

B'nai Gombin

Newsletter of the Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society



The Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society (GJHGS) is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization that seeks to educate the public about the history and genealogy of the Jews of Gombin. To achieve this goal, the GJHGS collects and publishes relevant materials, encourages historical and genealogical research, and undertakes activities aimed at preserving documents and relics of the culture and history of Jewish Gombin.

B'nai Gombin is the newsletter of the GJHGS. Everything published in *B'nai Gombin* is meant to provide information for Gombiners and their descendents. Articles, stories, poems, or other genres about Jewish genealogy, Poland, Gombin, or other subjects of interest to Gombiners submitted, may be published in *B'nai Gombin*. The views and opinions expressed in *B'nai Gombin* are not necessarily those of the Gombin Society. For further information, contact the Gombin Society by mail at 185 Skyline Drive, Highland Mills NY 10930 or by email.

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Report on the State of the Gombin Jewish Cemetery

Our visit to Gombin this summer (2011) revealed dramatic modernization and development in the town but a concerning state of affairs at the Gombin Jewish Cemetery, which is badly in need of repair and maintenance. The cemetery is the only visible presence of the 700 year history of Jewish life in Gombin. Ten years after its renovation, the future of the cemetery again demands the attention of the Gombin Society.

First, Gombin has changed since we visited there in 1999. Many of

the pre-war buildings are gone, replaced by new construction, including modern houses and businesses. There are new cars, including expensive European makes. You can use an ATM at one of several banks and get Polish *zlotys* with a US bankcard. The supermarket now sits on the site of the former Gombin synagogue; the place was bustling. The "Land-lovers" museum is only open officially for 2-3 hours on Sunday afternoons. Many young Polish families have settled in Gombin. (*Cont. p. 5*)



Magen Avraham - Gombin's most famous child (~1633-1683)

Years ago, I was describing the Gombin cemetery project to a friend here in London. "Gombin," he mused, "I know that name. Ahah! Of course! The Gombiner Rov. The *Magen Avraham*. I read him every day!"

So who was the Gombiner Rov? Why was he called the *Magen Avraham*? Why was my friend exposed to him on a daily basis?

The *Torah*, Jewish Law, is divided into the Written Law (the Five Books of Moses) and the Oral Law. For over a thousand years the Oral Law was transmitted by word of mouth. Towards the end of the second century c.e., out of concern that persecution and expulsions would lead to it being forgotten, it was committed to writing in the form of the *Mishnah*. Over the next centuries the *Mishnah* was discussed at length in academies in Babylon and Palestine. Notes of those debates are contained in an extensive work known as the *Gemorrah* (conclusion). Taken together, *Mishnah* and *Gemorrah* are known as the *Talmud*. After nearly two thousand years, the *Talmud* remains the primary text for students of the *Torah*.

The monumental nature of the *Talmud* (combining law, history, philosophy, medicine and astronomy) has a particular drawback. The rules (*Halacha*) on a particular topic are not easily accessible; the answer rarely jumps off the page. Instead you get the debate, the range of opinions expressed and the reasoning behind them.

In time, the need arose for a codified summary of normative law. Alfasi, Maimonides and the Tur (Ya'akov ben Asher), to name but a few, all

produced codifications, but we will focus on the 16th century book called the *Shulchan Aruch* (the Set Table). The *Shulchan Aruch* is Judaism's pre-eminent legal codification. Borrowing heavily from the earlier codes, it was written in Tsefat, Northern Israel, by Rabbi Yosef Caro, a Sephardi, and concluded in 1563.

Ashkenazi Jews, from Central and Eastern Europe, had their own customs and traditions, as well as (in places) different interpretations of the *Halacha*. Caro's contemporary, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (the Rema), from Krakow in Poland, inserted into the *Shulchan Aruch* those instances where Ashkenazi practice was different. He did so in a work known as *HaMapah* (The Table Cloth).

One section of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the *Orach Chayyim*, deals with the laws of prayer and festivals. A century after Caro and Isserles, a commentary on this section emerged from Kalisch, Poland, in a book entitled *Magen Avraham*. It was the work of Avraham Abele ben Chayim Halevi, Gombin's most famous son.

In short the *Magen Avraham* is the primary commentary on the codification of the laws of prayer and festivals applicable to Ashkenazi Jews. Ashkenazi scholars investigating those laws would first read the main text in the *Shulchan Aruch* and then turn to the Gombiner Rov for further elucidation. That is why my friend reads him every day!

