended as social gatherings, while the second one dealt with business matters. Meetings typically commenced around 10 PM and finished sometime between 11:30 PM and midnight. It is a glowing testament to the dedication of those early members that they could work a full day, stay up late in the evening to further the goals of the organization, and then, on a short night's sleep manage to get up and go back to work the next morning.

<slide 14: Gombin Newsletters>

At the time of the Yizkor book's publication in 1969, Jack Zicklin and Jack Frankel were presidents of the NY & NJ societies. For now, the names of the presidents who preceded them and the activities of the societies are not known; hopefully they can be gleaned from a more thorough examination of the Gombin archives in my possession

The last two presidents of the of the NY and NJ societies were Ben Kraut and my father, Raymond Boll. Their tenure lasted a long time, roughly from the mid 1970's to the early 2000's. For the most part their efforts were directed toward managing their cemetery plots and eventually planning joint social events. On the left side of the slide you see the program from 1988 celebrating the 65th

Anniversary of the Society at a venue which was probably a fancy shmancy hotel somewhere in the Catskills. In addition to the two society presidents, I've highlight some of the attendees who may have some ties to some attendees here today. They include Fania Odra, mother of Ita and Mary Odra; and Minna Zielonka who created the film "Back to Gombin"; and Roslyn Ballen, mother of Mindy Proseri and Elliot Ballen.

On the right portion of the slide, is the 1994 newsletter reporting on the combined NY/NJ social event which took place in Tamarac Florida. Bernie Kleinert, the NJ vice-president, pointed out in his remarks to the group that this was the 71st anniversary of the society. He then presented a plaque to Alex Kraut honoring him for 71 yrs of service. Also honored, was Chana Guyer, the mother of Bernie Guyer, whose remarkable memory was singled out. Her plaque reads:

*We wish to honor Hannah Guyer
whose memories of Poland never tire.
As the **QUEEN OF GOMBINE**
She remembers all that she's seen.
And we sing her praises higher and higher.*

<slide 15: GJHGS>

This slide brings us to our current Gombin organization: the Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society which has taken over where the other organizations left off. Our origins are as follows. On Thursday evening, December 21, 1995, I received a call from Leon Zamosc, professor of Sociology at UCSD, who invited me to embark on a project with him to explore our Gombiner heritage. Leon related to me that for most of his life he had no particular interest in family history, but that the recent death of his father had sparked in him an intense desire to explore his roots as a Jew and especially as the son of a Gombiner. His enthusiasm and vision for this project was infectious and I gladly became a willing convert. We soon recruited a number of 2nd generation Gombiners and communicated with one another via email. These other founding members included:

- Elliot Ballen from Cranford NJ
- Mindy and Bob Prospero from NY
- Noam Lupu from SF, our 3rd generation representative
- Gayle Frankel in Florida
- Jeff Wruble from LA
- Jeremy Freedman in England
- Ada Holtzman in Israel

Our initial goals were as follows:

- 1) Organize a trip to Gombin
- 2) Secure the Jewish cemetery of Gombin from encroachment by building a wall around it. Also, to create a shrine from recovered Matzevot (tombstone) at the entrance.
- 3) To erect a Monument at the death camp of Chelmno to honor the memory of the Gombin Jews who perished there in 1942.
- 4) Honor the victims massacred at the Konin Labor camp
- 5) Minna Packer-Zielonka set out with a film crew to record this historic trip to Gombin which is chronicled in her film "Back to Gombin".

We immediately commenced a fund raising effort to accomplish these goals. We received considerable help from the NY & NJ societies as well as individual contributions from Gombiners here in North America and, indeed, from all around the world. In August of 1999, after an absence of almost 60 years, Jews returned to Gombin, at least for a little while.

It was thanks to Leon's prodigious efforts, keen intellect and boundless energy that our group came into being and within four years accomplished all our initial goals. Sadly, some short time after the trip, Leon chose to absent himself from our organization, but we are all grateful for the indelible mark he has left us. Our archives are filled with the fruits of his scholarly research on Gombin and its destruction; it greatly supplements the information contained in the Yizkor book. Without his seminal efforts to get the ball rolling, it is conceivable that our organization would never have come into being. We are forever in his debt.

No re-telling of our organization's history would be complete without highlighting the herculean efforts of Ada Holtzman. Over the years she has made countless trips to Poland to research Jewish Gombin's history, recover matzevot and collaborate with Polish friends on various projects there. Her richly adorned website is a living testament to the memory of Gombin and its Jews. More than any other Gombiner, she has earned the right to be the heir to the legacy trail-blazed by Sam Rafel who, like her, worked tirelessly for the Jews of Gombin. On behalf of Gombiners everywhere, Ada, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

<slide 16: 1931 Gombiner Lodge>

And now to conclude this talk, I present to you a riddle: who are these people anyway? Among the papers I salvaged from my father's place was this delicate picture of an organization called the Newark Gombiner Lodge 174 at a fancy gathering of about 120 people. Given the name 'Gombiner' obviously this organization has something to do with our stehtl. But why no mention of it in the Yizkor book? And why did their founders include the word 'Lodge', which is reminiscent of VFW lodges. The lettering on the left side of the image indicates that this event is taking place in the ballroom of the Robert Treat Hotel in downtown Newark - a very expensive venue. Indeed the people in the picture appear to be well off; all the men wearing tuxedos, women dressed in stylish gowns and a live band sitting against the back wall. They seem quite assimilated into American society; I spied no men with beards and only 1 yarmulke is in view.

<slide 17: Flag showing 1910 founding>

Note the magnification of the flag in this image shows that this organization was founded in 1910, 13 years before the founding of the NY Gombiner society. They were still in existence 11 years after the founding of the NY society in 1931. Googling their name brings up the Newark tax records which shows they owned a property at 7 Whitney St, Newark which is right off of South Orange Avenue not far from West Side H.S. and the Garden State Parkway, a building housing other

Jewish organizations as well. Cemetery records indicate that the society owned plots in the Hebrew cemetery across the street.

My working hypothesis is that when this organization was formed in 1910 it was purely a social organization with few ties if any back to Gombin itself. When Sam Rafel formed the NY/NJ society, its primary purpose was to help the Polish Gombiners, a service the Gombiner Lodge may not have provided. I suspect that after the creation of the NJ Gombiner society in 1937, members of the Lodge were absorbed by it.

<slide 18: Gombin Synagogue>

In conclusion, let me say that I'm gladdened by the number of people who have come out for this event. Being here offers us the possibility of regaining what has been long dormant: a sense of connectivity, an appreciation of our common roots as Jews, as Gombiners, and as the sons & daughters and relatives of the survivors and victims of the Holocaust. Hopefully a sense of fellowship has been established that will endure for many years. Thank you.