
Poland Trip June, 2011

REPAIR OF THE GOMBIN JEWISH CEMETERY

We departed Berlin in a rented Fiat 500 at about 10am. The road out of Berlin was well marked and we were soon on the major highway east to Poland. Once into Poland we were slowed down by the long detour at the beginning of E30, which is still under construction, and the heavy truck traffic. Finally picked it up again before Poznan and paid at least 3 tolls of 13ZL each (can use credit card). We exited E30 at Kolo (colorful bridge), which is near Chelmno.



Then there are only rural roads toward Plock, which took much longer than we anticipated (2+ hours). Finally, after several wrong turns, we arrived at Gabin (the best route is to take the roundabout from Rt 60 in the direction of Sochaczew—that runs directly through Gabin). We’ve learned that Gabin sounds like “gom.bin” with the emphasis on the first syllable.

The last part of the trip from the Plock road to Gabin was remarkable because the road is being upgraded with EU funding. There is a bike path along the road and many families were out biking with children. We were arriving on the Corpus Christy holiday and people were off from work. Gabin is recognizable from the last times but also very different. There are many new building, including nicer houses and many businesses. The place was bustling. There are many new cars, including expensive European makes.

We met Lukasc Florkiewicz (pronounced “flor-key-ich” with the emphasis on the second syllable), age 24, at the Jewish cemetery. He is a tall, thin, very pleasant young man. His English is pretty good and we communicated well; he even taught us some simple Polish.

Our first stop was the Jewish cemetery, which was a bit shocking at first. Here is a list of the issues, in no particular order. The front gate no longer closes properly, because one side has subsided and the bolt no longer lines up. There are also tiles missing from the wall above the plaque. The area between the gate and the monument is completely overgrown with weeds, which is not entirely bad because the wild flowers are very attractive. We

found the monument in quite bad shape, mostly from the effects of weather. The areas around the stones are overgrown with moss and weeds and the moss has started to eat into the stone mazelot. Several stones have fallen. It appears to us that water has seeped into the cracks in the stones, frozen in the winter, and subsequently cracked the stones. There needs to be some effort to put a coat of waterproofing on the stones, or they will all deteriorate soon.

There was some broken glass from what appear to memorial candles that have been left on the monument. There is some debris, plastic bottles, etc. But, given that there has been little maintenance in recent years, there is little evidence of vandalism or abuse of the area.



There are even some new matzevot that have been brought to the monument and left on the large open area, including one small matzevah that had been shaped into a millstone. There is also a pile of matzevah pieces behind the monument. Some matzevot are badly damaged. On Friday, Jane, Lukasc and I spent about 3 hours, cleaning up the monument and hauled away about 3 large trash bags of debris and moss.



We left these bags by the gate so that others could see that a cleanup had taken place. We also took a long time to walk around the rest of the Jewish cemetery. It is an extensive, very beautiful property with massive oak trees, open meadows, scrub land, and a large wooded ditch that runs through it behind the monument. We only found one place where people had dumped trash, and were able to partially haul it away. In the very back, there is evidence of a place where another gate (or a section of the fence) has been removed and there is a large gap in the fence. The fence itself is rusting and needs a little repair and a proper coat of rustproof paint.



The monument after cleanup.



It seems to us that the Gombin Society needs a contract with a gardening/yard-maintenance company to maintain the cemetery on a regular basis. We also need to contract to do a general repair of the monument, re-cementing of stones, put a skim-coat of the monument surface, waterproofing of the concrete and the matzevot, etc. Finally, we need to design a plan for the new matzevot that have been brought. I am going to explore with Lukasc the involvement of his brother, Marek, who is a Gombin businessman (he owns a large hardware store near the new market and has a construction business that is building houses and apartments in the area). He was, unfortunately away with his family for the holiday weekend. The board of the Gombin society needs to discuss the long-term upkeep of the cemetery; this will be a perpetual problem. We might also want to organize an annual (or every-other-year) work trip to Gombin for Jewish Gombiner youth from all over the world to clean and upgrade the site. We should talk to Krzysztof Gorczyca from the Chelmno site about preserving matzevot, because at Chelmno we saw recovered matzevot from other Polish communities.

