

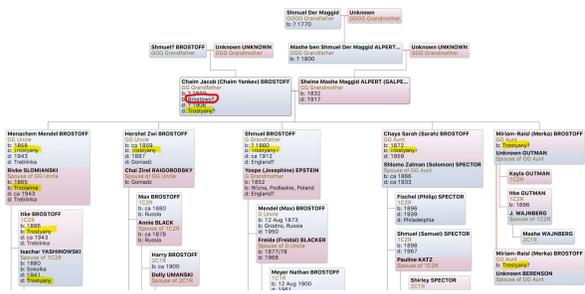
Trzcianne. Trestiny. Trostany. Poland?

These are place names I heard as a child from my bevy of great aunts and *mishpocha* (extended family). It conjured up images of a once idyllic Eden, invaded by Nazis, and later Soviets, that was on the other side of the world and someplace that could never be visited again.

Most of my ancestors fled before World War I, those who tarried until World War II were murdered by the Germans.

For as long as I can remember, Poland conjured morbid fascination for me. A forbidden place with mysterious people. The non-Jewish Poles I met, and Americans of Polish descent seemed like nice, normal, people to me. So, there was a disconnect.

My cousins had compiled a family tree leading back to the mid-18th century and a written collection of family stories. My great-great-great grandfather moved to Brzostowo from parts unknown and taken the family name Brostoff from the place name. The family moved to Trzcianne in the early 19th century presumably because the “border changed.” I interpret this to mean governance switched from Russian to Prussian. I’d also heard of a few harrowing escape stories about my grandfather (who alas died before I was born) and one of his cousins. My grandfather tried to start a labor union in the family business. Soon after the police found out, but before he could be jailed, his parents dressed him up as a woman (some iterations of the story say Catholic nun), and he was shipped out of Poland and eventually made his way to England and then America.



Excerpt from my family tree showing the “earliest known” Brostoff, my great-great grandfather, Chaim-Yakov in Brzostowo, and his children and some grandchildren born in Trzcianne. My ancestry follows the middle set of boxes.

Poland was always on the “back burner” of my imagination. I followed the Solidarity movement and wondered about its broader implications and historical impetus and prospects for the future. I read about the collapse of the Soviet Union and the “independence” of Poland. But still, I was convinced it was a dangerous place to visit and that I would be not be welcome. Some cousins had visited shortly after independence from the Soviet Union and had bad experiences.

When I heard about the proposed opening of the POLIN Museum of the history of Polish Jews, I thought there was a glimmer of opportunity to visit – not only the museum, but also the ancestral shtetl. The museum opening was a great success, though not without a bit of controversy, and I began to read and hear about experiences of people like me visiting.

Together with my wife (who also has Polish-Jewish ancestry), I planned a trip to Poland. We stepped off the plane in Warsaw, and were both very nervous (closer to scared s**tless). We were even more apprehensive when we encountered the khaki-uniformed immigration officers who in our minds were hybrids of our wild imagination of both Nazi and Soviet soldiers. They quickly scanned and then

stamped our passports and unceremoniously motioned for us to move on. Our fear began to melt away during our ride to the Warsaw Marriott, the taxi driver was professional and gracious; the welcome at the hotel was exceptionally warm. We spent a couple days in Warsaw and marveled that it was a clean, orderly, and interesting city on par with other European capitals.

The next step was the “big city” used as a geographic reference to the shtetl – Białystok. My father said that “Trestiny” was about 25 miles away from Białystok.

The train ride to Białystok was quite an adventure. The hotel porter not only carried all of our luggage to the train station, but insisted on waiting to make sure we got in the right car and the right seat. The train left precisely on time and was immaculately clean, far better than anything I’d experienced in the U.S. or elsewhere in Europe. We were given free beverages, a nice meal, and snacks. Things were great for the first 30 minutes or so as we passed through the city and the suburbs into the forest. My wife and I looked at each other with the same apprehension– the forests looked like those straight out of the movies depicting German soldiers killing Jews (and presumably non-Jewish Poles as well) and burying them in mass graves.

