



Until the next year in Gombin holidays in the tradition of Polish Jews

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Model of the Gombin Synagogue erected in 1710

– architectural development and model construction by Wojciech Wasilewski, in cooperation with Michał Sroka, balsa wood, acrylic paint, 2014, The State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw





Permanent exhibition at The State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw
Sukkah from Szydłowiec. Deposit of Museum of the Polish Jews POLIN

To the year 1935, 47 Jewish families have emigrated from Gombin and 127 people took the decision individually. Most went to the United States, where the largest cluster was formed in New Jersey, other several dozens of people went to Palestine. After 1935 the emigration had intensified. Jews were leaving, taking from Poland their meager belongings and negative experiences of the last decade – the image of the country that is poor and possessed by a growing hatred. Those who remained in Gombin can be seen in Sam Rafel film from 1937, filmed probably after the Sabbath, on the streets of town with its now defunct wooden houses, synagogue, beit midras, mikveh. It shows people posing in front of the lens of a camera held by their wealthy compatriot from America, wearing their festive clothes, clearly exposing the hallmarks of modernity – bicycles, watches, scout uniforms. Because in Jewish

North and East elevation of synagogue in Gombin

photo. W.Kieszkowski, from collections of Institute of Art. PAN



Gombin, despite all the difficulties, the normal life still went on. Political parties, associations, theater, library, school and health care were still op-

erating. Zionists and the Bund argued about the future. Children were born, the young got married and the old lived their last days their own way.



Members of socialist-zionist society Hashomer Hacair
Gombin, 1933, photo from private collection



Children from Gostynski family:
Pinchas (1911-1942), Rivka (1915-1969),
Rachel (1908-1995) | Gombin, 1930's, photo
from private collection

HOLIDAYS IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

Ordinary world of the Jews of Gombin ended with the sweltering summer of 1939, in the month of Elul, 5699 years since the Day of Creation, which in historical imaginary time scale meant 450 years from the time the ships of Columbus reached the shore of America, the Sephardic commune was exiled from Spain by royal edict, and the first families of refugees from Ashkenaz settled on the edge of the old river bed of Vistula, by a large forest three hours on horseback south-east of Plock. Despite the war, as usual in September, the preparations for the celebration of the New Year – Rosh Hashanah continued in town. The holiday in the Jewish calendar begins a ten-day period of settlement of conscience, with acts of repentance and reconciliation with people and God. This significant holiday is also called “Days of Awe” – with

a dramatic culmination of twenty-five hour long fast and evening and day-long prayers on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). It opens a much longer period of holiday, today called colloquially autumn holiday, culminating in the week-long celebration of Sukkot (Feast of Booths) with the joyful ceremony Simchat Torah (Joy of the Torah) ending the festive liturgy and beginning of the annual cycle of Torah reading. Only after the fulfillment of all the obligations of the religious life, the Jew is freed from grief of last year and can move on to an ordinary secular mode of everyday life. It was a fact well known to Germans stationed in Gombin at that special time of the week. As in other towns, they decided to hinder the followers of Judaism in their reconciliation with God and did not allow them to write their names in the Book of Life. Two days before Yom Kippur, the day before the Sabbath which this year

immediately preceded the holiday, they set fire to a great shul of Gombin, one of the most beautiful synagogues in Eastern Europe, and certainly one of the most impressive Baroque religious buildings made of wood in the old Poland. When it was completed in 1710, it could accommodate all the inhabitants of the shtetl. According to the legend, thanks to the special blessings for two centuries the synagogue had resisted fires that during this time repeatedly spread through the Jewish quarter. Blessings saved it even from the effects of the Luftwaffe air raids, which in September 1939 bombed eastern frontage of the market, completely destroying all the houses located there and along with a brick church – the pride of the Catholic population of the city. At the time of the fire Germans locked several men in the synagogue, hoping that their charred bodies could be used later as an evidence to put

the blame on the Jews themselves. Although the imprisoned luckily managed to escape from the burning building, they were accused of the arson and a high contribution was imposed on the Jewish community. German attempts to remove the eye-witnesses of crime and their intention to use their bodies as evidence in the bogus trial against victims, points to something more than just remnants of legalism or shame of their own deed (gone were the priceless treasures of Jewish civilization and Polish cultural heritage – synagogue, all its equipment, books, beit midrash neighboring buildings and mikveh). Scruples, which in this case we should expect from the best sons of the nation of poets and philosophers, only partially explain the intentions of the criminals. Everything seems to indicate that they were more complex. Burning shul of Gombin, selecting the targets of the September bombing

Synagogue in Gombin | detail from inside,
photo. W.Kieszkowski, from collections
of Institute of Art. PAN



of Warsaw to be synagogues and houses of prayer crowded with people in Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Nazis not only intimidated and stigmatized Jewish community in Poland, which was their obvious goal, but also tried to prevent the Jews from the celebration of holidays which, as they thought, were to be the cosmic foundation of Judaism, and in a broader meanings – international conspiracy of Jews, Communists and Freemasons. Besides the old as the world rations of every murderer and, fairly recently mastered, method of provocation (starting with the arson of the Reichstag), the Nazis were guided by even more complex and irrational motives (for now let's stay with this rather crippled definition). Their target were holidays themselves. It is a rather strange goal in the case of cynical representatives of the extreme rationalism. Let's try to explain what it might mean in a larger context.

