

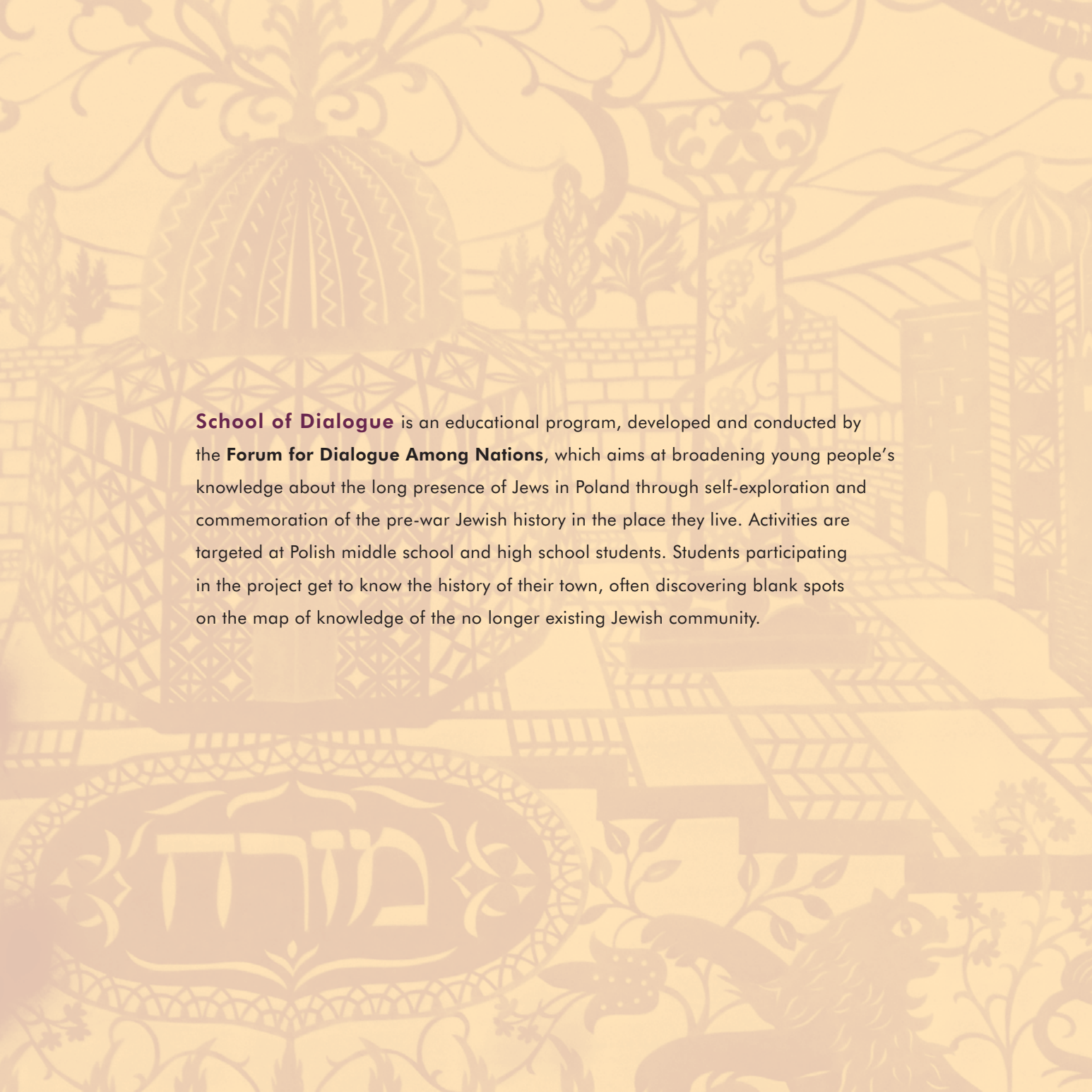
FORUM FOR DIALOGUE AMONG NATIONS

# School of Dialogue



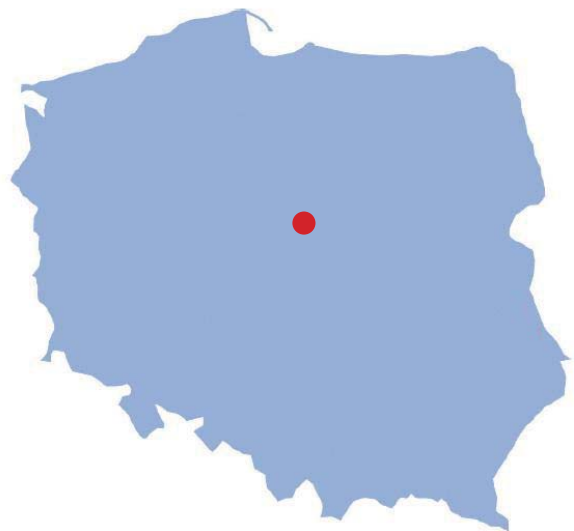
Gqbin | Spring 2012

Restoring a Jewish presence



**School of Dialogue** is an educational program, developed and conducted by the **Forum for Dialogue Among Nations**, which aims at broadening young people's knowledge about the long presence of Jews in Poland through self-exploration and commemoration of the pre-war Jewish history in the place they live. Activities are targeted at Polish middle school and high school students. Students participating in