The Białystok train station was more or less what we expected, historical construction, picturesque and not very efficient – we did have to carry our luggage up and then down a series of steep staircases.

We checked into the highest rated hotel in Białystok, Hotel Cristal, at a bargain rate. Our room was a bit basic, but cozy, comfortable, and whimsically decorated. We were warmly welcomed at the hotel and had a spectacularly delicious dinner that would be a challenge to duplicate at a reasonable price where we live in California. The buffet breakfast had more choices on offer than any we have seen anywhere in the world.

We had arranged for a guide to take us not only to Trzcianne but also Brzostowo. Our guide (Daniel Paczkowski), who we highly recommend, picked us up in a modern car and discussed plans for the next two days.

First, we headed to Brzostowo on a cold rainy day. My excitement grew as we approached. There was one directional sign off a local road. The main street (?) providing access to a few houses and farms



seemed to be unpaved. We drove around for a few minutes taking what seemed like a complete tour. We encountered a farmer anxious to share the town history with foreign tourists. He was very surprised to find people whose family name originated from the name of the town. He recounted the village history, explaining that it was so badly destroyed on the front of the Russian and German armies during WWII that it wasn’t reoccupied until the 1950’s. I dutifully recorded

the conversation and had it translated to make sure our guide was faithfully translating. As the farmer was more than a little drunk, but still exceptionally friendly, most of what he said was babble.

The landscape was lovely – it was adjacent to the Biebrza River and largely wetland. The area was set up for agro-tourism and birdwatching in and adjacent to Biebrzański Park Narodowy (national park).

We then drove to Trzcianne. After some back and forth we arrived at the unmarked area of the



Likely “main entrance” to cemetery off the main road.

cemetery. There was absolutely no sign of what it had been. Just north of the suspected site, we found a monument/graveyard for Soviet Soldiers. After flagging down some cars and bicyclists, we were informed we were in the right place. We spent a couple of hours traipsing through the thick undergrowth and mud and did find Hebrew script on a few “boulders.” Our guide ruined what appeared to be a pair of dress shoes, and my wife ruined a pair of Gucci boots. I had warned

them both that we would be slogging through rain and mud, but I was really the only one prepared with waterproof boots and a Gortex™ parka. I photographed the few eroded inscriptions on the few crude matzevot we found. I was “hooked” and knew I would return.

We spent a bit more time in Trzcianne trying to find the location of a three-story brick house my great-great grandfather had commissioned about 1870. Although we had a general location, “between the Catholic Church and the windmill on a hill,” according to family lore, there were no other details. This was especially challenging since the town was destroyed, with the exception of the church and one other building during WWII by the German army. Our guide asked passersby, inquired in the local market, and started knocking on doors in possible locations. Though we weren’t successful, we did indeed find a likely photograph and location the next year.



Typical of the headstones and state of headstones remaining. Note the remnant of the bird illustration.

We also did a day trip to Białowieża Park. As a biologist, this was a great treat, but although our guide and my wife were very good sports, they were cold, wet, and miserable. We saw the last remnants of near-pristine European forest, native bison, wolves, and active slime molds. For anyone interested in nature, and not too far away, this is a fascinating side trip.

We returned to Berkeley and I immediately started figuring out how to restore the cemetery.

I started reading everything I could and made contact with the local philanthropic community here in the San Francisco Bay area, who were major funders of Jewish agencies in Poland. I planned to go back the next autumn (to coincide with my wife’s vacation time), and contacted the Chief Rabbi of Poland, the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODŻ), the Matzevah Foundation, a

local guide/scholar – Dr. Tomek Wisniewski, and a few others. I had read of Tomek’s work, including his books and films. I had even started to learn a few words of Polish.

We made arrangements for our second trip and impatiently counted the days before we could return to our now beloved Poland. We encountered the same khaki-clad border control agents who now seemed like overworked bureaucrats and who grudgingly welcomed us back to Poland.