For each researcher of ethnic and religious stereotypes it is clear that the actions of the German occupiers resulted from centuries of religious prejudice and ignorance which assigned the Jews with actions and intentions true for their Christian environment. So it was for centuries with the legend of blood (where the stereotype said everything about those who created it and virtually nothing about its alleged object). And so it was and still is with the persistent inability to understand the fact that, since the beginnings of Judaism, the holidays did not have any significant reference in the cosmological myth. Simply put – neither the continued existence of the world, nor even the further course of the most ordinary cases did depend on compliance and completion of holidays. It is difficult to require this knowledge from the Nazis since even such eminent scholar as Mircea Eliade, well aware of the fragility and mar-

ginality of the myth of creation in the book of Genesis (he writes about this specifically), could not stop himself from stating in the same commentary that: "You could easily draw a comparison between this conception of religion [Judaism, postscript – A. C., A. C] and the beliefs and practices of rural Christianity, which we called »cosmic Christianity«. The only difference is that in the Mishnah work of sanctification is carried out only by God and by acts of man fulfilling God's orders".

If we are dealing with ignorance, it is a special kind – in case of someone like Eliade, who mastered biblical Hebrew to gain direct access to sources, it cannot be linked to the lack of knowledge. It should not be associated with semi-fascist worldview, which was not abandoned by the famous phenomenologist of religion after parting with Iron Guard and Antonescu regime (famed for "purification" of recovered



Synagogue in Gombin, Bima
photo. W.Kieszkowski,
from collections of Institute of Art. PAN

Bessarabia from the Commissioners and the Jews). It seems to have more to do with the mild form of ignorance, kind of numb indifference to other than causative or cosmogonic forms of religious sensitivity. Seen in this perspective, Judaism supplied Eliade only with problems and disappointments. When trying to describe it in accordance with accepted standards of religious experience, it turned out that cosmogony does not play any role in it (just a few paragraphs in the Book of Genesis), eschatology is in its infancy (who may know how it will be in the next world?), soteriology is extremely unappealing (maybe the Messiah will come, maybe not), and on top of that: lack of resurrections, few healings, and unsightly miracles. Thus Judaism was perceived by Eliade through the simplicity of a tribal religion, clan history, family biography, where only consistent monotheism stood out. However,

People of Gombin | end of 1920's, photo from private collection

Athletes from Macabi Club | Gombin, 1928, photo from private collection

Synagogue in Gombin | entrance to women section, photo from private collection

even here, pointing to the property of Judaism, implicitly – the transcendence of God over the Creation, Eliade was limited only to the foundation of the difference between Judaism and “rural Christianity practices” (another imperfect term indicating a long and varied religious tradition, by no means “primitive”, which lasted in the Mediterranean world continuously since the Paleolithic times until today, one which Judaism defied abruptly and without compromise). Eliade ignored the whole range of consequences of this difference, and so many differences derived from the principal, but no less important for the



understanding of Judaism. One of them, perhaps most important, is the vast diversity of the Jewish calendar and the holidays, resulting from an entirely different concept of time and the function performed by the “appointed time” – time of celebration. Who does not understand the difference will be sentenced to reproduce stereo-



types and conceptual cripples derived from other religious traditions foreign to Judaism. This applies especially to the Christian tradition, where the differences are easily blurred due to the Jewish origins of many of its elements, especially some holidays and relations between them, the so-called moving holidays – Easter (Pascha) and Whit (Pente-

cost). Because in fact, in the depths of its nature, Christianity was and still is to a much greater extent a continuation of the tradition of the Roman Empire, and especially the Hellenistic world, rather than the Jewish tradition.