the project get to know the history of their town, often discovering blank spots on the map of knowledge of the no longer existing Jewish community.

We are grateful to the Gombin  
Jewish Historical & Genealogical  
Society for its generous support of the  
SCHOOL OF DIALOGUE in Gqbin.



# An Introduction

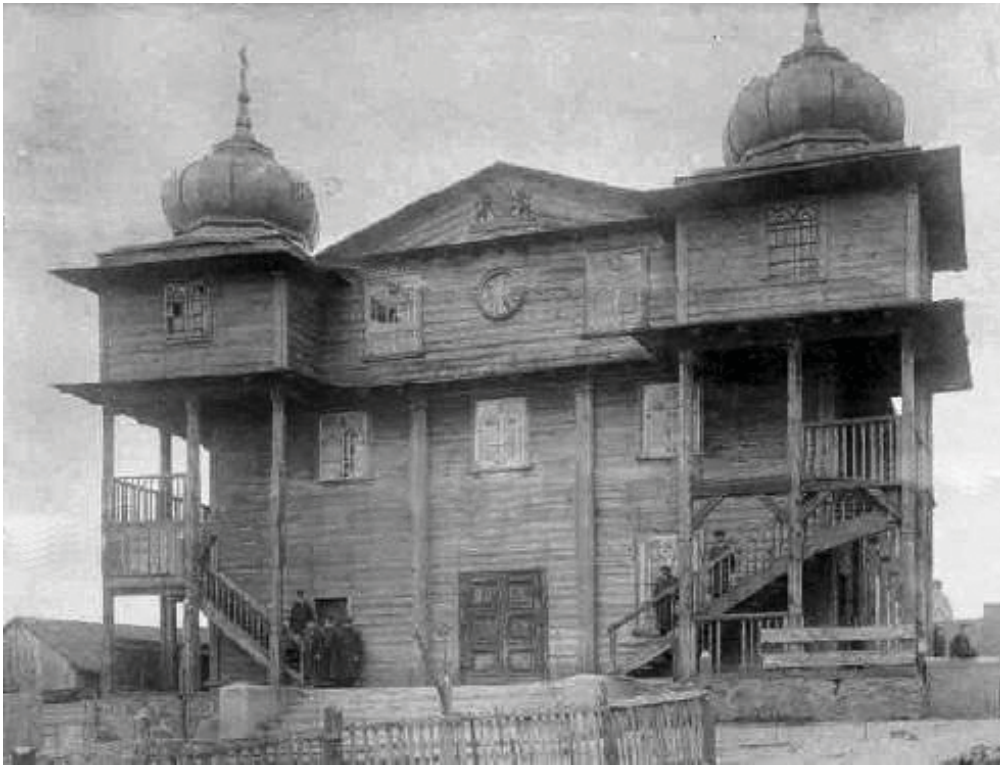
**One of the** oldest towns in the Mazovian Province, Gąbin is a small town with approximately 4,000 residents. Today, little remains of its prewar Jewish community, except for a recently renovated Jewish cemetery and the building of a former mikveh.

