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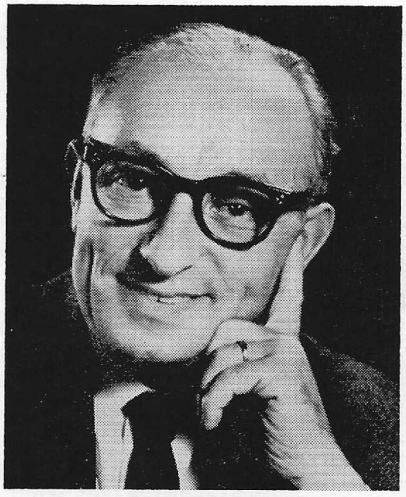
MY SHTETL GOMBIN

Reminiscences of a lost world

On April 17, 1942 the Jewish community of Gombin, my birthplace in Poland, was savagely wiped out by an act of Nazi brutality. The small number of survivors chose not to return to their hometown, where their ancestors had lived and worked for some five centuries, in an effort to forget the unbearable catastrophe in which their loved ones perished mercilessly. They preferred exile, and so the Shtetl Gombin that I knew is no more.

The Polish Magazine *Nasza Ojczyzna* (our Fatherland) reported in its September 1964 issue: "Gombin is smaller than before the war when it counted six thousand inhabitants. Now there are less than three and a half thousand. The Jews who made up almost half of the population of Gombin were murdered by the Hitlerites. Gone from the streets are the hassidik Jews with their yarmelkehs (skull caps) and from the fronts of the small stores the bearded tailors and shoemakers. In the small Gombin now there is almost no industry nor commerce."

It is with deep sadness that I write of my life in Jewish Gombin where I grew up and lived, except



for some interruptions for studies from 1907 to 1937. My painful awareness of its extinction may best be described by my paraphrasing the words of the Polish Poet Adam Mickiewicz as follows: Gombin, my dear shtetele, you were like health. How much I miss you only he knows who lost you.

The memory of Gombin, of its people and its religious, cultural and social institutions, lives in the minds of the few survivors who are scattered over the face of the earth. When we are gone, Gombin will cease to exist even in memory and this would be its second extinction.

To prevent this tragedy, this book is being published as a me-

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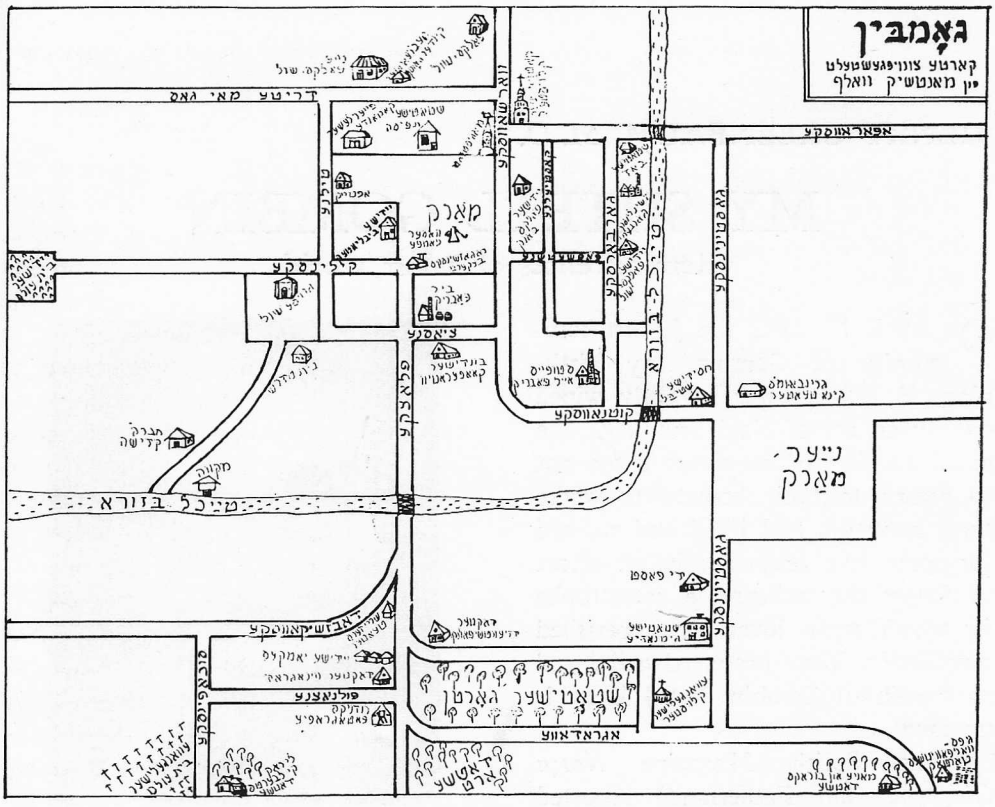

This map of Gombin was sent by Wolf Mantzyk (Israel)

morial to our town in hopes that in years to come it will be read from time to time by people who will tell their children that once upon a time there was a Shtetl Gombin and so keep the memory of this town alive after all, like an eternal flame.

