

Remembering, Returning, Forgiving

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On July 23 I traveled to Zolochiv in Ukraine, the town I left as a small boy. I was returning for the first time in 62 years, to remember.

Remember whom? The people who lived there and are forever gone from us, the Jews of Zolochiv. They were there for centuries, as their gravestones once testified. Except... there are no gravestones left. A group of us, survivors and their children, went to dedicate a memorial in a bare, fenced-in field.

Before World War II the town beneath the Jagellonian castle on a hill had a population of roughly 12,000, about equally divided between Ukrainians, Jews and the Poles, who called it Złoczów . Living together, living apart. The Jewish community had many strands — here lived a great Hasidic rabbi, Yekhiel Mekhl, the Maggid of Złoczów. From it to New York came the great Yiddish poet, Moshe Leib Halpern, and the photographer Weegee.

The Soviets occupied Zolochiv 1939-41, and then began the darkest of times for the Jews, three years of Nazi rule. In the first week of the war, SS Einsatzgruppe C shot 2000 Jews at the castle, the same place where the Soviet NKVD had killed many Ukrainians days before. By war's end, there were no more than 200 Jews left. I was one of perhaps five children who survived. Among those who didn't was my father, three of four grandparents, and many aunts, uncles and cousins.

We survived. How? By chance. By political awareness. Through the unimaginably courageous acts of good people. Millions around us were passive; hundreds of thousands collaborated with the Nazis, participating actively in atrocities. But thousands of Ukrainians helped Jews to survive. Among those, whose actions redeem — yes, I do believe so — one's faith in humanity were Metropolitan Andrei Sheptyts'kyi, of the Greek Catholic Church in the region, and his brother Klement. And the good teacher who hid us in the unlit attic and then a storeroom of his village schoolhouse for 15 months, Mikola Dyuk.

We left, for the United States, Israel, for Brazil, Australia, even Germany. Who cared about our house, still standing? (I saw it, recognized in a Proustian moment the colored stones inlaid in the stair landing) Who worried about bank accounts, about insurance policies? There was a life to

live. Later, I wanted to take my mother there, but she said, no, only bad memories are there. No Jews remain in Zolochiv.

But we remembered — I remembered, that somewhere there, oh, I don't know where, lies my father. That there was a Jewish cemetery in Zolochiv. That in those terrible July 1941 days at the Castle my grandfather Wolf Rosen was killed, and my uncle Abraham crawled out from among the dead with a bullet in his wrist.

At the dedication of our memorial at the cemetery, I go over to talk to the old women standing by, their gold teeth gleaming. I ask them if they knew the Cukierna Mackocka; a sweet shop is what kids will recall. Later these women surround me, ask, "Did you know Dr. Berg who lived in the center? Did you know the Gottlieb family?" They remember. But I am not sure what they are remembering.

I think back to that village school house; I watch my son Hillel and my sister Elinor climb into the attic. My son has a son, five years old, exactly the age I was when we went into that attic.

The storeroom where we were hidden, where we dug a space under the floorboards to sit in in the worst times, is now a classroom with Mendelejev's periodic table on the wall. A chemistry classroom.

Can one forgive what happened, the pain, the killing? Forgiveness comes from the soul, it is individual. I can only speak for myself. I can forgive. But only if I remember, and, importantly, if I see that the people in whose midst the killing took place, remember. If they do not, if their children are not told what happened, and taught that it must not happen again, to anyone, then my soul hardens.

There are wounds from that time, physical and mental. They can be healed, in part, by righteous actions today. Recognizing the sacred nature and historical significance to the Jewish community of places of spirit and memory — the Jewish cemetery, the Castle courtyard where so many were killed, the obliterated synagogues -- is an act of universal charity.

We are grateful for the memorials we have been allowed to build by today's Zolochivers. And while there is no end of death still left to commemorate, there was Jewish life there, what life! This too, needs to be shown. Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews, we need to remember, together. To put the horrors of the past truly behind us.