

Digging for Roots

Scrape some soil from the ground and rub it across the worn inscription on the tombstone and, like one of those children's magic boards, the name suddenly becomes legible and there it is: one of those family names which we have only ever encountered in the family tree. But now August Gumpert, Malermeister (master painter), born in Ohlau in 1821, buried here in 1890, speaks to us from a nineteenth century tombstone which has been hidden behind bushes (and the cemetery compost heap) determined to prove that it can survive the attempted obliteration by a Catholic cemetery. Yes – the local priest has brought us to the Catholic cemetery in Prusice¹. All we asked him to do was to show us where the Jewish cemetery was and here we are in an area covered in Christian graves, each one lovingly tended, bedecked with brightly coloured plastic flowers, remembering the deceased who were buried here from 1942 onwards. But where we **really** are is the Prausnitz Jewish cemetery, where – we can only guess – the grand and not-so-grand burial places of local Jews for at least a century and a half stood proudly and were visited and honoured by their children and grandchildren, certain in the knowledge that their final resting places would be close to those who had gone before; and that Prausnitz would always bear witness to its longstanding and loyal Jewish community. It was certainly the place where at least three generations of Gumpertz – relatives on Grandfather Max's side – had lived and died. That tangible memorial had vanished without trace.

Prusice is only one of thousands of small towns and villages throughout Poland which was home to a Jewish community. Home, that is, until the advent of the Nazis and their determination to exterminate the Jews and extinguish all traces of Jewish existence throughout Europe. All traces...cemeteries, synagogues, even records as mundane as a community's annual accounts or minutes of its synagogue management committee meetings. In the Prusice cemetery, the Church cooperated, probably not even stopping to consider the feelings of those whose nearest and dearest were buried here and glad to have a space for the burial of its own.

On the other hand, we were grateful for the existence of those few visible tombstones. In Seelow, just west of the border between Germany and Poland, the Jewish cemetery has been truly obliterated and is now a car park. Over the border the litany of non-existence seems endless: in Pniewy², the synagogue is a cinema and all that remains of the cemetery is a grassy hill, a picnic site for the local townspeople. The memorial hall at the foot of the hill, recognisable only because of its typical pillars, is now home to a Polish family. In Lwówek³ the locals, probably unknowingly, dance on the Jewish graves: a dance hall has been built on the site of the Jewish cemetery.

But I should really start at the beginning.

For many years, my cousin David (the family's genealogist) and I have wanted to search out our family's roots in Silesia and Posen, both part of Germany until the aftermath of World War II when they were ceded to Poland. Pre-1989 Communist Poland always seemed singularly uninviting and, certainly, obtaining information and access to archives and other information sources would have been almost impossible. We shelved the idea even though it would have enabled David's mother and my father (their parents being our common grandparents) to accompany us or at least be on hand to help us identify what names we might find. Sadly, when the trip finally became reality, both had died. But I had the very strong feeling that they were with us anyway.

The spade-work was done by David. With his genealogy software and computer expertise, but more to the point his energy, patience and refusal to take 'no' for an answer, he mapped out our route through Poland. We had to identify the Polish nomenclature of the place names familiar to us through our parents: Pinne, Lissa, Prausnitz, Neustadt, Rawitsch, Münsterberg, Breslau. Sometimes the new -Polish - name bears no relation to the old: Münsterberg (where our common grandfather was born) turns out to Ziebice and isn't even pronounced phonetically. Help also came from the Jewish Genealogy internet group who flooded us with all sorts of tips gleaned from personal experiences of tracing their Jewish past in Poland as well as names of guides, archivists and others engaged in research of Poland's Jewish past.

And so at the end of May 2000, armed with a map, a car hired in Berlin and a large dose of non-expectation, we set off east, stopping first in Seelow, twelve miles west of the German-Polish border in what had been the German Democratic Republic. Seelow had been home to forebears of grandmother Mirjam's family: Louis Reissner and his children Willi, Ruth and Joachim. A rather dismal town, its main purpose seemed to be to point travellers towards the Polish border. Acting on what proved to be excellent advice, we looked for the local church and then the priest. The reception was friendly and helpful and we followed Pfarrer Roland Kühne to what had been the local Jewish cemetery. Without him, we would have searched in vain: what we saw was a car park and an adjoining overgrown area of grass and bushes behind railings and with no access. Certainly there was no reference to the past (Jewish) purpose of this wilderness. Moving from the dead to the living, we went to visit an elderly bedridden lady who remembered our family; they had been next-door neighbours. Our visit awakened in her reminiscences of the pre-war years and she shared some of her memories with us.