And what kind of Shtetl was Gombin ?

To some it would probably seem to be a Shtetl like many others dispersed throughout Poland. But to me it was something very special. I grew up there and it was there that I had my roots and tasted life in all its variety for the first time. And it was also there that I derived my chief values, aspirations, and drives which have become my guidelines in life and have contributed to my achievements.

Regardless of how far away I was from Gombin and from the family I left behind and no matter what I was doing, I always had a feeling of nostalgia and a desire to visit home. So whether I was attending high school in Warsaw or Medical School in Paris, I always liked to return home for vacations. Now that my Shtetl is no more, my old longing to return there has left me.

THE WISH TO LEAVE THE SHTETL

Looking back to the early days, I can say it was fun to grow up there.

Yet paradoxically, as far back as I can remember, there was also the wish to grow up and leave Gombin and make my way to faraway cities or lands. Everybody in the Shtetl at one time or another dreamed of getting away from it, and those who could not hoped that at least their children would have a chance. It was therefore no coincidence that at the age of twelve I wrote a school composition to the effect that I would like to be an explorer of unknown lands like Christopher Columbus.

Nor was it accidental that shortly after World War I, two young boys of about fifteen, David Meilekh Przezinski (now Burns, living in New York) and Haim Luzer Ciuk, ran away from Gombin and got as far as Holland before they were apprehended and returned home. How I envied them their courage. The aspiration for traveling was in the very atmosphere of the Shtetl. Few were able to get away, but almost all of those who did emigrate thrived in other lands for it was at home that they acquired their stamina and courage.

GOMBIN WAS ISOLATED FROM THE WORLD

When I was growing up as a child, Gombin was pretty much walled off from the rest of the world. The nearest railroad station, Zychlin, about fifteen miles away, could only be reached by horse and buggy, and the nearest boat to the outside world was in Dobrzykow on the River Vistula, about five miles away over a stretch of sandy road easier to traverse on foot than by horse and buggy which often got stuck in the deep sand, causing impatient passengers to miss their boat.

THE MAGGID

The influx of people from the outside up to the beginning of World War I only amounted to a trickle. From time to time a *maggid* (preacher) would arrive in Gombin and spend a Sabbath in town, giving a sermon to the men foregathered in *besmedresh* (house of learning) on Saturday afternoon. On such occasions, the place was filled to overflowing. My father liked to take me along. Although I did not understand the maggid's teaching, I remember how enjoyed the melody of his words, but above all the atmosphere he created by his sermon. When he finished, the people clustered inside and outside in small groups and commented on his wisdom and learning.

Since my father was considered in the town to be a *lamdn* (Talmudic scholar) people would turn to him on such occasions to ask his opinion on many fine points of interpretation of the Torah. I was always surprised to hear him quoting from memory extensive Hebrew passages from Talmud in support of his reasoning, and of course that feat made me one of the proudest boys in all Gombin.

The effects of the maggid's teaching did not stop there. After my father came home, he would take down from the shelves of his large library heavy Sforim (Hebrew religious books) and study them, sometime far into the night. I imagine many other learned Jews acted in a like manner.

My family

Fierce was the devotion to learning of the Torah among a number of *balebatim* (burghers) in the Shtetl.

THE OYREKH

Among the people who came from the outside world to pay a visit to Gombin were the beggars. The shtetl had its own poor who on Fridays and holiday eve used to go from house to house to beg alms. But not infrequently transient beggars came to town and did the same thing. It was the custom for the balebatim to invite a beggar in as an *oyrekh* (guest) to the Sabbath and Holiday meals.

More often than not the oyrekhs turned out to be interesting characters and I liked very much when my father, after Friday evening prayers in *Shul* (synagogue) chose one of the beggars standing in the door as an oyrekh. That was when the mealtimes were gayer and livelier than ever. Once the initial bashfulness was past, the oyrekh often grew quite talkative and told exciting tales about his travels to various towns and cities, and frequently discussed religious, political and business matters with a sophistication and wisdom one would hardly expect to find in an oyrekh.

I remember after one of them left the house how my father and mother expressed astonisment, how amazed they were that a beggar should be so smart yet unable to achieve for himself a life of dignity. My parents' wonder stuck in my mind for a long time, and it was

not until many years later when I became a psychiatrist that I understood the paradox of being intelligent and capable and yet unsuccessful

Gombin was an isolated shtetl. But in its isolation it was a microcosm where the people experienced, as they do anywhere, a wide spectrum of emotions ranging from joy to intense sorrow.