Abraham Abele ben Chayim HaLevi was born in or about 1633 in Gombin, the son of the Rabbi in Gombin. He was considered to be an *illui*, a child prodigy. (Continued on next two pages)



His parents were slaughtered in Gombin, by Chmielnicki's Cossack thugs, while he was still a youth. He then went to live and study with a relative in Lithuania, Jacob Isaac Gombiner. Later Abraham became a Rabbi in Kalisch where he was known as the 'Gombiner Rov'. He died in 1682 or 1683 and was buried there.

The Rov began writing his commentary in 1665 and finished it in 1671. The book was originally called *Magen Avraham* (Shield of Abraham). The author's name was, of course, Avraham but the title is also a reference to the concluding words of the first blessing of the *Amidah* prayer. However, there was opposition to that title because *Magen Avraham* is also one of the names used for G-d. The commentary was renamed, temporarily, *Ner Yisroel* (Lamp of Israel).

In 1692, 10 years after the Rov's death, the book was published by his son. Wanting to perpetuate his father's name the son returned to the title *Magen Avraham*. In his preface, he wrote that his

father was frequently ill and suffered pain and discomfort.

The Gombiner Rov used his extensive learning to reconcile the rulings of Caro and Isserles, though generally preferring the latter. His approach was remarkable for its insistence upon the preservation of religious customs of contemporary Poland, while incorporating some of the Kabbalistic traditions of Tsefat. The Rov taught that customary practice (*minhag*) should be maintained. This was no innovation, it was a long-standing principle that customs should be respected. The Rov gave them special emphasis.

For example, dealing with the widespread practice of hiring gentiles to work for the community on the Sabbath (the *Shabbes goy*) he wrote, "they allow themselves to hire a Gentile under contract to remove the garbage from the streets, and the Gentile does the work on the Sabbath". It could be said that this practice contravenes the Fourth Commandment (that servants also must rest on the Sabbath day). The Gombiner Rov permitted the practice of employing a non-Jew to work for the benefit of Jews on the Sabbath, acknowledging that it had become customary to do so. He expressed the view that in a previous generation a rabbi of high standing must have handed down this ruling, for the sake of the community. Since it had been incorporated into customary practice, it had become permissible (subject to a series of constraints which are beyond the scope of this article).

Whereas 16th-century rabbis noted the custom to celebrate a boy's *bar mitzvah* on his 13th birthday with a festive meal, the celebrations were limited. The Gombiner Rov codified that a *bar mitzvah* should be as elaborate as a wedding.

The Rov observed the "consumption of *tabak* through a pipe by drawing the smoke into the mouth and discharging it". He taught that smokers should first make a *brachah* (blessing)

over smoking (as they would over food or drink) as it was a type of refreshment.

He taught that *aliyot*, the calling-up of individuals to the reading of the *Torah* in Synagogues, should be handed out based on events in congregants' lives, such as marriage, birth and death, rather than always giving such honours to the scholars. He also held that women can count for a *minyan* (the quorum of 10) necessary for the reading of the *Torah*.

Perhaps the Rov's most prominent legacy concerns the calculation of the timing of prayers and other rituals. The Jewish day is divided into 12 'hours'. Each 'hour' is one-twelfth of the daytime period, consequently its length will vary with the season (longer in summer, shorter in winter). There are two approaches to calculating these hours. The approach of the *Magen Avraham* reckons the day from first light until nightfall. The other approach (attributed to Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, the Gaon of Vilna) reckons the day from sunrise to sunset.

For rituals, which are prescribed in the morning, *Magen Avraham's* calculations will always be earlier than that of the Vilna Gaon. For rituals, which are prescribed in the afternoon or evening, *Magen Avraham's* calculations will always be later than that of the Vilna Gaon. Modern calendars print both timetables, opinions differ as to which approach should be followed.

The Gombiner Rov lived through a period of great turbulence for eastern European Jewry. The Cossack leader, Chmielnicki, emerged from the Ukraine in 1648 and launched into seven years of carnage and atrocity against Poles and Jews. It is reckoned that the same proportion of the Jewish population was wiped out in this period, as perished in the Shoah 300 years later. The Yiddish Nation was traumatised.

