

FELSHTIN SEVENTY YEARS LATER

By Menachem ben Shmuel Verbukh (Melvyn R. Werbach)

In 1937, a pioneering book was published in New York by the Jews who survived the pogrom of 1919 in Felshtin, a small town in Podolia Gubernia, Ukraine. Simply titled “Felshtin,” the book was the repository for the outstanding memories of the town’s Jewish inhabitants. It is a verbal and visual museum of the Felshtin of the past, never to change as time moves on.

My father, born Shmuel Verbukh, was one of the authors. As a young child, I remember looking at the book and wondering if Felshtin really existed, or if it was just a fantasy land – much like Peter Pan’s Neverland. My first cousin knew of a visitor in the early 1950s who said there was “nothing left” of Jewish Felshtin. Even the name of the town had been changed to Gvardeskoye.

Recently I decided to see the town for myself, not only to see what physical structures have survived, but simply to make contact with the shtetl where my father’s family lived and died before their historic move to North America. I began planning my visit in the spring of 2006. Within a couple of months, I received a report from Steven Shaer who had just been there. With text, videos and photos, he showed or discussed what he had found, and what he was unable to find. Essentially, he reported that all that was left was a ruined Jewish cemetery just outside of town. I wondered whether, with so little to see, the trip was worth it – but finally decided to go ahead.

In May of 2007, my wife and I, along with our guide, drove from our hotel in Ternipol to Gvardeskoye. We arrived in town on a warm spring day. There were flowers everywhere, including on the lilac trees that we found to be so common in southern Poland and Ukraine. I already knew that the local countryside is beautiful; what I didn’t expect was that Gvardeskoye, which was built on a hillside, is especially picturesque.

As you enter the town, you can’t help but be drawn first to the St. Voitsiekh (Wojecick) Roman Catholic Church which towers over all other structures. Although the doors were locked, there was a town history mounted in the front of the church building which I will summarize:

The beginning of the town is connected to the Gerburt family. Of Czech origin, they came to Podolia from Slansk in 2nd half of the 16th century. The direct founder was the manager/accountant for the town of Holich in Galicia.

The cathedral was built in 1594 by Mykola Gerburt. However, in 1615, tartars destroyed both the town and the church. The current building was started in 1754 by Mme. Maryna Grabyanchyna of the Kalynovski family, and the church was consecrated in 1791. She built Polish schools as well as a hospital that was

destroyed in 1864. The parish consisted of 30 villages. There were 8500 Roman Catholics, mainly of Polish descent.

The years preceding World War II were very difficult, with severe repression of priests. In 1933, the church was closed by the Soviets, and it was used for mechanical and transport training. In 1936, it became a movie theater and club. It functioned as a church again during Nazi occupation, although parts of it were used as storage. It was closed in 1950, but in 1978, the parish became active again. In 1980, the building was returned to the parish.

After walking around the church grounds, we decided to walk down Gvardeskoye's main street, looking for remaining signs of the former Jewish residents. Our guide searched for older villagers who, he hoped, would share their knowledge of Jewish Felshtin with us - and came upon Franz Joseph Zhukovski.

When Franz Joseph learned that I am an American Jew whose father spent the first 15 years of his life in Felshtin, he was clearly happy to meet us and said, "I wish my father were here to talk to you." His father had owned a blacksmith shop. During the 1919 pogrom, according to Franz Joseph, his father had rescued 40 Jewish neighbors by hiding them in his large basement.

Franz Joseph was born in Felshtin in 1926. He considers himself Ukrainian, although his roots are Polish. His family lived in the Jewish area of Felshtin, and they interrelated daily with the Jewish inhabitants with who they were very friendly.

He invited us to look around his house, one of nicer homes in Gvardeskoye. While most homes in the area still have no running water, his did because he had dug his own well and installed an automatic pump. He noted that, in part, he could afford such a nice house because of the pension he receives due to a World War II war injury.