It is fair to say that the Jewish emotional life in Gombin was fashioned by two forces — Jewish religious fervor and the ever-present hosility of the non-Jews.

YOM KIPPUR

The religious fervor manifested itself especially during the Sabbath and all holidays. Of all the holidays, *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement and Pardon) has left on me an unforgettable impression. Although Yom Kippur is the culmination of a period of the Days of Awe, which begin with *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year) when each person's fate for the year is inscribed in Heaven, and ends ten days later when the fate is signed, I do not recall this period as being grim and gloomy. Rather it was a time of magiclike prayers, of warmth and love in the family, of brotherhood among people outside the family, and of delicious meals which bore all the earmarks of feasts. I recollect that as a small boy I never worried about the fate of my parents, my sister, my brother or myself during Yom Kippur. For I believed strongly in the magic protective power of the ritual whirling about my head of a cockerel which was supposed to take over all my sins. During Yom Kippur Eve all the members of the family went through this ritual, father using a rooster, mother a hen and the children cockerels or pullets. Then I felt immensely reassured as to the fate of my whole family.

But most reassuring of all was my parents' love around this time. They loved their children all year long, but when the high holidays came, they showed more warm tenderness and affection than ever, as if they were trying with their love to wash away our sins.

After the sundown feast of *Erev Yom Kippur* (Yom Kippur Eve) came a most solemn moment which always moved me very deeply. Father dressed in a Kittl (white garment) over his holiday silk Kaftan, and mother dressed in a long black silk gown and a black shawl on her head. They kissed each other and shook hands, wishing each other, *"Beyt sich oys a good johr"!* (Pray yourself out a good year!). Than father would bless us children and kiss us. After that mother remained at home with the younger children and a thick Hebrew prayer book with Yiddish translation and legends and parables that she loved to read, while tears poured out of her eyes. By the time the evening was over, the pages were quite damp.

While the women prayed at home on Yom Kippur Eve, the men and older boys set out for the Shul, besmedresh or the *hassidik shtiblekh* (little shul). A blanket of quiet covered the town. The stores and shutters were closed and the people (with a sense of gravity and solemnity) went to the houses of worship to face their Creator. On the way when they met

they shook hands and wished each other, "May you pray yourself out a good year." Besides expressing good wishes, some people asked forgiveness of others for any offenses committed in the past year.

The Shul was filled as at no other holiday. The crowd of worshippers overflowed into the large vestibule. It felt as if the whole town were in the Shul. Every year a few non-Jews, usually members of the town's Polish intelligentsia, came to the vestibule to listen to *Kol Nidre,* a very sad and moving prayer, sung by the cantor and his choir in front of the Arc of Torahs at the *Miẓrakh* (Estern wall).

This ancient and poignant musical prayer set the tone and opened the Yom Kippur services of unremitting and intense prayers which were interrupted only for the night and then lasted until sundown the next day. The following morning the women and girls came and joined the prayers in the balcony of the Shul.

The chanting, the weeping, the swaying, the fasting, the blessing by the *Kohanim* (members of the tribe of priests) and the fumes from the hundreds of candles on brass chandeliers suspended from the high ceiling, created a climate of intense religious devotion which culminated with the blowing of the *Shofar* (ram's horn).

I have no words to describe the effect of the Shofar on me. The sound filled me with a hypnotic sense of awe and a conviction that God Almighty had descended into the Shul to bless us personally and protect each of us from evil. After the services, I felt elated and purified. Outside the Shul, mother and father met and wished each other a good year, and then exchanged this wish with everybody they met on the way home to a delicious dinner.

To me Yom Kippur meant being in communion with God and with

My brother Stan (1910-1942) and my sister-in-law Helen (Zayontz) (1917-1942)

people. It also meant loving and being loved. It inspired an exalted sense of the sublime which comes from the feeling of being purged of sin and evil. But above all, the religious intensity of Yom Kippur imparted spiritual strength and elevated the mood which was so indispensable for Jewish survival in the hostile environment of non-Jews.

THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

As far back as I can remember, I felt the hostility of non-Jews which ranged from condescending attitudes,

through subtle as well as overt unfriendliness, to various degrees of violence. This unremitting hostility was depressing to the spirit and highly exasperating. For instance, how can I describe my desolation when at the tender age of eight or nine I happened to meet in school a gentile boy with whom I had played the day before, done homework together in my house, and whom I had invited to dinner. There he stood with a group of other gentile boys, acting as if he had never laid eyes on me before, and together with the others hissed at me and called me dirty Jew.