THE JEWISH CALENDAR

Without going into other issues about the differences and similarities, and only remaining on the subject of holidays, let us note that the Church, when it assumed a function of the state religion in the Roman Empire (from the Edict of Milan in 313 r., although in reality the process took a longer time – from a third to mid-fourth century of the Christian era), was forced to take on responsibilities held so far by the great religions of Middle East – oriented on solar symbolism. From the point of view of the then policy of the Empire, with its

Synagogue in Gombin, Aron ha-Kodesh
photo. W.Kieszkowski, from collections
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high officials being the bishops of the Christian communities, the symbolism strengthened central authority and legitimized it on the basis of the cosmogony. For this purpose, Emperor Aurelian established in 274 the state cult of Sol Invictus, a syncretic deity, whose feast

was celebrated on December 25. About a hundred years later, the Church chose the same date for the celebration of Christmas, replacing the earlier cult of invincible sun. Despite ongoing for some time disputes about the way of determining the date for celebration of Easter (either simultaneously with the Jewish Pesach or, according to the new rules, always on Sunday), Christianity took over the Roman calendar with all of its known troubles concerning the synchronization of the lunar and solar year. It also took over the cosmogony of the Empire and the cyclical concept of time, in which the

most important starting moment of the cycle was December 25 which at the beginning the fourth century became a Christmas Day. It is easy to notice the absence of its festive counterpart in the Jewish calendar (it is not Hanukkah, as it will be explained later). There is a simple reason for that. The idea of eternal return is completely alien to the Jewish culture, the Jewish history is a line rather than a circle or a spiral. We are talking not only about the history as such, but also about the sacred history which in the Jewish liturgical calendar does not fill the entire year, as it is in case of the Christian calendar, but only



Gostynski family: Jacob Gostynski-father, Yached-mother, nephew-Honigsztok (from Kiernoz), children-Pinchas, Rivka, Rachel
photo from private collection

Firefighters from Gombin
photo from private collection



Synagogue in Gombin

general view, photo. W.Kieszkowski,
from collections of Institute of Art. PAN

a fragment – the period starting from the month of Nisan (March/April according to the Gregorian calendar) until the month of Tishri (September/October). This is because the Jewish New Year begins (according to the date of creation of the World) in the month of Tishri and yet the celebration of Rosh Hashanah – the first month – takes place in the spring month of Nisan. This apparent inconsistency has various explanations. For the purposes of this argument we will assume that the year of religious events starts in five (or six – in a leap year) months after the beginning of the calendar year. If someone asks what is actually happening over that half of year in the Jewish liturgical calendar, the answer is simple: nothing (with a few notable exceptions, which will be discussed in a moment). There are no festive brackets which could symbolically link the end with beginning of a great circle of the eternal return. There

is no symbolic birth in form of renewal of the world, and that is because neither man nor any other creature (a hero, a mythical demon, fiery snake, bird, dragon or the devil, as it happens in “cosmic Christianity” and other religions of Eurasia) does not participate in the Creation. According to the Jews it was a single unique act, sufficiently “causative” – an expression of sovereign will of the transcendent sole Creator of the holy name, which the Jews were not even allowed to speak and replace it with the term Ha Shem (“His Name”). The part of the Jewish year that we are now interested in, is a descending and later ascending line – road accentuated by three festive climaxes – the Passover at the beginning, Shavuot in the middle and Sukkot at the end. Passing those festive milestones the faithful Jews make their way through a moral transformation of their own lives, families and their communities.

Every time they begin at the same time in the month of Nisan and finish in the month of Tishri, and yet each subsequent year of the process occurs in another place, at another time, at another level of person’s spiritual development. Despite the seemingly rising spiral of time and obvious traces of agricultural calendar relevant to the ancient Land of Israel, for the Jews the celebration of holidays has never been an act of ritual repetition and return to a mythical beginning, but only the fulfillment of the obligation to remember. The word “only” has a special significance with respect to the memory of the nation – a collective creators of the largest in the history of civilization memorized intellectual resource, which was given its written form relatively late in the form of the Mishnah. It was then extended with written debates and comments, thus creating the Talmud. Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot are some-

times called pilgrim holidays because in the days of the Temple, at that time all the Jews living in Eretz Israel would travel to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in the Temple and feast together. Distinct meaning and a special position was assumed by Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, during which the high priest read the entire Torah before the congregation of the people of Israel. It was the one and only time in the year when he spoke out loud the holy name of God. It was a day of the fast, which in Jewish tradition means abstaining from both food and drink for over a day. After the destruction of the Temple all the time in the diaspora (with exception of sleeping) was spent on prayers in the synagogue. And so it was to be in Gombin in the autumn of 1939. Had it not been for the greatest tragedy in Jewish history,

Synagogue in Gombin, plate with shiviti in front of Amud (desk of hazan) | between Aron ha-Kodesh and Bima, photo. W.Kieszkowski, from collections of Institute of Art. PAN



holidays, and life in the shtetl would have carried on with their fixed mode until the present day. Although living conditions would have changed since then, the celebrations surely would have remained unchanged. The Jewish world does not know the religious hierarchy, but despite this its festive customs are much less diverse and far more solid than the ones of the Christian world.