There were various responses. For example, the influence of the mystical Kabbalists in Tsefat began to spread. Elsewhere, false messiahs appeared, the most famous of whom was Shabbetai Zvi, promising redemption but failing to deliver. Another response to the challenges experienced by this generation was the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement. His influence was destined to change the face of orthodox practice down to this very day.

In the shadow of such radical change, the Rov could be seen as a pillar of established tradition. Although he synthesized aspects of *kabbalistic* practice into his *halachic* scheme, and was bold in his promotion of customary practice even where it modified ancient prescription, in the final analysis he was an orthodox scholar who, despite much suffering in his short life-span, did not waver from the beliefs of his antecedents.

Yet the Gombiner Rov casts light on a contemporary phenomenon. Post-Shoah there has been widespread theological debate. Many views have been articulated. At one end of the spectrum, the 'ultra' orthodox have continued as before; their dress, language, and lifestyle evoking 17th century Eastern Europe. At the other extreme many Jews have turned away from tradition, towards secularism, mysticism or cult religions. Somewhere between these positions a 'modern' orthodox movement has grown up, maintaining rigorous standards of belief and practice but opening its mind to contemporary philosophies (for example in relation to education and psychology). This accommodation with the contemporary milieu mirrors the Gombiner Rov's approach, which might lead us to the conclusion that not only was he Gombin's most famous child, he was also modern orthodoxy's most famous grandfather!

Jeremy Freedman, London, England

(From page 1) Second, the state of the Jewish Cemetery was shocking. Here is a list of our findings: The front gate no longer closes properly, because one side has subsided and the bolt doesn't line up; tiles are missing from above the plaque. The area between the gate and the monument is completely overgrown with weeds and wild flowers. The monument is 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 *matzevot*. 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 was some broken glass from 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 is no graffiti.

There are even some new *matzevot* that have been brought to the monument, including one small *matzevah* that had been shaped into a millstone. There is a pile of stone pieces behind the monument. Some *matzevot* are badly damaged. Jane, Lukasc Florkiewicz (a 24-year-old Polish Gombiner who is interested in the town's Jewish history) and I cleaned the monument and hauled away 3 large trash bags of debris and moss. (Photo on page 1) We left

these bags by the gate so that others could see that a cleanup had taken place.

We also walked around the rest of the Jewish cemetery. It is an extensive, very beautiful property with massive oak trees and open meadows. We only found one place where people had dumped trash, and were able to partially haul it away. The perimeter fence is rusting and needs a little repair and a proper coat of rustproof paint.

We said *Kaddish* for the Jews of Gombin. Ironically, the Gombiner victims of the Holocaust (Shoah) are not buried in our own cemetery, but we can remember them there.

**Bernie and Jane Guyer,
Baltimore MD**

The Gombin Society Welcomes you to the Annual Meeting, November 6, 2011, 11am-2pm, Cranford NJ

Join us! **Temple El Mekor Chayim**, 338 Walnut St, Cranford NJ 07016, 908-276-9231.

Why should I come?... Because without you our society will disappear along with the memories and history of the Gombiner Jews!

The program includes a report on work in Gombin (with photos) and a discussion of plans for upkeep of the Gombin Jewish cemetery.

Cost: \$10 per person covers the cost of lunch. It is \$5 per person if you pay your 2011 dues (\$60) along with your reservation for the meeting.

RSVP to Mindy Prosperi at mprosperi@optimum.net or 845-642-7654. Mail check to Gombin Society c/o Prosperi, 185 Skyline Dr., Highland Mills NY 10930

Making the Most of Max; A Story of Search and Discovery

It sounded like “Meishnic,” the name that my wife, Ellen, thought her father (Samuel Max) said was the family name in Gombin. She knew her father’s father, Abraham Max, was an immigrant. She also had heard of her father’s grandfather, Chiel, and some of his relatives- Jake and “Bullets” (“a horse thief”).

My first searches in 2001 were futile. I could not find Abe (or Abram, or Abraham) Max (or Maxx, or Marks) in the Ellis Island Data Base, and I missed him in searching the microfilm of the 1900 federal census for New Jersey. A Polish friend suggested “Manczyk” for the name, and pointed out that Gombin is an extant city today near Warsaw.