The SCHOOL OF DIALOGUE program took place in April and May in a local middle school named after John Paul II. During a series of four workshops led by two Forum's educators – Agata Jujeczka and Magda Maślak 22 students learned the basics of Jewish history and culture, and incorporated Jewish heritage into their knowledge of the history of their town. They were surprised to learn about the Jewish presence in their town and centuries-long coexistence and cooperation between Poles and Jews.

The program's final element, incorporating students' research of the often-forgotten Jewish heritage of their town, is a walking tour of the Jewish sites of which regular visitors are not aware. Students in Gąbin invited to the tour their families and friends so as to restore the memory of the local Jewish community among town's inhabitants.



# Gqbin—Past...



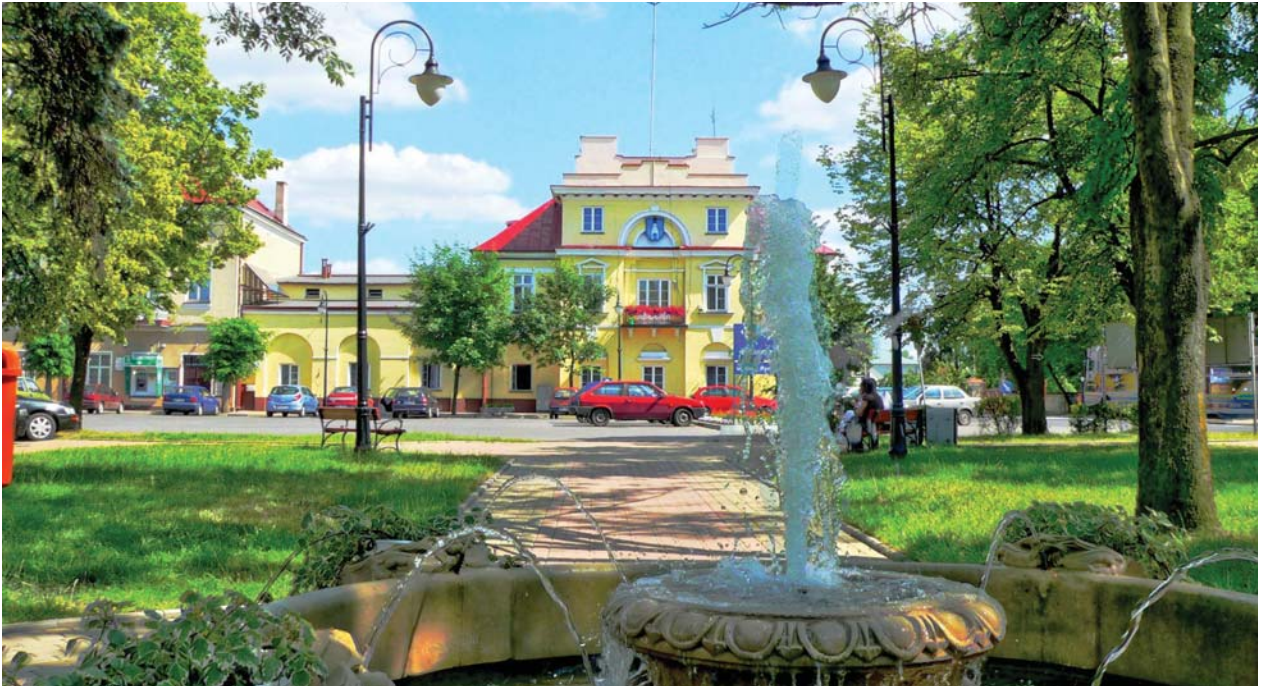
Wooden synagogue in prewar Gqbin

**Gąbin history dates** back to the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a time which saw the beginnings of Jewish settlement in the area. Initially, Jews were employed as distillers, cattle traders and craftsmen. In 1764 Gąbin's Jewish community had 395 members, who owned a wooden synagogue, *cheder* and a *mikvah*. Though there is ample documentation regarding the peaceful cohabitation of the Catholics and the Jews, there is as much evidence of conflicts between the communities, including accusations of ritual murders. In 17th century, most Gąbin Jews were either landowners' tenants in charge of local inns, or dealt with textiles. Yet, due to the collapse of the textile industry at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the employment structure of the community had to change, with most people choosing shoemaking

and leatherworks. Additionally, Gąbin's Jews organized numerous craftsmen and political associations, such as the Zionist Organization, Mizrahi, or a chapter of the Women's International Zionist Organization.