Moving on, we crossed the Polish border at Kostrzyn⁴. The landscape barely changes. Western Poland – formerly Germany – is very agricultural; the villages and small towns, so many of which had Jewish communities, give the lie to the stereotype of Jews as urban dwellers (so that's the origin of my inbuilt dislike of city life!).

Our next stop was Pniewy, a small rural town and home to at least four generations of Lewins (our forefathers on grandmother Mirjam's side). In Pniewy, we found at least four churches but no knowledgeable priests. The second line of attack, we decided, was to find elderly people who might remember what existed before a war which played havoc with European history and geography. Applying admittedly Western preconceptions, we headed for the ubiquitous town square (*rynek*) and were rewarded with the sight of a bench playing host to three old men busy gossiping and watching the world go by. Now, Polish is an almost inaccessible language – unless of course it is your mother tongue – and we were certainly unversed in it. Between us we had English, French, German and Hebrew (the latter did come into its own when it came to deciphering tombstone inscriptions). But not Polish. After French, English was the least useful of our languages but we always offered it first so as not to be mistaken for Germans. But German got us the furthest, certainly when conversing with the older generation.

One of our three bench occupants remembered the Jewish cemetery and offered to accompany us in the car as it was a couple of miles outside the town. But first he showed us the synagogue. Or rather the cinema; for that is now its role in life. That it had been the synagogue was beyond doubt: the telltale stone tablets still nestle in the apex of the building. But who in Pniewy would notice them, let alone understand their significance? About two miles out of the town, we drove up a track and stopped, on the instruction of our Polish guide, at the foot of a grassy hill. This, he explained, had been the Jewish cemetery. Now it served as a local picnic site. As we came down the hill on the other side (with not a gravestone in sight on any part of the hill), there stood a house clearly occupied by a local family. But not a typical house. The pillars gave away its secret: it had been the memorial hall attached to the cemetery. The washing was hanging out to dry, the dog barked and the children's toys lay abandoned. Now it is simply number 20 Jakubowo.

In Lwówek a few miles away, visitors to the dance hall unknowingly dance away their Saturday nights on the Jewish burial ground in a 1950s style communal building. How can they know it had once been consecrated ground? No memorial plaque or other clue of an earlier Jewish presence graced the site. Nine generations of Reissners, again our relations through our

grandmother, had lived and, in some cases, died in this undistinguished little town. Amongst their number were a rabbi, a trader, a grain merchant, a banker. They reflected the history of their times: Michael Marcus Moses Reissner, a grain merchant and carter, became a naturalised Prussian citizen and subsequently a sub-representative on the council of the Dukedom of Posen at various times between 1834 and 1844. He died here in 1861. Simon Marcus Reissner, born in 1831 was a veteran of the Prussian wars against Denmark and Austria and died of cholera whilst nursing a comrade in the field. Born in 1865, Leopold Reissner's business was 'aryanised' in 1938 and he was deported to Lodz ghetto (where he died) in October 1941.

Leszno⁵ is a somewhat larger town and seems more confident in its interface with the outside world. Until the Second World War, it had a proportionately large Jewish population as evidenced by the large (and rather ugly) synagogue built in 1626, two decades after Jews first obtained permission to settle in the town. Until restoration work began a few years ago, the building had served as a store for building and other materials. Now the municipal coffers are providing the means to reinstate its former main Jewish place of worship although there is no Jewish community to use it. The main evidence of Leszno's Jewish past now rests in the small Jewish museum where a large number of tombstones – all with Hebrew or Yiddish inscriptions – stand or lie, waiting to be deciphered and then recorded on computer by Dariusz, a young Pole whose commitment cannot be doubted as he works his way through several piles of index cards representing the Jews of Lissa's past. Here we had wanted to find traces of grandfather Max's many forebears dating back to the mid-eighteenth century, not least Jakob Koebner, born here in 1744 and father of the founder of the Baptist movement in Odense (Denmark). Great-grandmother Johanna was born here as was her father. Many of their cousins were born and buried here.

In Rawicz⁶ the story darkens even more. We looked in vain for any sign of the small town's Jewish history knowing that at least one branch of our family had been here in the nineteenth century. We found only an absence: no synagogue, no cemetery, no trace. The *Judenberg* was without a single stone: in contrast to the Red Army cemetery with its regimented rows of numbered graves. The approaching thunderstorm echoed my feelings of alienation.

