

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, Poland. To achieve this goal, the GJHGS collects and publishes relevant material, 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. 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 the Editor of *B'nai Gombin* by email at bguyer1@jhu.edu. Website: www.gombinsociety.org

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Recuperating Jewish Gombin;

The State Ethnographic Museum Conference in Płock/Gąbin, Poland, September 24-25, 2016

Recuperation: There is little left of the actual “Jewish” Gombin. [Note: We will use ‘Gombin’ when referring to the town’s Jewish past and residents because it corresponds to the Yiddish spelling, גאמבין. The Polish spelling ‘Gąbin’ will be used when referring to the current town and its residents. The name is pronounced in the same way in both languages: ‘gom-bin’.] There are no Jews living there. The 220-year-old synagogue was destroyed in 1939. Only a few old houses and the Jewish cemetery survived. While the Nazi army destroyed its physical presence, the “spirit” of that former Jewish community survives. The Gombin Jewish Historical and Genealogical Society (GJHGS) is devoted to sustaining the memory of Jewish Gombin. It now appears that we are gaining partners in this effort. This issue of *B'nai Gombin* reports on the recent State Ethnographic Museum’s conference, highlights the DVD virtual tour of the digital model synagogue, and proposes reengaging with the current Gąbin community. We are now “recuperating” Jewish Gombin, that is, not attempting to rebuild what existed formerly, but evoking its multicultural heritage in new modern forms.

The program: A large group of Gąbiners and visitors met in the town square with Hon. Krzysztof Jadczyk, Mayor, and Mrs. Anna Ostrowska head of the “Enthusiasts of Gąbin Association.” Magdalena Karczewska presented a history of the Jewish population in Gąbin. Mrs. Ostrowska and Feliks Jankowski led a tour around the town with a delegation of Gąbiner citizens. The State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw was represented by Director Adam Czyżewski, his wife Elżbieta, Marta Elas and staff. Others present included Barbara Kirchenblatt-Gimblett from the POLIN Museum, Wojciech Wasilewski and



Participants gather in Gąbin town square.

Michał Sroka of the synagogue-model team, Helena Czernek of Mi-Polin, and Alina Cała. Descendants of Jewish Gombiners came from the United States, England, and Spain; they included Dana Boll, Anita (Greenbaum) & Jonathan Brush, Bernie (Chaja/Rissman) & Jane Guyer, Jeff Kutcher (Sklarek) and Michael Shade (Frankensztajn).



Jan Jędrzejewski giving witness to tragic events of the Second World War.



Michael Shade receiving Hebrew book from Barbara Romanowska.



Felix Jankowski speaks during walking tour on the site of destroyed Gombin Synagogue.

Witnesses to history: The conference brought out unscripted voices from the Polish community. Elderly Gąbiners approached the group and gave spontaneous accounts of the events they had “witnessed” during the war. Jan Jędrzejewski, a gentleman in his late 80s, had tears in his eyes as he reported on the terrible, cruel events he had seen as a boy in 1939, when the Nazi army occupied Gąbin, tormenting and killing its Jews. Barbara Romanowska brought a bag of Hebrew prayer books that had been recovered from the walls of a Gąbin house that was being renovated. She wanted to return them to members of the Pindek family, Jews who had once lived there. When Michael Shade from the U.K. was able to recognize the name of one of his own ancestors, Lajb Rajn, in Russian script, she gave him the volume and a hug. [Research shows that Lajb was the brother-in-law of Pindek.] Felix Jankowski spoke about the destruction of the Gombin synagogue on the very site, now the parking lot of the drugstore and supermarket. These were moments of reconciliation and truth.

Multiculturalism: The conference theme of “multiculturalism” brought together the tragic history of Gąbin’s Jews and the stories of other minority communities, including gypsies (Roma) and “*Olęders*”. [Pronounced ‘Olenders’ and derived from the term ‘Hollanders’.]



We visited a former Olęder church [Photo at left], now a museum, in Wiączemin Polski near Płock, where Magdalena Lica-Kaczan spoke. The Olęders were Dutch Mennonites, originally invited by the Polish nobility to settle in this area in the 16th Century, bring their skills for managing rivers that are prone to flooding, and farm in areas along the Wistula River. They sought religious freedom; as pacifists, they refused to serve in either the Polish or German army. The Olęder communities were destroyed by the Nazis during the Second World War and were driven out of the region after the war. An exhibit entitled “Lord’s Beavers; the Forgotten World of the *Olędrzy* Communities,” created by the State Ethnographic Museum, was opened by the Mayor in the Gąbin Town Square.