With the commencement of the WWII in 1939, Gąbin, renamed as Gombin, was incorporated into the Third Reich. In mid-September 1939 Nazi soldiers burned the synagogue and neighboring Jewish buildings, including a prayer house. In August 1941 a ghetto was created and 2100 people were imprisoned there. In April 1942 the ghetto was liquidated: some of its male prisoners were transported to Gostynin and Konin, while the remaining prisoners were sent to the Chełmno death camp.

# ...and Present



Gąbin's Town Hall

After the war, a Jewish Committee was set up in Gąbin, yet the fate of Gąbin survivors is largely unknown. Today, the remains of the Jewish heritage include the building of the mikvah, for a long time used as a nail factory, and a small

cemetery (ruined by the Nazis). Thanks to the Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society and funds from the Nissenbaum Family Foundation, some of the tombstones were restored and remodeled into a lapidarium.

## Day 1

# Uncovering Jewish past of Gąbin

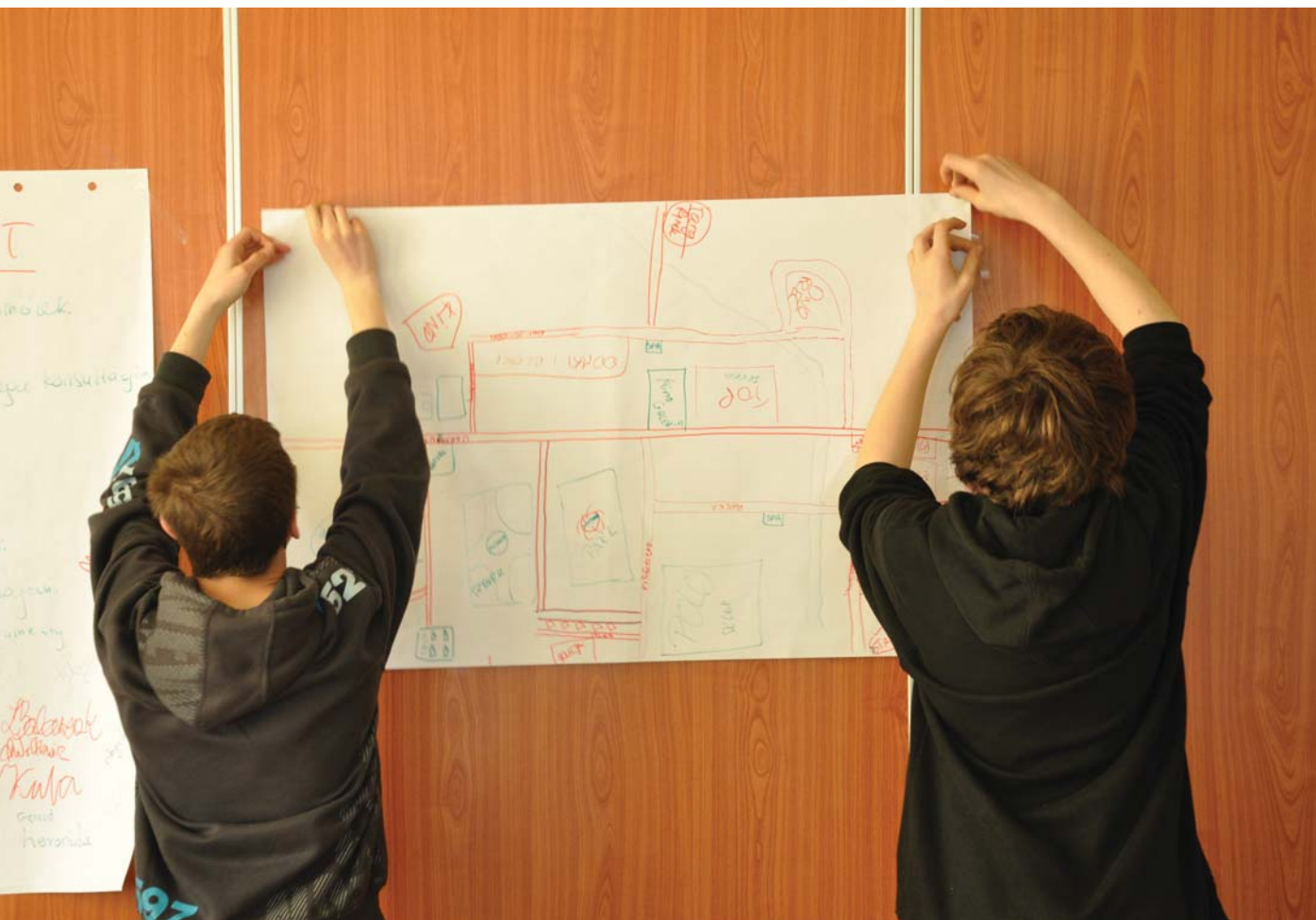
**For the 14-year-old** student, knowledge of her town's former Jewish community is obscure at best. Students in Gąbin had some information about their town's pre-war multicultural history, but could not imagine how it actually looked and were eager to learn. The Forum's educators, Agata and Magda, did not need to encourage them to actively participate in the workshops.