PESACH

The relative unity of the holiday traditions of Judaism comes from the inner activity of one, not very complicated, story shared by all believers. The whole period, from spring until autumn, is linked by the story of the Exodus from Egypt and forty years of wandering in the desert on the way to the Promised Land. It commemorates the beginning of Passover, the most familiar holiday in the Jewish tradition. It lasts for eight days in the Diaspora (seven in Eretz



Actors of Jewish Theatre "Polonja" in Gombin
photo from private collection

Israel), including two starting and two closing holy days, and four other days considered semi-festive. As a traditional Jewish day, and therefore all the other holidays, Pesach begins in the evening with lighting of candles, saying the blessings and a festive supper. Supper follows in accordance with the established order, and therefore it was named Seder (in Hebrew "order"). In addition to the blessings, songs and the feast itself, filled with the heartfelt conver-

sations with closer and more distant relatives, friends, often not seen for months, read out is a richly illustrated Haggadah (Hebrew for "story"). Telling it, in practice reading, is understood as a religious duty of every father towards his sons (children). Hearing Haggadah is, however, the responsibility of the whole family and every individual Jew. In the absence of family and friends, a man completely alone in the evening should read the Haggadah to himself and answer the four questions that traditionally, by the Seder table, a son asks his father. This simple story about Moshe, who spoke with God, his brother Aharon and sister Miriam, Egyptian slavery and hard negotiations with Pharaoh, ten plagues that struck the Egyptians, the revelation of the power of the Eternal One who brought the destruction of all the firstborn, but passed over the houses marked with blood of sacrificed lamb ("pesach"



People of Gombin | end of 1920's,
photo from private collection



Synagogue in Gombin, Northern tower
photo. W.Kieszkowski, from collections
of Institute of Art. PAN

in Hebrew means “to bypass”), bread hastily prepared with unleavened flour, fleeing from the armies of Pharaoh and the miraculous passage between splitting waters of the Red Sea – the story is always told in a language understood by all the guests, and so in the Diaspora it usually is not Hebrew, it revives the memories serving a single purpose – maintaining the memory and at the same time the adherence to the commands of God.

Passover is associated with many difficult to maintain rigours. On ordinary dietary restrictions associated with the rules of kosher, imposed are additional restrictions deriving from standing at the time ban on eating bread and all products prepared from leavened flour. The ban also includes the possession of this kind of food at home and around the property. Each family used to keep a special tableware used only on Pesach. Today it is often replaced by disposable

tableware. In older times, before the Passover the shtetl streets would turn into a big warehouse and washroom for furniture and other equipment that was taken out of the apartments as these were bleached with lime anew and completely. At crossroads great cauldrons of boiling water were set and their owners would kosher metal dishes for a small fee. So then, as it is now, on the eve of the holiday ended the thorough cleaning of the house and its surroundings; then ritually removed and invalidated were the remnants of chametz (leavened food) in the form of bread crumbs. In practice, this means removing all food stored in the house. At that time in Jewish shops appear new, specially imported for Passover foods including – matzah, pies baked from unleavened flour. It should be emphasized that matzaha is not part of a healthy diet, as is commonly believed to be in the non-Jewish world,

but simply food of the poor, and the religious warrant of its consumption is limited to a period of Pesach. This order is celebrated during the Seder ritually, by breaking and sharing the sheets of matzah between the gathered while reading the Haggadah. Three matzah (used for this purpose is szmura matzah, circular, hand-made and macer-



ated), arranged one over the other rest on the table either under a tablecloth, in a protective cover, or in a bunk container, depending on the family custom or affluence of the hosts. Next to it, on a special Seder plate, in a symbolic amount are spread the ritual meals. Each

is marked by specific meaning, all serve to remember the most important events of the story of the exodus from Micraim – the land of slavery. Wine, present in all the festive rituals, serves to fulfill the kidusz (blessing over wine), in this case it is drunk in total number of four cups. The fifth cup is filled on the table for the memory of the prophet Elijah. Two challah, reminding about the gifts for the Temple and loaves placed at the Temple's table, during Passover are replaced by matzah. At the end of the supper the gathered exchange wishes "For the coming year in Jerusalem".

SHAVUOT

On the second day of Passover begins countdown of the Omer. This enigmatic term means the distance separating the seven weeks of Passover from Shavuot (Pentecost). The distance, traveled by the Hebrews, so in 49 days from the Exodus they reached Mount Sinai, is not



Zelda Tajfeld, Max Guyer, Esther Tajfeld
Gombin, 1920's, photo from private collection