A provincial capital, Wroclaw⁷(pronounced 'Vrotzsuave') has a confident and almost cosmopolitan feel about it which radiates from the magnificent *rynek* and town hall. As an important city in pre-war Silesia with its university and heavy industry, it boasted two synagogues and Jewish cemeteries until the Nazis decided otherwise. The site of the 'new' synagogue (built in 1872) is now marked by a memorial stone commemorating the arson on Kristallnacht,

the night of 9/10 November 1938 when Jewish Germany burned. The one hundred practising Jews of present-day Wroclaw, mainly of Polish descent, use the earlier 'Stork' synagogue now undergoing restoration. A plaque in the courtyard testifies to the deportation to extermination camps of Breslau's Jews between 1941 and 1944. Of the two cemeteries, the 'Slesznej' cemetery (named after the street in which stands), inaugurated by Abraham Geiger⁸ in 1856, has survived relatively intact through one of fate's quirks: in 1942, the cemetery was let to a German tree nurseryman and remained so tenanted, and thus untouched, until 1947. It is the largest Jewish cemetery east of the Oder-Neisse line and the dominant inscription language is German. Luminaries such as Lasalle⁹ and Graetz¹⁰ are buried here and their headstones stand in close proximity to hundreds of others from the magnificent to the modest. In this company we found members of our family: Heinrich Köbner, the university bookseller and his wife Laura; Hugo Köbner, a doctor, and his wife Jenny; Clara Köbner, who died at age 16, and others new to our family tree. Suddenly, we have a large family who – in death – breathe life into our search for lost roots. One family has returned to affix a plaque to the grave of their grandparents on which they commemorate their parents, victims of the Holocaust: reaching out for the continuity for which so many of us long.

After the visit to the now Catholic cemetery in Prusice, which gives us August Gumpert and, with him, a real sense of excitement that there are still discoveries to be made in this land of Jewish annihilation, we drive a short distance south to Ziebice¹¹, birthplace of grandfather Max. It's six in the evening and the women of Ziebice are streaming into church; the men are sitting in the town square, walking their dogs or out of sight. The town can hardly have changed in its composition and structure. Here, I try to imagine our grandfather as a young boy, playing in the streets until, when only 5 years old, he lost his father Louis and the widowed Johanna moved west. As before, we search out the local priest to point us in the direction of Jewish traces. This time, the priest, when he emerges from the hour-long service, is unhelpful in his haste to get away. And the language barrier seems impenetrable. One of his helpers somehow communicates to us that there is indeed a Jewish cemetery outside the town and as the early evening turns sunless, we climb the hill and pass through the stone arch leading to the Münsterberg cemetery, packed close with headstones, some standing, some fallen, all bearing Hebrew inscriptions. Might we find the grave of great-grandfather Louis here? Disappointingly, we don't but there are many Münsterberg families buried and recorded here over the previous two centuries. To our astonishment, the most recent interment dates from 1972. I ask myself how many of the inhabitants of Ziebice are even aware of this treasure-trove of Jewish history.

We have two more appointments with our grandparents' forefathers: in Cracow and Warsaw. But not before visiting that shrine of unimaginable horror and inhumanity: Auschwitz. In fact, Auschwitz – more specifically Birkenau, because that is where the Nazis perfected and practised their industrial killing process – is also important in my family tree. It is here that my grandfather Siegfried Klein, my maternal grandfather, was murdered on arrival from Lodz ghetto. Siegfried was a rabbi in Düsseldorf in the heart of Germany, a man whose family had, for generations, lived in Germany, who had been at the front as a German army chaplain during the Great War, who was a founder member of the RjF¹². Throughout the late 1930s, he resisted the urgings of his community to leave Germany with his family - out of a sense of duty to his community. Thankfully his two children, Hanna (my mother) and her brother Julius, escaped thanks to the *Kindertransport*. Siegfried and his wife Lilli were deported to Lodz ghetto in 1941, Lilli dying there not long after, unable to survive the appalling conditions. I like to imagine that my grandfather's calling gave him some inner strength in his darkest days. But confronted with the massive Birkenau site, the infamous railway "ramp" and the piles of bricks which were once crematoria for over a million of Europe's Jews, the rows and rows of wooden barracks and the eerie air of calm, I cannot imagine how even the strongest and most devout of men might have thought and felt as he went to his fate. In common with millions whose death was willed and dictated by others, my grandfather has no grave, marked or otherwise; at best, he shares a memorial stone to all whose ashes were unceremoniously tipped at various points in this hell. And I cherish the moment when I can, for the first time, pay my respects to him in the time-honoured tradition of placing a stone on one of the memorial graves.