"Let's draw a map of your town as it is today and mark the places that its residents need," said Agata. The students decided to draw a school, a shop, a church, a stadium, and also a cemetery. When they decided that the map was ready, Magda asked them, "How do you think your town looked before the war?" The students in Gąbin had difficulty imagining this, so the Forum's educators gave them photos featuring buildings and institutions typical for the interwar Jewish settlements in Poland.

*"I'm a resident of Gąbin. I know little of its history. The little I know, comes from the workshop that I took part in, a workshop designed to teach us about what was here before and what is here now. About places that once existed... Gąbin once had a cinema, a theatre, and a synagogue. There is no sign of them now. ... This project helped me realize that I don't know much about Gąbin's history. This is a shame. ... I feel bad about all these things I did not know about my town."* – Anonymous workshop participant







For many students, looking over the materials was the first opportunity to see an actual synagogue, and with the educators' help, they discovered major differences between a synagogue and a Catholic church. These materials also enabled students to learn about Jewish social and religious life in Poland. With this newly acquired knowledge, they decided to enrich their map by marking the synagogue, the *mikvah*, the Jewish cemetery, and the *cheder*.

"Now, let's draw a double calendar, one that would include both Catholic and Jewish holidays," Magda suggested. While two students were drawing the calendar, others helped mark Jewish celebrations using information from the materials that they had just received. They discovered that there are many similarities between the Catholic holidays they know and the Jewish rituals described in the provided texts.

During the exercise explaining the rules of kashrut, students decided to mark a Jewish butcher on their map. The workshop ended with a screening of an authentic documentary shot in Gąbin. The film, shot in 1937, helped students visualize life in their town where before the war Jews constituted biggest minority.

## Day 2

## Do we remember enough?

**Jeff lives in** the Netherlands. When he was in his sixties, he suddenly became interested in researching his roots. His ancestors came from Poland, a country he had never visited and with which he had never felt any connection. However, he decided to pay a visit and learn more about his origins. He walked around the town of his grandfather: “Where did he live?” he asked himself. “Maybe his house still stands somewhere here?”

Students read this semi-fictional story at the beginning of the second workshop as a starting

point for a class discussion. It raises the students’ interest in how Jews are remembered in their town. Is their presence commemorated? What is the condition of sites connected with them, such as the cemetery? And to return to Jeff’s story: Why did he come? Is it easy to find traces of the past? How would it be if he had visited Gąbin?

For students it all comes down to questions of memory: to what degree are we responsible for commemoration of the past? Are we supposed to remember all former residents, or only our own late

*“I’m writing this very short letter to you, to let you know what is happening in your town. If you’ve ever been here, than you have to know how much it has changed. We, the students of the local middle school, attend workshops that teach us Gąbin’s history. It turns out that many remnants of Jewish life are still here...” – Angelika, workshop*

participant





grandparents and great grandparents? Is the local Jewish history also our history? And if we decide to commemorate it, how should we do that? Agata, one of the educators, suggests: “Let’s think about examples of good commemoration strategies from other places. And let’s plan what we could do in Gąbin.”