Agnieszka Caban presented a paper during the Płock conference, entitled "Capturing the Ephemeral - Material Heritage of the Gypsies in a Virtual Museum". There followed a discussion of the history of the Roma population in Poland. During the walking tour of Gąbin, we visited both the Jewish and Protestant cemeteries.

The willingness of modern Poland to embrace multiculturalism may provide a new opportunity for tolerance and understanding, thus linking the history of Jews in Poland to that of other minorities- the Olęders (Mennonites), other Protestants (Evangelicals) and the Roma.

Poetry and theater: Selections of the poetry of the great Gombiner Yiddish poet, Rajzel Zychlinsky, were translated into Polish from Yiddish by Bella Szwarcman-Czarnota, prepared for recitation by Agnieszka Wichrowska, and presented by members of Gąbin's theatre group, including two teenagers. The poetry is powerful and stark in its images.

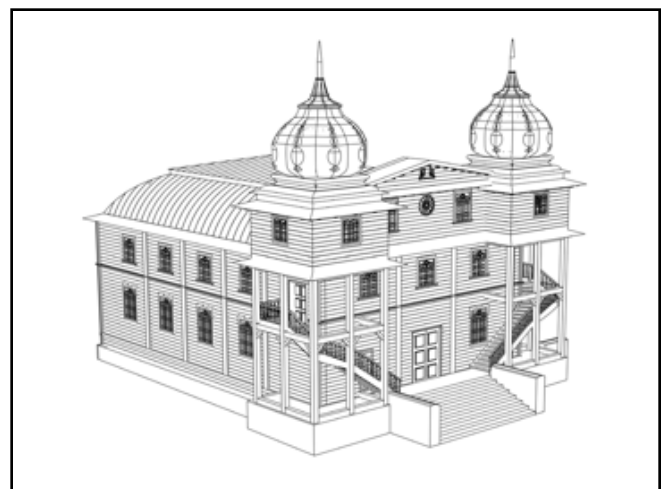


Dana Boll showed a short video fragment of her production, "Bella's Dream", as performed in New York. It is the dramatic story of her grandmother's premonition of their fate at the hands of the invading Nazi army, thanks to her uncle's advice given in a dream. Bella and Raymond then begin the heroic tale of their escape to Asia and survival in the USA.

A virtual tour through the digital Synagogue of Gombin: Gombin was the site of one of the most celebrated wooden synagogues of Poland for more than 200 years. Built in 1710, it was regarded as a landmark historical building, part of the national cultural heritage that was under special supervision of the government's Department of Museums. It stood near the old town square but was burned to the ground by the Nazi army in September, 1939. Many historic photos of both the exterior architecture and the interior details exist in archives.

An earlier issue of B'nai Gombin (#35), reported on the scale model of the synagogue, painstakingly researched and built by Wojciech Wasilewski, that is installed at the Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw. With financial support from the GJHGS, Wasilewski, Michał Sroka, and Piotr Opalinski have now created a video tour through the model synagogue. The DVD, "Reconstructing Memories - the Gombin Synagogue 3d Model", was shown in both Płock and Gąbin during the conference. This is a prime example of "recuperating" Jewish Gombin; while the synagogue may never be rebuilt, the virtual synagogue will inform and educate future generations.

The video tour begins with historic photos from all sides of the synagogue; moves to architectural drawing of the details, and then enters the front doors. The viewer is guided through the details of the model's interior, showing the beautiful features of the *bima* (stage) and the *aron hakodesh* (arc holding the *Torah* scrolls). The virtual tour takes the viewer up the stairs to the two women's balconies. The cantorial music of the *Avinu Malkenu* and the *Kol Nidre* prayers evokes the last *Yom Kippur* celebrated in Gombin, weeks before the destruction of the synagogue. The haunting silence that follows, recuperates the feeling of the synagogue after the end of *Yom Kippur* when the worshipers have returned home for the breakfast and the building is empty. The sound of the wind outside is chilling anticipating its destruction. The video ends with historic footage from the Sam Rafel film of 1937 and the Packer film, "Back to Gombin" of 1999.





Wojciech Wasilewski made a passionate plea that the Gąbin community find a way to install the video record of the synagogue in a prominent place, preferably at the original site so that future Gąbiners and visitors will learn of this exquisite structure and its spiritual importance to a now dispersed Jewish community.