Cracow seems to be experiencing a Jewish revival, almost as if to compensate for the obliteration elsewhere in Poland. Maybe this is partially due to the more tangible and commercial explanation of Spielbergia: for this is where *Schindler's List* was shot. In any event, the *Kasimierz*, formerly the Jewish quarter until the Nazis forced the Jews into a ghetto on the other side of the river, is bubbling with Jewish-style restaurants, renovated synagogues converted to Jewish museums, hotels with Jewish or biblical names and even a (non-operational) *mikvah*. The oldest synagogue – the beautifully simple Rama – still functions as a house of worship for the 150-strong Cracow Jewish community and has an old and well-kept cemetery. ("Rama" was the name of Rabbi Moses Ben Israel Isserles¹³, who lived in the mid-sixteenth century and is our great uncle eleven times removed.) Amongst the several ancient graves is that of our great grandfather eleven times removed, the seventeenth century Tossafist rabbi Lippmann Heller, imprisoned for his views and subsequently released but barred from preaching in Cracow. His grave is

covered in candles and other tributes which makes me ever so slightly proud.

Warsaw holds no cemetery visits for us but we are drawn there by the existence of the Jewish Historical Institute and its archive. It acts as the central archive for the erstwhile Jewish communities in pre-war Poland. Not all archives were saved from the Nazis' desire to eliminate all signs of Jewish existence but what has been saved is piled up in this Aladdin's cave, uncatalogued through lack of financial resources. Amongst the many records of nineteenth and early twentieth Jewish community life are some of the Breslau community's records: death registers, notifications of marriages, bequests, minutes and financial records, none of them complete but still the green shoots of information. Here again, this time from the musty and sometimes crumbling pages of registers, the Koebner/Köbner family grows and spreads through cholera epidemics which claim the lives of babies and young children, brothers and sisters, the old, frail and sick, to give us back a history we have taken so long to reclaim. It is a deeply moving moment.

The final lap of my journey – as David and I part company, he to explore his (paternal) West Prussian family history, I to return to Berlin to visit Daniel Libeskind's unforgettable Berlin Jewish Museum – sees me on the night train from Warsaw to Berlin, crossing the Polish-German border and submitting to quasi-military passport control procedures at five in the morning when most civilised travellers would be allowed to sleep. Berlin, at eight in the morning in bright sunshine, is a garish place when compared with the world from which I have just emerged. East Berlin is trying to catch up with its counterpart in the west: pavement cafés, expensive menus, Austin Reed going to work and, above all, a huge rebuilding programme. The Berlin Jewish Museum is in the Lindenstrasse – in what was East Berlin – and jumps out at you in an as yet underdeveloped cityscape. It has been so extensively written about that I can only recommend a reading of the mass of written material and, in any event, a visit in person. A wonderful history and explanation can be found in James E. Young's *At Memory's Edge*¹⁴. Suffice to say that the building itself – as yet devoid of exhibits – is a moving experience and a memorial in its own right. There are those who say that it should remain empty and communicate its power without the help of the clutter of pre- and postwar artefacts of Jewish life in Germany. Maybe that is what the architect himself secretly intended!

In a perverse way, it is a relief to be back in Germany: undoubtedly because I can communicate with those around me in a way I couldn't in Poland. But with the surfeit of experiences and impressions flooding in during the previous six days, I am no longer receptive to the thrusting new Berlin with

its new *Reichstag* and its myriad cultural offerings. I just want to go home and digest a piece of history. How to assimilate two centuries of family history without drowning in it is a process in which I am now engaged. Writing about it is, of course, part of the process.

Marion Koebner

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¹ formerly Prausnitz.

² formerly Pinne.

³ formerly Neustadt bei Pinne.

⁴ formerly Küstrin.

⁵ formerly Lissa.

⁶ formerly Rawitsch.

⁷ formerly Breslau.

⁸ Abraham Geiger (1810 – 1874) emerged as the leading theoretician and spokesman of the Reform movement in Germany. He was at one time Chief Rabbi of Breslau and founding editor of the *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift für jüdische Theologie*.

⁹ Ferdinand Lassalle (1825 – 1864) was instrumental in the establishment of the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein* (General German Labour Union) in 1863. He devoted himself to organising a political party of the workers in Germany.

¹⁰ Heinrich Graetz (1817 – 1891), German-Jewish historian and biblical scholar, wrote a definitive history (11 volumes) of the Jews from a Jewish viewpoint.

¹¹ formerly Münsterberg.

¹² *Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten*, an association founded in 1919 by patriotic German war veterans.

¹³ Polish Rabbi, Posek, Halachik codifier. He left Krakow to study in Lublin under Shalom Shachna, whose daughter he married. In her memory he built a synagogue which still stands. He also studied philosophy, astronomy and history. Until WW2 his grave was a site for widespread pilgrimage. He is best remembered for his *Mappah* - glosses on Caro's *Shulchan Aruch*, which made it universally authoritative by adding Ashkenazi usages to Sephardi practice of codified law.

¹⁴ James E. Young: *At Memory's Edge- After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*. Yale University Press, 2000. pp152-183.