Or how can I express my shame and humiliation when a Polish teacher, in order to illustrate the concept of race, called up in front of the class — a short, fat, homely Jewish boy — and compared him side by side with a tall, slender, good-looking gentile boy as two specimens of different races.

These and other painful experiences in Gombin were numerous, but of a relatively minor nature. However, from time to time, there were experiences which were overwhelming in character. One such episode shook me up so deeply that I have never forgotten it and even now when I think about it I am moved to tears.

MY FATHER IS NEARLY KILLED BY A COSSACK

It happened during Wold War I, at the end of 1914 or the beginning of the following year. Russian soldiers, coming or going to the front, were milling about in the streets of the Shtetl. A big tall cossack with a mop of hair sticking out from under his hat to one side of his forehead came into my parents' grocery store and ordered a large amount of groceries. After his order was packed in a burlap bag, he took it and walked out without paying. When my father called him back, he made an insulting remark and spat on the ground.

My father, in a rage, ran out into the street after him and grabbed his arm. They grappled with each other and when my father did not let go, the cossack pulled out his sword and threatened to thrust it into my father's chest. Meanwhile, soldiers with ugly, cruel and laughing faces gathered around as if it were a circus, urging the cossack to go ahead and kill the *Yevrey* (Jew).

My mother, the tears streaming from her eyes, begged the cossack not to harm my father, and pleaded with my father to let the cossack go. I watched this ghastly scene from the doorway of our store, dreadfully scared and horrified and crying *"Totteh! Totteh!"* (Father! Father!) For a moment the world stood still on the edge of disaster, the image frozen into my mind of the soldiers' fierce, pitiless faces, and my father deathly pale, his life in danger, and my mother in extreme agony before me.

Suddenly and miraculously, a Russian chaplain, tall with flowing hair and dressed in a long kaftan, appeared on the scene and angrily ordered the cossack to put away his sword and return the groceries to my father, and then he dispersed the

crowd. My joy and gratitude to that chaplain knew no bounds.

Mother and father returned to the store badly shaken. Of course she scolded him for risking his life and he defended himself, insisting that the cossack had no right to act as he did. As for me, I agreed with mother that life is sacred, but I was also immensely proud of my father and the courage he showed in making his stand.

Since then I have always believed in the sacredness of both life and human dignity and have longed for a world where no human being would have to risk his life to defend his dignity. Although scientific, technological and economic progress are necessary for the achievement of man's goals, the real barometer of progress toward a humane society is the preservation of human dignity.

THE LOCATION OF GOMBIN

To pinpoint Gombin geographically, it was a small town situated in the plains of central Poland, some sixty miles northwest of Warsaw, the capital, fifteen miles south of the ancient city of Plock, sixty miles northeast of Lodz, eighteen miles northeast of the railroad junction, Kutno, and fifteen miles southeast of the county seat, Gostynin. By the time I reached adolescence, the shtetl was connected with all these places by relatively good highways of commpressed pebbles.

When a traveler came into town from Kutno or Lodz, the highway ran through pastures, wheat, rye and potato fields. On the outskirts of town there were four huge windmills which manufactured flour from local farmers' grain. A similar landscape presented itself when you arrived from Warsaw, only instead of windmills there was at the entrance of town a flour mill, a tall red brick building with modern machinery. The road from Plock and Gostynin crossed miles of beautiful pine forest, and as you approached the town you could see from afar the tall steeple of the Protestant Church. At this entrance there was a mechanized lumber mill.

When I was a little boy I used to love to play in the fields, watching horses pull the plows and beautiful colts running along beside them, and cows grazing on the grass. But more than anything else. in the summertime I liked to walk through the tall rye and wheat with the stalks high above my head. It was thrilling to see the waves created by the breezes along the surface of the rye and wheat fields. The shimmering golden color of the ripe rye and wheat gave me the impression of a sea of gold.

Then as an adolescent I took great pleasure in strolling for hours at a time in the forest of tall thick pine trees, daydreaming about the wide world and my place in it. One of the people I frequently met in the woods was our poetess Reisele Zychlinski who like myself was fascinated and absorbed by the unusual loveliness of nature and the whispering orchestration of the trees..

In the center of this beautiful countryside nestled the shtetl, with its two markets and two dozen cobblestoned streets. On its periphery were dispersed farms with small houses, large stables, and huge barns with thatched roofs. In the middle of

the farmyard there was usually an open well.

The Old Market, the center of town, was a rectangular place with two manually operated water pumps, one in the center, the other about two hundred feet to the east. On the southeast corner stood the Catholic Church, a handsome red brick edifice with two towers. Across the street was the Town Hall, a plain stucco building which housed the administrative offices, the police and the town jail. Adjoining was the firehouse. All around stood two-story brick or stucco houses with store fronts. They replaced the wooden houses which had been burned down by a big fire at the turn of the century. The few wooden houses that survived the fire stood at two opposite corners of the market.