During the Soviet era, his family of 8 was forcibly moved to Kazakhstan because his father had a tin roof on his house and therefore the Soviets considered him to be a rich capitalist. His father was thrown into prison for 2 years and became very sick. Eventually they escaped and returned home.

In the 1930s, life in Felshtin was very difficult. There was a famine from 1933-1934, and people starved. His father bought a bottle of vodka and gave everyone in the family a spoonful. They survived because they owned a cow (named Solomon!) that produced 3 bottles of milk daily.

A Jew named Punio was a friend of his. Naftula, another Jew, lived in a house on the main street which no longer exists; instead a statue of Lenin was erected there. Naftula had a pub in the basement for selling beer.

Franz Joseph also recounted to us the story of Meyrene, a Jewish thief. Somehow, Meyrene had acquired many keys on a large key ring which could open the locks on most

of the buildings in town. A nice man, he used to unlock the candy store after hours, and give treats to the kids. He also robbed graves. One day he stole an expensive Polish saber from a grave, and then disappeared from town before anyone could catch him.

During World War II, there were initially about 300 Jews in town; very few were evacuated in the first few months. The Jews and Ukrainians cooperated with one another at that time. Franz Joseph left to fight for the Soviets; he still keeps a sports jacket pinned with lots of medals hanging on his bedroom wardrobe.

He offered to show us the places he remembered where members of the Jewish community lived, worked and prayed. We walked a couple of blocks back to the main street west of the church, the heart of the former Jewish community. Most of the Jewish houses on the street are now gone. On the south side of the street west of the church, the larger Jewish shops - with living quarters in the rear – used to be located. (One of these must have been my grandparents' home as they owned the dry goods store and lived behind it.)

Across the street, and about a block west of the church, the Jewish secular institutions were housed. No new buildings have been constructed on the entire side of the street for several blocks, so that most of that side of the street is now densely covered by trees – perhaps, I wanted to believe, as a sign of respect for the former Jewish residents.

There were, however, three monuments. As we proceeded west on that side of the street, there is the statue of Lenin (where Naftula's house once stood) surrounded by beautiful chestnut trees in full bloom. Nearby there are two war memorials, one to honor the specific villagers killed in combat in World War II, and the other, erected in 1994, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Felshtin by the Soviet army in 1944. However, there was no monument to the 600 Jews murdered in the pogrom of February, 1919, nor was there a monument to the entire remaining population of Jews murdered by the German army following their occupation of the town in July of 1941.

According to Franz Joseph, Felshtin used to have three schools: Jewish, Ukrainian, and Polish. Also, Jews and Ukrainians each had their own town halls. The Jewish town hall used to be on the corner of the main street where there now are only trees. Close to it was a Jewish social club and dance hall. In fact, the section of the south side of main street that is now occupied by the three monuments once was part of the area where the Jewish institutions were located.

He showed us a blue house that had been occupied by a female Jewish tavern keeper named Palatnyk. He also showed us a 2-story building near-by that, he said, was always a Jewish house and noted that the original roof was made of black tin.

As they did in so many other towns, when the German army occupied Felshtin in 1941, they initially herded the Jews into a ghetto. Franz Joseph showed us where the ghetto was located. Again, there was no marker to commemorate the site.

He showed us a blue and white building, and noted that, on this spot, there was a Jewish-owned liquor store. The shop of a Jewish hatmaker was nearby, and a barbershop. He remembers a mentally ill Jew named Pena who collected matchboxes. A Jewish egg seller lived in another house - he sold his eggs in Proscurov.

There were “32 to 33” repressions under Stalin; many residents were arrested. The Landa family lived in a house that was taken over by the KGB.

Franz Joseph then excused himself for a few minutes and returned to his home, while we went into a small store and bought some ice cream. (In contrast to the days when the area was filled with Jewish shopkeepers, this store – and a building across the street that looked like a home but apparently was some sort of store – appeared to be the only stores in town.)