The friends we made at the hotels, both Warsaw and Bialystok, remembered us and greeted us with big hugs. We met with Monika Krawczyk, then CEO of FODŹ, and Rabbi Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland, in Warsaw to learn their roles in the process and to get advice. This time we made arrangements for Tomek Wisniewski to serve as our consultant and cultural ambassador. It was a privilege to tour with him because of the work he has done over the years writing and making films about former Jewish life in Poland and his work in restoring and documenting Jewish cemeteries.

Tomek had planned a full day for us. Not only did we visit the Trzcianne cemetery, but also Jewish cemeteries in nearby Goniądz and Knyszyn. He had also arranged for us to meet with the Trzcianne town historian, Mietek Kirejczyk, and the mayor’s office.

The town historian invited us into his home to share his knowledge, photographs of pre-WWII Trzcianne, an update on a book he was writing, and tea and homemade raspberry liquor. He shared a photograph of what was likely my great-grandfather’s three-story brick house and a school photograph with a distant Brostoff relative. He accompanied us to the cemetery. With his sharp eyes and historical



Tomek Wisniewski and the town historian examining a headstone. Note the nature of the underbrush inside the cemetery.



Photograph of what was likely my great-grandfather's three-story brick house between the church (visible against the skyline) and "windmill on the hill." It was one of three brick buildings in Trzcianne. Photograph generously provided to me by Mietek Kirejczyk, the town historian.

perspective, he was able to find a few more headstones than we had found the year before. He showed us around town and showed us the site of the former synagogue and other points of interest.

We then went to the mayor’s office. Although the mayor was out, the deputy mayor and several members of his staff greeted us like long-lost relatives. We were graciously welcomed with freshly brewed cappuccinos, cake, and candy. They were very happy to hear that descendants were planning to restore the cemetery. One of the members identified her grandfather as someone who

had helped save Jews during WWII. Another member took us to a memorial just outside Trzcianne, in Zubole, to commemorate the site of a mass-murder and possibly a mass grave of Jews. This monument

was unknown, at the time, to Tomek and to FODŹ. So this was an important bit of information for our quest. Tomek invited us to his home in Bialystok that evening and we started planning the restoration and restoration ceremony in detail.

I spent another few months planning the restoration and a third trip to Poland. I raised enough funding for a stone memorial to be installed at the cemetery, but not much else (as a retired federal government bureaucrat I had developed a detailed and ambitious plan but ran somewhat short of funding...). I also started studying Polish in earnest.

Third time's the charm? Maybe. I attended the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies Conference in Warsaw in August of 2018. I met most of the "experts" in the field and a small cadre of descendants like myself in the process of trying to get their own ancestral cemeteries restored. Everyone very generously shared their experiences and advice. I got new direction and revised my strategy for my own project. My Polish language study served me well and I was able to order food and buy souvenirs entirely in Polish. For someone who had desperately struggled with language classes in school, I was very proud of myself. Alas, I couldn't line up a guide to take me to Trzcianne during the time I was in Poland. I knew that the monument I had commissioned had been installed and was anxious to see it; fortunately some other Trzcianne descendants on an extended trip there and a few nearby places shared a photograph with me.

A bit later that year, I decided I needed to meet with the officials in Trzcianne, not only the mayor's office, but also officials at the church and local school. I wanted to hedge my bets, so I arranged for FODŹ to take me to the mayor's office and Tomek Wisniewski to take me to the local school and meet with the church. The visit with FODŹ to the mayor's office was successful. Monika and the deputy mayor explained their respective roles and policies. The deputy mayor explained that the location of the monument was in or very close to the path of a proposed road widening and bike path and we discussed options including a designated parking place for the cemetery.



Memorial placed about June 2018 at the cemetery "entrance." Note the headstone placed on the support structure; it's origin is unknown, possibly it was unearthed or moved during installation of the monument.