About four blocks to the west was the New Market where my parents and granparents lived. It was a huge, rectangular place, paved with cobblestones, a water pump in the center. At its west end was a huge wooden cross and all around were small farmhouses. In the summer at sunset, it was quite a picture to see the farmers with their horses and cattle returning from the nearby fields. Many a Jewish mother liked to bring her children to the farm to have them drink the fresh warm milk, supposed to have health-giving qualities.

The streets were narrow and lined on both sides with low one-story wooden houses, devoid of beauty or ornament or any modern comfort. There was no running water and until the end of World War I no electricity. Water was brought into the houses from the nearby wells and pumps, and light was furnished by kerosene lamps.

Poor working-class people lived in one room with a brick or tile stove for both cooking and heating in winter. The more affluent could afford a kitchen, a combination dining and living room and one or more bed rooms. In each room there was a high tile oven for heating.

About one block from the Old Market was the Jewish religious complex of the shul, besmedresh, and the *mikva* (public bath for ritual). The shul was a charming old wooden structure about three or four stories high with tall windows, a copper roof and two copper onion-shaped cupolas. The outside walls were quite weatherbeaten. Inside the walls were covered with natural wood boards with no ornamentation except around the Arc where the Torahs were kept. There at the Eastern Wall were beautifully carved wood decorations of an ancient design. In the center were carved tablets with the Ten Commandments inscribed in Hebrew. The pulpit, the elevated platform with its Arc and decorations, gave the Eastern Wall a most impressive quality.

In the middle of the shul was the *bimah*, an elevated platform where the Torah was read, the shofer blown, and speeches made. From the high ceiling dozens of brass chandeliers were hung. In the rear was a balcony where the women prayed. In front of the bimah were benches with pulpits for the balebatim (burghers), in the

rear the reserved place for the artisans and workers.

At the northern end of town there was a large park and the nearby Protestant Church with its beautiful high steeple. A narrow creek divided the town in half, and two wooden bridges connected both parts. In the spring the water of the creek often came up to the top of the bridges. In winter the water froze and boys and girls skated on the ice in their homemade wooden skates. In the summer the creek usually dried up.

Gombin could not be called a beautiful town. But the synagogue and the two churches towering over the narrow cobblestoned streets, and the two markets with their low small houses, all surrounded by magnificent natural beauty, imparted an aura of charm, the sort of thing that was captured so well by Chagall in his many paintings of small Russian towns.

THE PEOPLE OF GOMBIN

The Jews lived in the center of town, and by their industry and commerce served the other inhabitants who lived on the periphery. Most of the non-Jews were farmers. Some were carpenters, shoemakers, construction workers, blacksmiths, town employees and unskilled workers. Although the Jews constituted about half the population, no Jews were employed by the town hall or the post office.

Gombin was also the commercial and religious center for a peasant population of several thousand people, living within a radius of five to ten miles in an outer belt of villages. A few Jews lived in these villages, but the great majority were non-Jews. I guess about ninety percent of all the non-Jews of Gombin and the surroundings were Catholics and they were referred to as Polish, the rest being Protestants of German origin who were called Germans.

On Sundays and other Christian holidays, the non-Jews came to town in large numbers on foot or in country horsedrawn wagans to attend religious services in the two churches. They were dressed up in their holiday clothes. The men were usually attired in dark, poorly-tailored suits with high shiny boots and round caps with gleaming leather vizors. The women wore colorful pleated skirts and blouses, homespun kerchiefs on their hair. They would arrive in town to the tolling of the great church bells that could be heard for miles around. After the services they would mill about in the streets. I remember as a child feeling apprehensive on such occasions, because from time to time the Catholics would emerge from church displaying hostile feelings towards the Jews.

Other times when the farmers and the peasants used to come to town were the marketing days on Thursday of every week, and during the two semi-annual fairs held in the spring and fall. They came with wagons laden with grain, potatoes, fruits, vegetables, eggs, butter and fowl for sale. Horses, cattle and pigs were also on sale. The merchants, usually Jews (except when it came to purchasing pigs), met the peasants and bargained with them before a deal

was consummated. With money in their pockets, the peasants then went to the stores to purchase food, clothing, shoes and assorted articles for their houses and farms.