We said kaddish for the Jews of Gombin. Ironically, the victims of the Holocaust are not in our own cemetery, but we can remember them there.

About the Florkiewicz family. These are very nice people who live in a village outside of Gombin (Grabie Polska). They have a small family farm with barn, horse, other barnyard animals, fruit trees, a small lake for fishing and swimming and a cottage that they rent to tourists; we stayed in the cottage. They were very kind and welcoming to us. We only knew Lukasz through his email inquiry to the GS about the photo of Leah Florkewitz and the Hashomer Hazayir from the 1920s. Lucasz graduated high school in Plock and works in an insurance business there. He also recorded a song he wrote to the Raizel Zychlinski poems. His parents, Edward and Wanda were very nice, despite not speaking a word of English. They have been farmers growing strawberries and other fruit on their land, which has been in their family's hands for 4 generations. They do not have Jewish connections, but suffered at the hands of the Nazis and communists. The grandmother hid a Jew in the war, but they don't know what happened to him. The oldest brother, Marek, seems to be a successful businessman. Another brother lives in Warsaw and works at a radio station.



Gabin is a far more developed place that in was in 1999 when we visited. You can go an ATM at one of several banks and get Polish cash with your US bankcard. The supermarket now sits on the site of the former Gombin synagogue; we did not go in, but it is clearly very busy. The museum is there but is only open officially for 2-3 hours on Sunday afternoons. The place is rapidly changing and seems to be a comfortable place to live. There are many young families who start businesses here. Note the modern garbage truck in the photo.



We went to the park, where the trees are much more grown. The house where Maria Kaminska lived (across from the park, has been fixed up and is up for sale. We did not see the Balkos.

Lukasc has an excellent cable connection and wi-fi at home. So, Gabin is now part of the 21st century although we learned at the Plock Muzeum that Gabin is identified as a place on maps of 12th century Poland (Mazovia region).

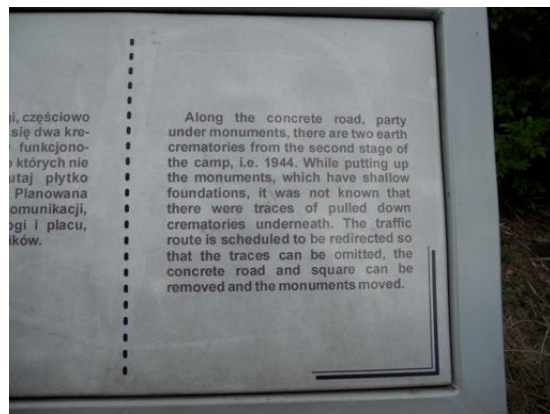
On Saturday morning, on the drive back to Berlin, we stopped at Chelmno. BTW, the drive from Gabin to Chelmno is on quite small highways and took 2+ hours. Chelmno itself is a small town near the E30 highway. It has a very beautiful, onion-domed church.



The Chelmno museum is right near the church, but it was closed when we visited. The Chelmno memorial site (where the mass graves are located in the forest) is accessed from the road between Chelmno and Kolo (pronounced “Kowo”). It’s very obvious. We went to visit the wall of remembrance where the plaques of many Gombin families were placed: Biegeleisen, Ber, Rissman, Laks, Zamocz, and others. It has been well maintained and looks much like it did when we were there in 1999.



not there, but I've written to ask him for any new publications.



We returned to Berlin by road; it's a long way. I recommend that people fly to Warsaw and rent a car there. It appears to be very easy to rent cars now and the roads are being continuously improved by the EU.

Bernie and Jane Guyer
Berlin (June 26, 2011)

The Gombin monument that we erected looks terrific, but will be moved as more excavations are carried out. Krzysztof and his team have found that Chelmnno had a crematorium that was destroyed by the Germans to get rid of the evidence, but it is now being uncovered. Krzysztof was