During the second workshop, the educators helped students plan a tour of their town’s Jewish sites that they would eventually prepare. The students felt a bit overwhelmed by the task, but

the educators suggested useful books, websites and local experts that could help broaden their research.

The project focused on group collaboration, teamwork, leadership skills and division of responsibilities. Students from small towns and villages in underdeveloped areas are often unfamiliar with group work, having rarely had the chance to work actively on a project like this one. The SCHOOL OF DIALOGUE thus promotes new ways of thinking and learning among these young people.

## Day 3

## Discovering Gąbin anew



*“My name is Zuzia and I live in Gąbin. I’ve learned that you and your roots reach as far as this cute little town. Only before the war Gąbin was a town with many Jewish residents, including your ancestors. If you would like to tell me about them, share some anecdotes – come. I would also like to invite you on a tour of Gąbin, which we have prepared with the help of Forum for Dialogue Among Nations.”* – Zuzia, workshop participant

**Before presenting it** to Magda and Agata, the Forum’s educators, the students prepared the tour of Gąbin on their own. They assigned and shared responsibilities, planned the route, the timing of the tour, and then collected information about specific locations.

During the third workshop, students took Magda and Agata, Forum’s educators, on a trial-run of the tour. In the course of the visit, the Forum’s educators supplemented the students’ knowledge and suggested places that could be added to the route. They also acted as visitors, asking questions that helped students mould their narrative into a clear and attractive form, since the tour would later be presented to members of the local community.

After the tour, students completed the so-called David exercise, which presents the story of a fictional Jewish teenager, David, who lived in Gąbin before the war. Again, students are asked about the way his day could have looked like in 1935? What did they think happened to him? What would he be doing 15 years after the war? This is also the moment to talk about the destruction of Jewish community in Gąbin (even though this topic somewhat anticipates the standard school curriculum, according to which Holocaust history is covered at a later time). Within the framework of the School of Dialogue, students have the opportunity to talk about the Holocaust on the basis of a very local, individual story of someone their age.

## Day 4

## What can we do?

**After learning about** the past comes the time to reflect on the present and future. The students, with their recently gained knowledge, are eager to participate in a discussion about multiculturalism. They talk about interethnic relations in interwar Poland and in contemporary Europe, citing many significant examples and sharing interesting ideas.

Another exercise shows students the different ways Shabbat is celebrated around the world. This presentation serves to explain the diversity of the contemporary Jewish community.

Usually on the last day, the students meet a local activist or a representative of the local authorities who guides them in their further actions. In the special case of this town, it was Łukasz Florkiewicz, young resident of Gąbin who supervised renovation and cleaning works at the local Jewish cemetery initiated and funded by The Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society. He talked mostly about how he started his relationship with the organization and got engaged in taking care of the Jewish cemetery. He invited the students to join him in this task and his offer was met with great enthusiasm among the students.

*“Lately I have had an opportunity to attend meetings that enabled me to learn a lot about Jewish culture. I considered the workshops so interesting that I started to research the topic on my own. Finding information wasn’t easy, but I persevered. I’m glad that I could learn so much about you. I hope that I will meet you some day and despite my poor English, we’ll be able to talk.” – Patrycja, workshop participant*





The last exercise of the final workshop involves a role-playing activity. Students are paired up and asked to read two semi-fictional texts. The first text is about Sarah, a 58-year-old Jewish American who visits the town in which her father had been born. The second one concerns Maciek, a 17-year-old Polish high school student, who is interested in the Jewish past of his hometown. Sarah and Maciek meet, and together they visit places important for Sarah's family history. Maciek also helps Sarah get in touch with his father's former classmates. On the basis of these texts, one student acts as a journalist interviewing the other student, who

plays either Sarah or Maciek. Thanks to this exercise, students may understand more about the complex relationships between today's Poles and Jews.

The question remains, however, what to do with all that students have learned? After the series of workshops finishes, the students finally conduct the tour of Jewish sites for members of their local community who have yet to discover their town's Jewish past. Through its participants, the once-lost Jewish heritage of these places can be remembered, and shared with a much broader, local audience.