The stores were well stocked by Jewish merchants. Almost all the grocers, except two or three, were Jewish. Of seven bakeries, five were Jewish. The Jews were shoemakers, tailors, hatters, ropemakers, blacksmiths, barbers, roofers, metal stove and kettle makers. Haberdashery, dry goods, hardware, leather, book and stationery stores were owned by Jews. The seltzer and oil factories and one of two tanneries were run by Jews. The bicycle repair shop and watch repair shops were Jewish-owned. One out of two physicians and the *Feltsher* (medical practioner without university training) and the dentists were Jews.

The Jews organized passenger and truck transportation to nearby and distant towns and cities to which they exported grain, butter, eggs, and other farm produce, and imported goods needed by the local population. In a word, the Jews in Gombin were an intelligent, industrious and enterprising people in all avenues of endeavor.

A few Jews also lived in the country as farmers. My paternal grandparents, Abe and Hinda, lived in a village a few miles away when I was a child. But then two of my uncles emigrated to Great Britain shortly before the outbreak of World War I and one uncle was taken into the Rusian army, so they moved to Gombin. I especially remember the fun of visiting them in the country, running around in the field, riding on wagons stocked high with hay, and going horseback riding.

RELATIONS BETWEEN JEWS AND NON-JEWS

Social relations btween Jews and non-Jews were almost nil. The only contact btween them took place in the course of business and service transactions, and at such times human warmth sometimes did seep through. I remember my parents inviting customers from the countryside to come into the house and warm up with some hot tea and sandwiches during the bitter cold winter. Occasionally they came to my parents for advice on matters of family troubles. On such visits, deep family secrets were frequently bared, with tears in the eyes of the confider.

During my excursions in the countryside I used to meet peasants who knew me and my parents, and they were quite hospitable, inviting me into their huts and treating me to good peasant homemade dark bread, fresh milk, cheese and fruit.

As for intermarriages, they were most infrequent. In thirty years I recall only two such instances. Two Jewish women converted to Catholicism and their families suffered unbearable anguish equal to the pain caused by the death of a child. Indeed the members of the two families said *Kaddish* (the prayer of mourning for the death of a close relative) and all relations with the converts were severed.

Individually, some Poles were able to show friendliness toward Jews. But in a group they were often unrecogniz-

ably changed because of the tendency to display, overtly or covertly, anti-Semitic attitudes. From the earliest years of my life I often suffered from humiliation and even physical mistreatment brought about by anti-Semitism.

As in all other shtetlekh, anti-Semitism was endemic in Gombin, a constant threat to the physical and spiritual survival of the Jews. To keep afloat in the treacherous sea of hostility, the Jews needed a cultural compass. During the long dark years of political reaction and hopelessness in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century, such a compass was supplied by the conviction that the Jews were God's chosen people, that the Messiah would come and free them from oppression.

RELIGIOUS FERVOR IN GOMBIN

Until the end of World War I, life in Gombin had a twofold rhythm of *yontev* (holiday) and the struggle for *parnosseh* (livelihood). The latter took place during the week and was referred to as *vokhendik* (weekly) life, in contrast to the religious life on the Sabbath and Holidays. For the religious Jews, the vokhendik activities were subordinated to the Sabbath and holidays which seemed to serve the very purpose of their lives. For it was during these days that they were in communion with God. Activities in Gombin were spoken of as taking place before or after sabbath, since Sabbath was a day of complete rest, of praying, learning, and good eating.

From my earliest childhood on I preferred the spirit of the Sabbath to the spirit of the week. During the week, Jew competed with Jew for parnosseh, and this competition frequently led to quarrels and animosity which always filled my heart with sadness. But the spirit of Sabbath and holidays personified friendliness and serenity among Jews.

The devotion to studying the Torah was intense, and the respect for the lamdn *Talmud Khochem* (wise student) was great. When I was a child, my father spent perhaps more time in besmedresh, along with other students of the Talmud than in his business. According to custom, young married men, students of the Torah, continued to study, while their wives attended to the matter of parnosseh.

The shtetl had a well-organized system of *kheyders* (religious schools) extending from the elementary level of learning the Hebrew alphabet and reading the prayers and understanding the Bible in Yiddish, to the level of gemoreh kheyder devoted to the study of the Talmud. I began kheyder at the age of three and spent my whole day until dusk studying. By the time I reached the age of eight, the first public school had been opened in Gombin. The young men and women teachers and the modern classes attracted me and I made up my mind not to go to the kheyder. I shall never forget my father's reaction. One evening, thinking I was asleep, he complained bitterly to my mother that I would grow up to be an *amorets* (ignorant boor) and bring shame on the family. My mother tried to assure him that I would grow up to be a good Jew. I re-

member how I brooded over my father's prediction, for I certainly did not want to become an "amorets," and how grateful I was to my mother for having faith in me. Finally, my parents resolved the conflict by allowing me to attend public school in the morning and then having me attend kheyder in the afternoon.