Three images of the Gombin Synagogue: Page 3: (Top) Historic photograph from early 20th Century. (Middle) Architectural drawing from Synagogue Model Design Team. Page 4 (Left): Interior image of the *bimah* and Aron Hakodesh from the Video: *Reconstructing Memories*. Wojciech Wasilewski

The Recuperated Mezuzot: Helena Czernek, of Mi-Polin design firm, presented: “*Mezuzah From This House - Mezuzot In Poland.*” A *mezuzah* is a small parchment scroll inscribed with the words of the *Sh'ma* prayer that is affixed to the doorpost of Jewish homes in a decorative case. The Mi-Polin studio creates contemporary *mezuzot* from the remains of the destroyed objects. Casts are made of the doorposts of former Jewish homes, throughout Poland, where the *mezuzot* were formerly located. These fixtures are now nearly 80 years old, but the imprints in the old wood and nails remain. The artists create molds in which to pour the new brass. Again, these *mezuzot* recuperate the spirit of the ritual object that our Jewish ancestors posted on their doors. As it is written in the *Sh'ma* (*V'ahavtah...*), “Inscribe them [these words] on the doorposts of your houses and upon your gates”.



(Right) Doorpost of former Jewish home in Gąbin, showing the evidence of past *mezuzah*. (Above left) A recuperated *mezuzah* as produced and packaged by Mi-Polin.



Historic films of Gombin: More than 200 people came to the Fire Station on Sunday afternoon, September 25, 2016 to watch two historic films: the Sam Rafel film (1937, as restored by the U.S. Holocaust Museum) and the Minna Packer film, “Back to Gombin” (1999). This was truly an historic moment: We don’t believe that the Rafel film was ever previously shown in Gąbin. Ironically, it begins with a very dark and grainy image of a crowd of Gombin Jews in the Fire Station, the very building where we met.

“Back to Gombin” documents the 1998 visit to Gąbin by a group of Jewish descendants. The rededication of the Jewish Cemetery and Memorial is shown, along with footage of the group visiting sites in the town, connecting with local residents about relatives lost during the War, and discussions of the lost Jewish history of Gąbin.



At the Fireman's Hall, a large audience (above and above-right) viewed the 1937 film made by Sam Rafel, being shown for the first time in Gąbin. Photos from Teraz_Gąbin, with thanks.



A small group [photo to the right] visited the site of the historic Polonia Theater in Gąbin. Before the war, the Polonia was owned by the Greenbaum family and used to both show films and host theater productions. An earlier issue of B'nai Gombin (#23) shows photos of these dramatic productions and copies of Polonia playbills with the cast and program, written in both Polish and Yiddish; these playbills are an indication that the plays were viewed by multiethnic audiences in their day. The former Polonia building is now used for housing. Anita (Greenbaum) Brush, a descendant of the Greenbaum family was present on the tour.



Postscript- Next Steps

One theme of this visit has been the recuperation of Jewish life in Gombin. This was the goal that inspired Ada Holtzman's historical work on Gombiner lives in the 20th century. The digital rebuilding of the synagogue allows people, all over the world, to visit it, as it was. The *mezuzot* connect our own doorposts to those of our ancestors, whose houses may never be Jewish homes again. A second theme, multiculturalism, inspires us to appreciate how long these various communities had "lived together in peace" (to quote *Fiddler on the Roof*). Their skills must have complemented each other. Some grew flax, some wove linen, some were tailors. Some tended fruit orchards while others picked, packed and transported the harvest to Warsaw, up the Wistula River. In a small town, with a central market square, they must have bought and sold from each other on market days, known and respected each other's festivals, and spoken each other's languages (Polish, German, Dutch, Yiddish), at least for the purposes of greeting, dealing,

learning practical skills and sharing the news. By exploring in more detail the daily lives of the ordinary citizens of Gąbin, over the centuries, we expect to retrieve their wisdom and joys, as well as the tragic episodes that created the diaspora communities, and create rewarding, new collaborations. We will explore these partnerships. There is already a substantial history of Gąbin, written in Polish. We should work to promote its dissemination. The DVD of the virtual tour of the digital model synagogue will further this work.

The Gombin Jewish Historical and Genealogical Society will work with the office of the Mayor of Gąbin and the staff of the State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw and the Synagogue Model Team in Krakow to seek a prominent place in Gąbin for the installation of the video presentation, so that all future populations may again recognize the place of the Jewish community in the multicultural history of Gąbin.

Dziękuję Ci (Thank you): We are grateful to the leadership of the State Ethnographic Museum- Adam & Elzbieta Czezewski, and staff; the team of graphic designers from Krakow who have recreated the digital synagogue; the team at Mi-Polin who recuperate the *mezuzot* as part of their work to create the first Jewish items to be produced in Poland since the Holocaust; the staff of the Mazovian Museum in Plock, Museum of Mazovian Jews, especially Rafał Kowalski; Mrs. Ostrowska and the Gąbin Enthusiasts Association; the Mayor and administration of Gąbin; the Gąbin Theater group; and the countless others who made this two-day conference such a success, by any measure.