That information resulted in the first breakthrough. An internet search for Gombin lead to the Gombin Jewish Historical and Genealogical Society web-site (www.gombinsociety.org) documents, including the *Registration Book of Gombin (1888 – 1930)*, AKT 454, a list

of Jewish families living in Gombin at that time. Chiel Manczyk (photo below) is there, at about the right birth date (1832-1891), along with his son, Abraham, also with the right date. Now we had the “official” spelling, in Roman letters, of the family names.



The 1900 U.S. census shows Abe living with his wife Minnie (yes!) and their first-born children (my wife’s aunts and uncles). The NJ State Archives had copies of several birth certificates, and the Essex County courthouse had a copy of Abe’s marriage return. Chiel

was a witness to his son’s marriage, so he did make it to America. In 2002 we went to the Gombiner Section of the Talmud Torah Cemeteries in Newark to photograph the head stones and footstones of several Manczyks.

When census records went on-line I found the New Jersey family in 1900 and 1920 and learned that Abe arrived in the US in 1891 (as did Minnie). Living at the same address are Chiel and his wife, Hanna, with one of their children, Ruby, age 21. (I had not found Ruby in the *AKT*). I also noted that by 1900 Abe was a naturalized citizen. I now re-searched the Ellis Island database for any Manczyks arriving from Poland and this time found Abe. On the manifest of a ship entering New York in 1922, he is listed along with his wife and one of his sons, Charles. He was also accompanied by a young woman, Ruchla. Who was she?

The discovery of this manifest led to a quest for Abe’s passport application, which

turned out to be quite a revealing document. There are pictures of Abe, Minnie, and Charles; letters of testimony attesting to his worthiness; and an unsigned transcription of a letter (dated November, 1921) requesting Abe to come back to Poland to “settle the estate”. The family was destitute; there was a will to be settled; and Abe’s presence was needed. The letter writer also alluded to a son, who “is getting married...and he wants the money”, as well as to a sister of Abe’s (no daughters were found in *AKT 454*). I believe this letter was from Abe’s older brother’s (Luzer) second wife, Ryfka. So Abe went to Gombin with his wife and son and returned with them and his niece, Ruchla.

About this time in my research I became aware of the *Yizkor* books that the New York Public Library has put on-line (<http://yizkor.nypl.org>). The one for Gombin (*Gombin: The Life and Destruction of a Jewish Town in Poland*. 1969) is in both Yiddish and English. The article, *The Organization in Newark*, (page 115) features a photo of Abe, identified as

“an Influential Member of the Organization in Newark”.

Ada Holtzman’s website (www.zchor.org) contains a paragraph describing the arrival of Abraham Icchak Maks in Gombin in 1922, where he contributed “a sum of money” and encouraged the establishment of the Folks Bank. This was the visit requested in the letter in Abe’s passport application.

Now I had the family back to Chiel (b. 1832) and Hanna and their five sons. All five were born in Gombin. I have records of two of them coming to the United States. What happened to the others? Were there any daughters?

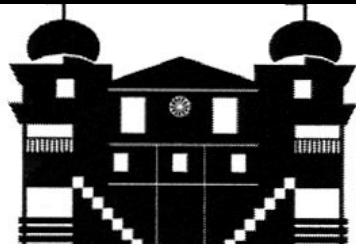
I was not making any progress until I tried Facebook, with its half a billion members. Of the 117 Manczyks, I selected about ten to write to. Most of the ten didn’t respond, but one, Roberto, said that his grandfather was Luzer Manczyk, born in Gombin in 1925, and that Luzer’s grandfather was also named Luzer. That matched my records exactly. The older Luzer is Abe’s brother, the younger is his grandnephew.

Roberto Manczyk was a student in Australia, but the family was in Brazil. I soon established e-mail contact with them. Luzer was brought to Sao Paulo at the age of four, after the family was denied visas to Palestine and the United States. We have now had two visits from Luzer’s granddaughter, Natalia.

Next, Ellen’s cousin Joyce believed that one of Luzer’s brothers, Robert, went to California where he was employed as a horticulturist. I found him there in several federal census records. And, looking again at the 1900 census for New Jersey I noticed that there was a listing for the family of Chiel (Keill in the enumeration sheet and sometimes spelled “Chil”) and his wife, along with their son, Ruby. Ruby became Robert when he went west - establishing the west coast branch of the Manczyk family tree.

Genealogical research can be frustrating, but when a new insight opens up it is very exciting.

Michael Kaplan, Princeton NJ



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L'Shana Tova Tikatevu, 5772



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