The most religious Jews of all were the *hassidim* (members of a religious movement founded by Israel Baalshem Tov in the seventeenth century). There were two sects in Gombin, followers of the Gerer Rabbi and Alexander Rabbi. Each sect had its own shul where besides the usual praying they danced and sang in great ecstasy. Most of the Jews in the shtetl wore long kaftans and beards. Besides wearing long beards, the hassidim distinguished themselves by their earlocks and their silk Sabbath kaftans.

My maternal grandfather, Yoyne Ryster, a tall, slender man with a long beard and earlocks, was a hassid, and he inspired in me an intense desire to emulate him. As I watched him during his silent prayers, eyes closed, swaying to and fro and twisting his body rhythmically to right and left, while exclaiming ecstatically from time to time the Hebrew word, *Adenoy Elohim Ekhod!* (God of the Universe) *Shmay Isroel!* (Harken onto Israel), I was convinced that my grandfather was in direct communication with God and it filled my childish heart with a sense of deep admiration and reverence for him.

The other person who inspired great reverence in me was Rov (Rabbi) Zlotnik, head of the congregation. He was a distinguished-looking man with a beautiful pale face and a long beard, tall and thin in stature. By his appearance and comportment he conveyed a sense of holiness and dignity. I remember him as a fascinating orator, and during his *droshes* (sermons) from the pulpit I had the distinct impression of Moses talking from the mountain to to his people. A few years after World War I he left Gombin to become a national leader of the *Mizrakhi* (religious Zionist party).

My sister-in-law, Helen
with her and my brother's son, Izia
(November 1941 – April 1942)

During this period of profound religiosity, the Jewish community was united, and such occassions as a marriage or funeral brought almost all the people together for celebration and dancing in the streets, or for the expression of sadness and grief. I remember always being moved to tears during a funeral, as I watched the men sighing deeply and the women weeping and lamenting loudly.

This was also a period of medieval superstition. It was alleged that at the turn of the century an epide-

mic had broken out in Gombin and many people died. To stem the scourge, so the story went, two town idiots were married off on the cemetery, and many people believed in the efficacy of this act, the epidemic having supposedly abated after that.

SECULARIZATION OF JEWISH LIFE

The period of religiosity in Gombin and all other shtetlekh coincided with a time of general political apathy. The Jews could only turn to their historical past and their religious traditions for hope, identity and spiritual survival. *Leshono Habo Byerushalaim* (the coming year in Jerusalem) often repeated in Jewish prayers, expressed the hope of returning to past Jewish glory. But in the midst of this political apathy two political movements were born in the year 1897 — Zionism and Bund, which at the end of World War I contributed greatly to the secularization of Jewish life and the awakening of the Jews to political action and modern Jewish culture.

At the First Zionist Congress in Bazle, Switzerland, in 1897, under the leadership of Theodor Herzl, it was decided that "the aim of Zionism is to create for the Jewish people a publicly secured and legally assured home in "Palestine." Soon afterward, the *Keren Kayemet* (Jewish National Fund) was organized to purchase land in Palestine and further the mass colonization of Jews. At about the same time, Ahad-Ha-Am, the philosopher of cultural Zionism, maintained that Palestine had to be restored as a Hebrew spiritual center for the harassed Jewish people.

The Bund, a Jewish Socialist Party, founded in Russia also in 1897, opposed Zionism and Hebrew culture from its inception. It considered Zionism a dangerous utopian philosophy because it diverted the Jewish masses in the countries where they lived from struggling together with the non-Jewish people for Socialism which alone could create genuine conditions for Jewish emancipation and a Jewish cultural autonomy. The Bund exerted great influence in promoting cultural works in the Yiddish language among the Jewish workers and lower middle class.

These two ideologies had the effect of completely revolutionizing Jewish life in Gombin. Many young people broke away from the religious restrictions and traditions of education, dress and daily habits. *Yeshiva bokherim* (talmud students) left the besmedresh, shaved off their beards and earlocks, gave up their traditional clothing for western type dress and took to reading secular books. Many joined the Bund or Zionist movement and became intensely involved in questions of social, political and national purpose. There were other smaller groups, such as *Poale Zion* (Labor Zionism) and Jewish communists. But the two main parties were the Bund and the Zionist party. They opened libraries with thousands of books in Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish. People read avidly and debated with vigor and deep feeling, especially around the time of elections.

The Bundists and Zionists opened up kindergartens in Yiddish and Hebrew respectively. Each party offered youth organizations, sports clubs, theater groups and glee clubs. Speakers came from Warsaw and discussed political, social and literary themes. Many Jewish women became emancipated from the subjugated role assigned them by religious tradition. A new four-year gymnasium (corresponding to the American junior high school) was opened, and many Jewish boys and girls enrolled in it. Among them was our present president of the N. Y. Gombin organization, Jack Zicklin. Some of them continued their secondary education in other cities, such as Gostynin, Plock, and Warsaw.