Tajfeld sisters | Gombin, 1930, photo from private collection



Front elevation of synagogue in Gombin
photo. W.Kieszkowski, from collections
of Institute of Art. PAN

clearly evaluated in the Jewish tradition and the time dedicated to it in the calendar does not encourage pride and joy (with the exception of Lag Ba Omer – traditionally spent on picnics in parks and outside the city). Burdened with appropriated valuables, Egyptian wives, barbarous customs and habits of slaves dreaming of tomorrow's assurance even at the expense of the terrible humiliation, within the mixed procession of the twelve tribes of Jacob – the Hebrews, because they were not yet the Jewish people, the children of Israel, stood in the desert at the foot of Mount Sinai. Here they experienced the greatest fall in their entire history: when Moshe went alone to the top, all the others, including Aharon and Miriam, gave in to the cult of the golden calf. Those who stood up from this fall on the same day entered under the leadership of Moshe into the everlasting covenant with the Eternal. They received the Torah and

Temple – the exact instructions on how to build and worship in the Tent of the Tabernacle. In exchange for the observance of the rights appearing on stone tablets they obtained the freedom they have since took pride in as Sons of the Covenant, the new nation of Israel uniting people with free minds but bodies fettered with 613 commandments of the Torah.

The feast of Shavuot therefore leads to a deeper reflection on misappropriation and fidelity. After evening prayers and festive dinner, men, and women who so wish, spend the night on the study of the Torah. The next day, in the synagogue adorned with green branches, holiday prayers are held.

TISHA B'AV

The next stage of wandering in the desert, attributable to the summer months of drought and heat exhaustion, is marked by fasts commemorating the



Group practicing with maces, Macabi sport Club
Gombin, 1928, photo from private collection



Ritual slaughterhouse | Gombin, photo from private collection

fall of Jerusalem and the Temple. The most important, Tisha B'Av (the ninth day of the month Av), like Yom Kippur is combined with an all day fasting and and ban on carrying out all work. It should be spent in the synagogue on prayers, during which mournful



School march during state holiday

Gombin, photo from private collection

of inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto to Nazi death camp of Treblinka.

THE GREAT HOLIDAYS: ROSH HASHANAH AND YOM KIPPUR

Summer ends, autumn is coming. Rosh Hashanah (New Year) is the true beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance, but also an opportunity to meet with relatives and friends at festive dinner. The wishes of “sweet New Year” are accompanied by sweet dishes, honey, which replaces salt during the blessing of the challah, cakes, nuts, sweets and fish served whole (head and tail) along with the wishes “so you in the coming year be the head, not – the tail”. In the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah everyone goes to the Tashlikh, a symbolic cleansing from sins which

laments are sung and the worshipers sit on the ground or on the overturned chairs. A fast of Tisha B'Av commemorates the destructions of the first Temple by the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC and the Second Temple that was set on fire by the soldiers of the Emperor Titus in 70 CE. This sad date opens a long string of tragic

events which, according to the tradition or history, happened that day: the fall of the fortress of Betar during the uprising of Bar Kochba (135 r.), the expulsion of the Jews from England (1290.), exile from Spain (1492.), Cossack mass murders of the Jews carried out during the Khmelnytsky Uprising in 1649 and the beginning of large-scale deportations

are discarded in the form of bread crumbs into a river or stream. This celebration, as the entire feast, is accompanied by the sound of shofar. It is also heard at the end of the fast on the Day of Atonement.

SUKKOT

In fact only now the calendar year can fully start, nearly at the same time as the Festival of Sukkot – the last climax on the way to the Promised Land, the third pilgrim holiday, during which Jews eat meals, and even spend the night in a specially built souks (shacks), commemorating the forty-year stay in the desert. Their walls are complete but the roof is replaced by branches through which one can see the sky. Once they were commonly built in backyards, gardens and on balconies. Today, they are less frequently erected by individual families, more often by the entire communities.



Synagogue in Gombin | valance which according to legend was made out of banner of Napoleonic Army which was retreating through Gombin

Photo studio | Gombin, at the turn of 1920' and 1930', photo from private collection

During the morning prayers in the synagogue, for the next seven days of Sukkot the men fulfill a ritual of agricultural origin, consisting of shaking lulav, a bunch consisting of leaves of palm, myrtle, willow and etrog, a lemon-like fruit. After the end of the eighth Day of Assembly (Shemini Atzeret), and reading of the last parashah (passage attributable to the weekly Torah reading in the synagogue) in Deuteronomy, in the evening takes place a celebration of the closure and the start of a new annual cycle of Torah study – Simchat Torah (the Joy of the Torah). In its course all the scrolls of the Torah in the synagogue are paraded in dance procession around the bimah seven times. Read out is the last and then the first chapter of the Torah from the Book of Bereshit (Genesis).

Thus the beginning of the calendar year is the intersection of the two roads, the first of which is a journey through the

desert and the second – Days of Penance leading to Yom Kippur. The first carries on throughout the calendar year, according to further parashah of Torah, the second ends its run with a bound of spring and autumn, the festive half of the year. Only now one can repeat the question: did the Germans, by thwarting the celebration of holidays of Yom Kippur and Sukkot, manage to achieve their goal? Did they, by burning the Gombin's shul, succeed in tearing the ritual life cycle of the Jewish community as intended?