Thanks to Teraz-Gąbin for making photos of the visit available on line. Other photographs came from Jonathan Brush, Dana Boll, Bernard Guyer, and Wojciech Wasilewski.



Presenting the DVD, "Reconstructing Memories" Left to right: Wojciech Wasilewski, Hon. Krzysztof Jadcak, Adam Czezewski.



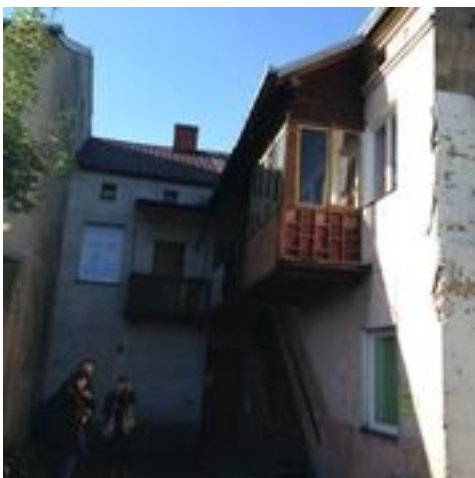
Plock walking tour with Rafał Kowalski, right; Jane Guyer, left, and Jacob (translator), center.



Enjoying Polish food and drink; Dana Boll, center, Anita Brush, right.



Dana Boll and Michael Shade searching for shared ancestral village of Swiniary in area of canals near Wistula River.



Surviving "*sukkah*" attached to 2nd floor of former Jewish house, Gąbin.



Tour participants visit the Gombin Jewish Cemetery.

Ada Holtzman (1951-2016) z"l

It is with great sadness that we report the death of Ada Holtzman, a child of Gombin, who served this community as our principal historian and genealogist, helping countless Gombiners to trace their family stories. She will be missed by all who knew her and benefited from her prodigious work in creating the *Zchor* website. May her memory be for a blessing.

Ada was the daughter of Gombin natives Meir Holtzman and Rivka Gostinska who emigrated to Palestine in 1939. They were *khaluzim* who helped found Kibbutz Evron, where Ada lived as a child. Many of her relatives, on both sides of the family, were killed in the Holocaust. She was the representative of the Gombin Society in Israel and held an annual gathering for Gombiners in Tel Aviv.

On her website, she wrote, "I visited Gombin in 1989, saw the 'schule' still there in Warshavska street... I saw some houses still remembered by the Poles to belong to Jews... saw the empty large field, covered by snow, where nothing is in, and that was the Jewish cemetery for hundreds of years, from which the Nazis broke all the stones and made roads from the holy tomb stones...I saw the woods around Gombin, bare and black trees in the white, hiding inside some secrets of murders and most barbaric actions committed not so long ago against my people... I saw the place where once stood the synagogue of Gombin, one of the most splendid synagogues in Poland, burnt by the Nazis... I saw the houses of the Ghetto in Kilinskeigo Street, from which the Jews went to their last journey... and I saw a memorial to the Poles who died in the Second World War, but no memorial to the 2500 Jews from this city who were deported, tortured, murdered and strangled by the Nazis... I swore then, that if it will ever be possible, I shall help to erect a memorial to the Gombiner Jews, and their tragic history."

Michael Shade wrote poignantly about the importance of Ada's help with his research on his Frankenstein family: "In particular, the Gombin Book of Residents, which she had transcribed, translated, and converted into a spreadsheet which is available at her website and from the Gombin Society website. It was this work that directly led to all the progress we have made in our Frankensztajn family history over the past couple of years.



He continued: "Specifically, one small entry in the Gombin Book, which I had seen but taken no real notice of previously. We had always believed the Frankensteins came from Gombin, so I was surprised to see that there were no Frankenstein families listed in the Book. Indeed, there was only one occurrence of the name: Bajla Frankensztajn, married to Towje Aron Szwarc. The bit I had missed was a note that said Bajla was born in Swiniary. When I went to the Archives in Płock 2 years ago with Lukasz [Florkewicz], I mentioned this to Mariusz the archivist, and he brought out the Book for Czermino. Lo and behold, there was the entry for the whole family on one page, in the village of Swiniary - which proved that Dana [Boll] and I, for instance, are 3rd Cousins - our great-grandparents were brother and sister. Without Ada's work, this could never have happened."

How could there ever be a more apt compliment for an historian and genealogist!



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