We were shocked to find fresh loaves of challah in the bread section. Our guide bought a loaf and offered us some of it – it was as good a challah as any we have ever tasted. I asked him what the locals call this bread. He replied, “the same name you know – challah.”

It may be a small thing, but the challah, a fresh creation, gave me a sense of connection to my forebearers. At least, in this small way, they live on in Felshtin. I could not help but recite the “motzi” to myself as I ate it.

When Franz Joseph returned, he was sweating from the heat. We offered to buy him something to drink. He thanked us but refused and went back again to his house for a few minutes, returning with a carton of ice cream to restock the store. He insisted that each of us accept an ice cream bar from him. We felt we needed to do so – even though we had just finished our own ice creams. The rest of the box he brought into the store to restock their supply.

I then asked him about the synagogue. He said it was gone. He remembered, however, where it stood and took us across to the South side of the main street (the side where the church was located), and behind the area where the larger Jewish shops with living quarters in the rear used to be. He led us down a little hill along a dirt road that ended in a large vacant area. Once, he said, there were many Jewish houses placed close together in this area. He then pointed to an electric relay station; this, he said, was where the synagogue was located (1).

We asked Franz Joseph about the Jewish cemeteries. He said that there used to be 3 of them. We took a short drive with him in our car and he showed us from a distance the sites of the first and the second. Neither has any remaining tombstones, but there has been no development on either site.

Then we drove with him to the remains of the final Jewish cemetery. It is located in a pleasant, fairly large, undeveloped area by a lake, but there is no monument to mark it. The last Jewish burial was in 1935. The Nazis removed most of the visible tombstones.

Several are still standing, however. Moreover, our guide is convinced that there are more tombstones beneath the grass, causing tufts of grass to rise up in mounds. (I probed one area where there was a rise in the land with a small trowel that I had brought from home; 4 inches down, however, there was nothing.)

Franz Joseph asked us if it was true that 1) Jews ran to funerals and 2) Jews were buried sitting up. We explained that both rumors were entirely false. (Our guide stated that this was an anti-semitic legend told to make the point that the Jews planned to rise first at the time of the Second Coming of Christ.)

Franz Joseph then took us to a small mound, the site of a 3-story wooden tower that the Cossacks used to watch for invading Tartars in the 16th-17th centuries. He remembers the tower being intact when he was young. In 2005, a monument was erected there to commemorate the site as a station point for surveying the Struve Geodetic Arc between 1816 and 1855 (2).

After spending some time wandering throughout the cemetery, my wife and I decided that we would like to see this sole surviving evidence of the Jews of Felshtin commemorated with a memorial marker, so we asked Franz Joseph where we could find the town's mayor. We drove with him back to the town center and parked there. He took us to a building across the street from the church, the place where the town hall is now located. Before entering, we thanked him for his assistance and said good-bye. I told him that I recognized that the last century was a very difficult one for both of our peoples, and that it was my wish that this new century would be one of healing and prosperity.

We found the mayor's office on the second floor. Her name is Tetiana Viktorivna Natreba (Phone # 624-135 work; 624-145 home). Her secretary told us that, unfortunately, the mayor was suffering from back pain and therefore had gone to be seen in the nearby hospital. When we explained that we were only in town briefly, she made a phone call and reported that the mayor was back at her home and would be glad to meet with us. She got in our car and directed us to the mayor's home. When we arrived, her secretary went to her front door and brought the mayor back with her to our car.

She sat in the front seat and I told her about my wish to see a monument erected at the front of the Jewish cemetery to honor the Jews of Felshtin. She replied that she could not see any problem with authorizing such a monument, but she could not do so without first discussing it with the city council, something that she promised to do. I asked her about the size of the current population. She replied that there are now 3674 people living in Gvardeskoje; 2174 live in three villages, and the rest live in the town proper.