For the first time in the history of Gombin, a number of young people studied at universities. The late Abram Finkelstein studied at the University of Frankfurt School of Medicine in Germany, Natan Gyps, the late Lea Frenkel, the late Israel Wolfowicz, and I studied at the University of Paris Medical School in France. Joseph Tadelis finished Medical School in Warsaw. My late brother Stan studied at the University of Warsaw Law School. The studies abroad were mainly due to the practice of *Numberus Closus*, a restriction of the number of Jews to be admitted to universities and professions.

Dr. Joseph Tadelis
fighter during the uprising in Warsaw Ghetto
murdered by the Gestapo in 1942

The religious Jews felt threatened by the extreme changes and innovations in the traditional life, and made every effort to oppose and combat the new wave. However, the process of change made deep inroads into many families. My own family underwent a radical change, starting with my father. He became an *apicoyres* (freethinker), changed to western clothes and trimmed his beard. My mother took off her wig and let her beautiful black hair grow, and dressed modishly.

It was about this time that my parents built the first movie and legitimate theater in the shtetl. When movies were shown for the first time on Friday evening, hassidic Jews threw picket lines around it to protest the profanation of the Sabbath and threatened my parents with *kheyrem* (excommunication). My father replaced his studies of the talmud with reading secular books. Now, during his long walks with me, he talked to me not about the Bible and the prophets but about Darwinism and Spinoza. I was pleased with the changes at home.

I myself joined the Maccabee sports organization where I played

soccer, and the *Hashomer Hatzair* (Young Watchman) in hopes of getting to Palestine to a *Kibbutz* (an agricultural settlement). But then in my mid-adolescenece, Socialism caught my fancy and I joined the Bundist Youth Organization, remaining a member until I left Poland in 1927 to study in France.

During this period I was a militant Yiddishist, Yiddish being the everyday language of the Jewish people, the Bund was fighting for a Jewish cultural autonomy and for the official Polish government's recognition and support of Yiddish schools, theaters, libraries and other cultural institutions. I remember when I applied for a passport, I had to answer a question about my maternal language. Although all my education had been in the Polish language, I answered Yiddish to register my solidarity with the Yiddish-speaking people. The passport was refused me and I had to go to great lengths and insist on my constitutional rights to obtain it.

Now, in retrospect, I ask myself how I stand in relation to those ideals of my youth. I believed then that Zionism was Utopian in nature. However, the tragic aftermath of Nazism and the vicissitudes of postwar international developments have contributed to the fruition of the Zionist half-century struggle for the establishment of the Jewish National State of Israel. About two and a half million battered Jews have found a home there and a purpose in life. My sympathy is with them.

As for my Bundist dream of a social order of equality and social justice for all, without oppression and discrimination, it is rather an incentive to pursue this ideal without respite: "He only earns his freedom

My Cousin, Reisele (1933 – 1942)
daughter of
Shyiyah and Sarah Greenbaum,
who perished in 1942

and existence," wrote Goethe, "who daily conquers them anew."

The last time I visited Gombin was in the Summer of 1937. There for the first time I met the late Sam Rafel who had not only come to Gombin to see his family but also to make a financial contribution from the New York Gombiner Society to the mutual savings and loan association. The shtetl was pulsating with life. The cultural, political and religious activities were carried on with vigor, as if there were no end in sight. Everywhere I was greeted with warmth and affection as if I were a son and a brother to all. The young men, women and children looked healthy and beautiful with a zest for life.

As a young physician, I was in-

vited to give a lecture on "Planned Parenthood" which attracted a throng of people. They filled the theater to capacity, with many having to stand outside and listen through the open doors. I remember the intelligent faces and the knowledge-thirsty eyes looking at me as I was speaking. Little did my audience and I know then that four and a half years later, on April 17, 1942, all my compatriots who came to listen to "Planned Parenthood" would be faced with planned destruction by Nazis.

As these reminiscences come to a close, I must add that they called forth in me the most poignant emotions. But the constant feeling that I experienced throughout my writing was one of ardent love and affection for the memory of all my landsmen who lost their lives. Especially do I cherish the memory of my beloved father Yankev Leib, 59, my beloved mother, Hena (Ryster) 57, my beloved brother Stan, 32, his wife, my beloved sister-in-law Helen (Zayontz) 25, their son, my beloved nephew Izia, seven months old, and all my lost beloved uncles, aunts and cousins.

Sport Organization "MACABEE" — Gombin.