SABBATH

One can answer this question in many ways, demonstrating the futility of Nazi plans. After all, despite the Holocaust, Jewish holidays are cultivated around the world, also by the descendants of the Jewish inhabitants of Gombin. Wherever they are currently living mainly in Israel and the United States,

there is a virtual community of memory: Gombin Jewish Historical and Genealogical Society based in Tel Aviv and its strong American branch the activity of which is concentrated in New Jersey – produced are books, movies, operates a website with a regular newsletter and a wide range of correspondents, also in Poland. It is all true, but at the same time it is just one of many possible answers. Another, which I propose here, is based on the analysis of customs which make up the Jewish culture of celebration – the reckoning, the sense of time and philosophy of life saved on cultural matrices of Judaism.

This specifically Jewish orientation in the world created by a transcendent God, admittedly, can cause cognitive confusion. Here, after hearing the entire list of Jewish holidays, located within a certain order of the sacred story of the exodus from Egypt and the journey through the desert to Eretz Israel,



Actors of Jewish Theatre "Polonja" in Gombin
"It is hard to be Jewish" | folklore play, 1927,
 photo from private collection

Ryfcia (Rivka) Gostynski, member of socialist-zionist society Hashomer Hacair | before war thanks to Sochnut agency she emigrated to Palestine where she married Meir Holcman, Gombin childhood friend; both were among founders of Evron Kibutz, photo from private collection

once it seems that everything about their relationship with the religious calendar was told, at the end of the list another holiday suddenly falls into account, and this is the most important one – the Sabbath. An unusual holiday, although it takes place every week, every Saturday; so often that in some way it is at risk of becoming ordinary.



Yet precisely because of this, paradoxically, it is a model for all other holidays, both in the general atmosphere of the ceremony and the rituals, specific bans and injunctions. In understanding this not very useful will be the naturalistic or symbolic attempts to explain its constant weekly cadence with journey of planets in the sky, the Babylonian origin, similarly barren are essentially attempts to interpret the Rosh Chodesh (solemn monthly blessings on the occasion of the new moon, due to romantic scenery often depicted in art) as a relic of the alleged lunar worship. It is sufficient to understand that we are dealing with convention, with a contractual measure. For an abstract arrangement of the Sabbath in the calendar, expressing a regular constant term of the number seven, not only does not take away its special position in the Jewish reckoning of time but even emphasizes it, pointing to the conventional nature

of human measures. As well as any other measurements of time and its climaxes – holidays, the memorial of the rest on the seventh day of creation also belongs to the order of things created. Sabbath is therefore not an update of cosmogonic myth, it does not have any causal power, it is “only” a memorial, an opportunity for shared realization how much weight is carried by the existential “here and now” for all gathered at the holiday table in an atmosphere of peace and joy. Ritualized actions, repeated on this day, from the lighting of candles, evening greeting of the Sabbath Queen in the synagogue, a blessing of children, a blessing over wine (Kiddush), the ritual washing of hands combined with an appropriate blessing, blessings over challah and hymn of praise to honour women – wives, through the consequent meals and blessings until the end of the Sabbath next evening with the ritual

lighting of Havdalah, all these rituals remind us of the covenant of the Eternal God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, concluded by Moses and the sons of Israel on Mount Sinai.

Each Sabbath is preceded by the earlier Sabbath. Following it are other Sabbaths, and together with them develops a simple, linear story of Eternal Covenant. The Nazi crimes have left a mark on the web of time, but could they in any way injure it, since even the most concerned, the Jews, have no influence over it? While fighting, as they thought, with Judaism, in fact the Nazis fought with their own notions about it.

TORAH

Jewish holidays are thus a ritualized form of recall of events especially important for the nation and its religion, and the essence of holiday rituals is the study and public reading of the Torah, in which these events are recorded.

Since the destruction of the Temple, and located within it the Holy of Holies – the room in which once was kept the Ark of the Covenant and in it – the prototype of the Torah in the form of stone tablets, it is its modern form, namely the Hebrew text, accurately transcribed on parchment scrolls by prepared for this scribes (Sophers), that remains the only source of faith revealed to the Jews. Only that unchanging text along with the so-called Oral Torah – the entire Jewish tradition of understanding and reading of the Torah, and therefore the Talmud as its written codification, with everything that has and has not been said on the subject, along with the act of Creation of the World and its end, only this holy text of the five Books of Moses exists outside of time and matter of this world. Despite the fact that the Torah was revealed in historical time, and the process of its reading will end with the bound of this world, in its