Tomek prepared strategically. He had been in contact with Dorota Budzinska, a school teacher from Dabrowa Białostocka. She and her students had a major role in conceiving the restoration of the local



Dorota Budzinska in the Dabrowa Białostocka Jewish cemetery. Note the monument she and her team commissioned. Also note the "manicured" look of the cemetery with cleared underbrush but tall trees remaining.

Jewish cemetery and collaborating with the descendant community. She had also prepared a curriculum for her high school students on Jewish studies and trained students as "tour guides" for the cemetery. We thought that if she accompanied us to the Trzcianne School, she could share what she did. Although the director of the school (Barbara Brzostowska, whose family name likely comes from the same root as mine – not that dissimilar to Brostoff) was out, some school officials and the history teacher seemed amenable toward their students participating and possibly receiving some ideas for curriculum about Jewish studies. Further, Dorota personally

knew the "junior" priest from the local church who was also welcoming to our efforts. All seemed well when we left, and I was excited that my trip was a success. Alas, a few days later I received news from Tomek that the director of the school and the senior priest of the church were against any sort of collaboration or even cooperation.

So much for year three. There would still be more years...

Early the fourth year, I learned about a leadership change in FODŹ. The CEO, a career real estate attorney (and a "living treasure" in my mind) was replaced with a career international diplomat, Piotr Puchta, (also a "living treasure" I would soon learn). I quickly established a dialog and requested that the new CEO meet with the mayor and also propose a date for a "rededication ceremony" for the cemetery. The mayor assured us that anything we did would be met with the utmost respect and dignity and that he would get back to us about the date. I made tentative arrangements for the ceremony later that year, notifying descendants, but cautioning them to hold off buying airline tickets. I wish I had heeded my own recommendation. Months went by without an indication of progress, and I had to cancel the ceremony. Shortly after that, I was told that the mayor's acceptance of the date had been misplaced.

Anyway, I had tickets and rather than try to deal with getting a refund on non-refundable tickets, thought I would have another trip to Poland and meet the new CEO. We scheduled a meeting with the mayor. Alas, when we arrived, the mayor was out but we met with some town officials who seemed to be interested and cooperative. After a quick trip to the cemetery, we concluded that we should do a formal survey of the cemetery boundaries and either erect a fence or put in corner markers to discourage encroachment. We also wanted to clear the underbrush to do a detailed survey of the surviving headstones. While they were amenable to this, they explained that such work could only be done during a limited time of the year to avoid disturbing nesting birds. This was a great opportunity to bond with these officials because this was precisely the thing I had spent much of my career working on: designing and administering "environmental work windows" to protect wildlife while still allowing

needed activities to go on. My work, which focused largely on river and harbor dredging and mainly on fish, seemed to appeal to them because they realized they were dealing with someone with experience in environmental concerns.

We left elated with the thought that, although we were delayed a bit from my initial plan, we could make progress. A day or so later reality struck. The mayor phoned the CEO of FODŹ to relate that all work must stop because ownership of the cemetery had not been transferred to the Jewish community and was still in the hands of the municipality. FODŹ said that the transfer must be made by the Restitution Committee and was a very slow process. Everything has come to a halt. I stopped studying Polish (except to harass telemarketers or confound robocalls).

Many of the neighboring shtetls have made great progress recently. Goniądz, for example, has made great strides. For my own project in Trzcianne, I will wait patiently. I regard it as a “deferred success,” we installed a memorial and met with the town officials. I am confident that progress, if only sporadic, will resume later this year or next. At the very least, they know the Jews were there, are part of a shared cultural heritage, and ready to participate in the future of that heritage.

In the meantime, I’ve used my time to write a “Guidebook” (available on this site) for others on the same journey and to prepare a panel to be presented in August at the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies conference. I will also try to organize, in concert with the many other dedicated descendants endeavoring to restore cemeteries, a descendants’ group to lobby governments, NGO’s, and philanthropic organizations for policies and funding to accelerate the restoration of the larger group of neglected cemeteries.

I’ve included a final photograph to share of my fond memories of the cemetery...



Thank you for allowing me to tell my story.

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Berkeley, California
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