# The Project

**For the majority** of the participants the SCHOOL OF DIALOGUE program was the first opportunity to reflect on the history of Gąbin. When preparing the tour, the project's final element, the students of John Paul II Middle School, relied heavily on internet research, but also learned a lot from their teacher. The tour took place in June, 2012. The students invited their parents and schoolmates to join them in discovering the town's Jewish past. The route included the most

important places connected to Gąbin's history, both Jewish and non-Jewish. This design enabled a presentation of the history and fate of the two communities as inextricably intertwined.

The tour started at the site of the former Talmud Tora school, where students discussed the character of Jewish education. Then, the visitors were presented with the building of the *mikvah*, the purpose of which was also explained. The

*"In Gąbin, there is a group of people who are interested in its Jewish past. Thanks to them we have some historical sites, documents and photographs from before the war. It is not much, but the collection helped us broaden our knowledge of the subject. We all put a lot of effort into this. We're trying to show local residents what had happened here. We would like to set up information boards, so that visitors could learn about all of this as well."* – Patrycja, workshop participant



group moved next to the nearby site of the *chewra kadisha*'s offices, where elements of traditional Jewish burial were discussed. The tour would not be complete without a visit to the site of the town's wooden synagogue at which students explained a synagogue's significance for a community. Finally, on the site of the Jewish cemetery, the students shared its tragic history. Most of its tombstones were used by the Nazis to pave bridges and roads.

Complimentary to the tour, the students prepared an album containing a map and old photographs of Gābin, which gives a detailed account of town's prewar Jewish history. The album's overall effect is reinforced with the use of fragments of residents' memories. As well as a detailed recollection of the past, the album contains information regarding the preservation of Jewish heritage in Gābin.



## Meaningful Encounters

**In July, 2012**, the students who took part in the SCHOOL OF DIALOGUE workshops repeated their tour of Gąbin: this time for Minna Zielonka-Packer, a descendant of Gąbin Jews

and a member of the Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society. Before setting out, however, the participants could get to know their American guest a bit better during a workshop organized by







the Forum. During the meeting Minna Zielonka-Packer presented fragment of a film she had produced, *Back to Gombin*. The film follows the story of children of Gąbin's Survivors, who having been brought up in the shadow of the Holocaust, decide one day to visit the town of their ancestors. The film is a documentation of their visit: an attempt to rediscover the lost, unknown story of their parents' generation. The students had many questions for both the filmmaker and two Gombin Society's local friends, Sebastian Balko and Łukasz Florkiewicz.

After the discussion, the students invited everybody to join the tour of Gąbin's Jewish sites. This opportunity to meet people involved in rediscovering local history showed students the significance of the topic they have been dealing with during the SCHOOL OF DIALOGUE workshops. The tour inspired both parties to create a translation of the album compiled by the students into English and to distribute it to Gombin Society's members.

## FORUM FOR DIALOGUE AMONG NATIONS

**SCHOOL OF DIALOGUE** | GĄBIN | SPRING 2012



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## What You Can Do

The Forum for Dialogue Among Nations, together with U.S. based Friends of the Forum, are seeking partners to help expand and sustain the School of Dialogue program in more communities that are eager to participate. You can help build bridges of understanding and mutual respect by sponsoring a school.

For more information, please contact the Forum at **[forum@dialog.org.pl](mailto:forum@dialog.org.pl)**.

## Forum for Dialogue Among Nations

The Forum for Dialogue Among Nations is a non-profit Polish organization whose mission is to foster Polish-Jewish dialogue, eradicate anti-Semitism, and teach tolerance through education. The Forum fulfills its mission through educational programs, seminars, publications, exhibitions, and exchange programs targeted at Polish and Jewish youth and leaders.

**[www.dialog.org.pl](http://www.dialog.org.pl)**

## Friends of the Forum

Friends of the Forum is a U.S. based (501)(c)(3) non-profit organization that promotes Polish-Jewish dialogue through educational programs, publications, discussion forums, and exchange programs dedicated to Poles and Jews. In concert with the **Forum for Dialogue Among Nations** and other NGOs, it focuses on reconciling 800 years of Jewish history in Poland with present-day dialogue. It builds bridges of memory over the gulf of prejudice.

**[www.friendsoftheforum.org](http://www.friendsoftheforum.org)**

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