I thanked the mayor for her assistance and we parted. Then we decided to seek the oldest villager we could find, in the hope of finding someone who may remember Jews before the 1919 program when my family left. After some asking, we were directed to the home of a woman born in 1915. As her family said it was too hot for us to go indoors to interview her, her son-in-law brought out some wooden chairs for us to sit in while our guide interviewed her. She remembered the Jewish names of Rubel and of Schwartz.

However, her memory seemed confused. We were disappointed, but decided not to ask her anything further.

Our visit with her family was not wasted, however, I asked her son-in-law about the mound outside the town that, according to the Felshtin yizkor book, covered the bodies of people – some say wandering Jews - who died from the Black Plague over 700 years ago (3).

This time we were in luck! Not only did he know of the burial mound but, seven years earlier, the town council had asked him to level the mound with his tractor. However, several old people told him about its history, so he left it alone. He joined us in our car for a short ride into the fields of the collective farms to see it. The “long, broken, rubbed out, aged stones” that the Felshtin book said were “protruding here and there” were gone; however, in contrast to the land around it, even today the land above the mound lies fallow.

When we returned to the tractor driver’s home, our guide suggested that, in order to thank him, I give him a little money to buy some liquor. I offered him the cash – but he refused to take it.

Leaving Gvardeskoye – leaving my father’s Felshtin – I tried to put together all that I had seen and experienced. Yes, Jewish Felshtin was gone, but something was left. The last Jewish cemetery, though desecrated, was still there, as were several houses where Jews had lived.

Perhaps more importantly, however, Felshtin was still alive in the fresh-baked challah, and in the poignant memories of the Ukrainian villagers who welcomed us as representatives of landsmen that most of them never got to know. If the villagers still remember the burial mound of victims of the Black Plague, you can be sure they will continue to remember their lost Jewish neighbors.

Footnotes

1. According to the Felshtin maps in the yizkor book, the old synagogue was on the opposite side of the street – but he did not know of this site and we could not locate it. However, the Felshtin maps in the yizkor book do indicate a large, two-story building in this location. I suspect the building initially served the Jewish community in some other manner. Perhaps, for example, it housed the Jewish school. Later, after the old stone synagogue was destroyed, this building probably replaced it as the Jewish house of worship.

2. The Struve Arc is a chain of survey triangulations stretching from Hammerfest in Norway to the Black Sea, through ten countries and over 2,820 km. These are points of a survey, carried out between 1816 and 1855 by the astronomer Friedrich Georg Wilhelm

Struve, which represented the first accurate measuring of a long segment of a meridian. This helped establish the exact size and shape of our planet and marked an important step in the development of earth sciences and topographic mapping.

3. From the Felshtin yizkor book:

All the people of Felshtin knew that on the fields of Felshtin, about three "versts" from town, where one travels on the vast plains of Felshtin through Parchevski's fulvarik (estate or farm), there was a pointed hill which was obviously not a natural hill but a man made one (i.e., a tell). Protruding here and there on this hill there were long, broken, rubbed out, aged stones, similar to tombstones. The landowners and farmers did not allow anyone to go on this hill with shovels and pick axes because they claimed this would be a desecration of holy grounds.

They claimed that this was a mass grave of wandering Jews who died during the Black Plague which rampaged through Europe in the thirteenth century. They also claimed that this knowledge has been handed down from generation to generation, from father to son. This was also told to them by the old squire Zilnetski. Also, the Count Maslovski, Zilnetski's father in-law, whose family owned Felshtin for hundreds of years had it written in his books that this hill was a mass grave of those who perished in the Black Plague 700 years ago.

Even the Christians revered this land as holy ground, forbidding anyone to desecrate it in any way. They believed that if one desecrated a mass grave, the wheat would not grow and a great hunger would descend on the world.

Excerpt from Chapter 38: How old is the Jewish settlement in Felshtin? by Shmuel Landoy. New York, The Felshtin Society, 1937 - Translated from Yiddish by Sidney Shaievitz.

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