People of Gombin | photo from private collection

virtual being it is only a thread linking the faithful with the transcendent God. For thousands of years, it has been a powerful generator of continuous sense, an intellectual edifice transmitted through the desert of time on sloping shoulders of inconspicuous teachers and students. One of the greatest Torah teachers of modern times was born in Gombin in 1615. Abraham Abele Gombiner great halakhic authority who, as a rabbi of Kalisz, became famous for his work Magen Abraham. His parents lived in Gombin until their death at the hands of soldiers of Stefan Czarniecki who were plundering the city and massacring the Jewish population. For almost 5000 years of Jewish history great empires would rise and fall, many nations were lost without trace or dissolved among other nations, the languages changed, including the ones that the Jews spoke among themselves. Language of the Torah, Biblical Hebrew,



came out of common use 2500 years ago. According to the statistical calculations, if not for the pogroms, mass murder and forced assimilation, today's Jews would be a ten times more populous nation. But if not for the Torah, they would not be at all.

WINTER HOLIDAYS OF MIRACULOUS RESCUE

Nearly six-month winter period, completely devoid of festivals described in the Torah, is also filled with history of the Children of Israel, but considerably later one, marked by events as much

historical as miraculous. To one of them, as described in the Books of Maccabees (books not specifically included in the canon of the Bible but being a valuable part of the Jewish tradition), relates the feast of Hanukkah celebrated for eight days at the turn of the months of Kislev and Tevet (generally in the first half of December). For eight consecutive days, after sunset, in every Jewish home in front of the door or window is lit an nine-branched candelabrum. With each day one more candle (or oil lamp) is lit up, and finally, on the eighth day the whole chanukkiah is illuminated. In addition to this tradition, accompanied by holiday blessings and songs, the ritual frame is modest. The ceremonial evening meals are diversified by food prepared in olive oil. In the tradition of Ashkenazi Jews these are mostly latkes – potato pancakes. Hanukkah is the only period in which gambling games are permitted. The most traditional one



Photo studio | Gombin, 1915-1925, photo from private collection

Eastern wall of Gombin synagogue
photo. W.Kieszkowski, from collections of Institute of Art. PAN

is a game of chance involving the use of a dreidel – a quadrilateral spinning dinghy that is manually set in motion. The burning chanukkiah is a reminder of the menorah lit in the Temple shortly after its recapture from the hands of the Greek invaders by insurgents led by Maccabean brothers. It was lit immediately, despite the fact that the stock of ritually pure olive found in the temple was enough only for one day. Since the preparation of a new oil lasted for eight days it had to be reckoned that the menorah would go out earlier which should not happen and would upset everyone. Meanwhile it was burning for eight full days, enough to prepare a new supply of oil. A Jewish miracle. But what miracle was that? All the miracles described in the Torah would not be enough for one average Sicilian saint. The books included later in the canon of the Hebrew Bible contain even less of such miraculous events. In the Book

of Esther, describing the history from the time of the Persian Empire, we are dealing with courtly intrigue rather than a miracle but the consequences could have been even more dangerous for the Jews. It was no longer only about the survival of Judaism in the sea of foreign aggressive civilization, as it was in case of events mentioned at the time of Hanukkah, but indeed about saving all the Jews from total extermination planned by the cruel Haman, a high official in the court of the Persian king of the kings Ahasuerus in Susa. The wisdom of Mordechai, the beauty and wisdom of his niece Esther who, thanks to these traits, became a beloved queen to Ahasuerus, the mystery that veiled the Jewish descent of Esther all allowed to control the fatal course of events and turn the fate against Haman, his family and supporters.

In memory of those events, on the 14th day of the month Adar, celebrated is a very

joyous holiday of Purim (the Hebrew word for “fate”). It has a rich ritual setting, and because its participants, including rabbis and elder people, dress up in fantastic costumes breaking many existing everyday bans, it had earned the name of the Jewish carnival. Men dress as women, women as men, acceptable is the abuse of wine – to a state in which intoxicated can no longer differentiate between sentences “blessed Mordechai” and “cursed Haman” spoken in Hebrew. Taking place in this scenery are prayers and reading of the Megilla (scroll of Esther which does not mention the Name of God even once and is therefore commonly kept at homes). When during the reading of Megilla the name of Haman is spoken, in the synagogue can be heard a loud noise – of rattles, chatterboxes, whistles, trumpets, the shouting and hitting the desks. The old tradition includes the organisation in the synagogue of Purim plays (purim

spiel) which today are often prepared by children. The most famous ritual dish associated with this holiday are “Haman’s ears”, cookies with a sweet filling placed in the envelopes. On this day, as opposed to Hanukkah, it is customary to bestow friends with gifts.

THE SURVIVORS

Winter holidays, although not part of the canon of holidays “from the Torah” are a continuation of the story of the rescue from the land of slavery – Egypt. Extremely tragic and sad chapter was added by the Germans in the years 1939-1945. With dismal determination they annihilated the language and culture of the Jews in Poland and subjected them to cruel extermination that tolerated no exceptions. A miracle did not happen in any of the Polish towns. Many centuries old great civilization was literally erased from the face of the earth. In Gombin even the dead were



Jewish youth | Gombin, 1920's, photo from private collection

removed from the cemetery and the broken tombstones, as in other places, were used to build roads. Perished a beautiful synagogue and all buildings, the evidence of the Jewish past of the city. Today in Gombin no one is celebrating, candles no longer burn on the Sabbath. There is no Gombin Jews. From the war remained a handful of documents. Among them, the most shocking – nominative list of several hundred children, waiting in Gombin ghetto for deportation to the extermination camp.

With two and a half thousand Jews living Gombin before the war, only more than two hundred people survived the Holocaust. Most survived in Russia, losing many relatives and friends. After the war, the Gombin reached one of the survivors, Jerzy Żołna. In the Polish Army officer’s uniform, he dared to walk into town for a few hours. He saw it in horrific condition – deserted,

Synagogue in Gombin | general view,
photo. W.Kieszkowski, from collections
of Institute of Art. PAN



with the rubble of the synagogue, an excavated graveyard. Throughout the city, there was not a single Jew. Soon he left Poland. In Germany, in a camp for Jewish refugees, he was joined by his cousin Michael Zielonka with his wife Sonia Gerschonowitch from Ukraine and their close friend from the Gombin times, Abraham Kerber. I heard the story of Abraham from the daughter of Michael and Sonia, Minna Packer-Zielonka, who, given her profession (film director), is a family Sofer of stories. Thus I got to know the rest of the relation of the rescue, one of the many stories that today, after years of silence, is told in Jewish homes around the world just as the Haggadah for Pesach. Abraham Kerber, or as his friends used to call him – Umczek, survived the war in Poland. Sentenced to death for two reasons, because he was Jew and because he was a dwarf (the Germans murdered people with genetic defects), after flee-

ing during deportation from the ghetto in Gombin was hiding in trash bin at the train station in Lodz. For three years. He survived. After a stay in Germany, in a camp for “DPs” (Displaced Persons) he moved to Israel where he worked as a photographer until his death in 1978. Minna has been repeating this story everyday for last several years while working on a feature film The Lilliput. Earlier, she completed a documentary Back to Gombin dedicated to the visit of survivors and their families to Gombin after decades of separation from their hometown. The film was for me the first sign of existence of my surviving relatives in New Jersey. My friend and Rabbi Michael Schudrich, whom I immediatly told about that, grew up with Minna in the same yard in the far suburbs of New York City. Jewish Miracles are modest, inconspicuous, but effectively paving the way for the next stories.

Permanent exhibition
at The State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw



JEWISH FESTIVITIES IN POLAND

CELEBRATION TIME IN THE CITY OF GOMBIN

Before the war, celebrations took place in thousands of Jewish families in countless cities, towns and villages of the old and new Rzeczpospolita. It is impossible to explain how colorful these celebrations were without evoking the memory of at least one of these places. The Mazovian town of Gąbin – Gombin in the Ashkenazi spelling – survived in the stories of the descendants of a destroyed civilization, who spread all over the world – from New Jersey in the United States of America to Tel Aviv in Israel. In Gombin houses all over the world, old holidays are celebrated; there are memories of a beautiful synagogue, beloved

relatives and friends, as well as renown personas from old Gombin: Rajzel Żychliński – a famous Yiddish poet, who died in 2001, and Abraham Abel Gombiner, a 17th century rabbi and a great authority in halakhic law. In present-day Gąbin, the only trace of the Jewish history of the city is a restored fragment of the cemetery, watched over by the Association of Gąbin Land Enthusiasts. The exhibition presents these rare few material testimonies, carefully stored mementos of a lost world – photos and films shared by the Gombin Jewish Historical and Genealogical Association. It is supplemented by precious

works of art and artifacts from the collection of the National Museum of Archaeology in Warsaw, the Historical Museum of Kraków, the Museum of The History of Polish Jews, private collections, as well as fragments of pre-war Yiddish feature films, provided by the National Film Archive in Warsaw. We would like to thank everyone for help and cooperation; we would also like to express our gratitude to representatives of DAF Import for providing ceramic lining, used in the construction of this exhibition's set free of charge.

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Szydłowiec Sukkah Restoration

**Agnieszka Wielocha z zespołem
Monument Service**



The following films are screened at the exhibition: Back to Gombin, dir. Minna Packer-Zielonka (provided by the Author); Sam Rafel Visits His Hometown of Gombin in 1937, dir. Sam Rafel, Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive collection (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), provided by the Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society; feature films from the collection of the National Film Archive in Warsaw: Dybbuk, Yiddle violin, Letter to mother.