

Finding His Roots

Detroiter attends 70th anniversary ceremonies of the liquidation of the Lodz Ghetto.

Dr. Charles Silow

Special to the Jewish News

The 70th anniversary of the liquidation of the *Litzmannstadt*, also known as the Lodz Ghetto, was commemorated Aug. 28-31. I was in Berlin around that time at the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Descendants conference, and I felt compelled to go to Lodz to attend the memorial ceremonies.

Lodz was the city my parents were from, and the historical home of my great-grandparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Lodz was the city where I probably would have lived had there not been the Holocaust.

Statistics from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum indicate that before World War II, about 233,000 Jews lived in Lodz, or about one-third of the city's population, making it the second largest Jewish community in Europe.

As a point of reference, the Jewish population of metropolitan Detroit in 2010 was estimated to be 66,500.

From 1940 to 1944, the Germans established a ghetto in Lodz. Living conditions were horrendous. Most of the ghetto had neither running water nor a sewer system. Hard labor, overcrowding and starvation were the dominant features of life. The overwhelming majority of ghetto residents worked in German factories, receiving only meager food rations from their employers. More than 20 percent of the ghetto's population died from these harsh living conditions. It is estimated that only 5,000 to 7,000 Jews from the Lodz ghetto survived the war.

One of the thousands that died of starvation in the ghetto was Chil Parzenczeski, my grandfather.

In 1941 and 1942, almost 40,000 Jews were deported to the Lodz ghetto. By September 1942, the Germans deported more than 70,000 Jews and about 5,000 Roma to the Chelmno killing center. German personnel shot and killed hundreds of Jews, including children, the elderly, the frail and the sick, during the deportation operations.

Between September 1942 and May 1944, there were no major deportations from Lodz. The ghetto resembled a forced-labor camp.

In the spring of 1944, the Nazis started the destruction of the Lodz ghetto. By



Silow prays at his grandfather's grave, which was unmarked. He arranged for this tombstone, which also honors his grandmother, Reizel, aunts, Chaya and Malka, and young cousin, Mirka.

then, Lodz was the last remaining ghetto in Poland, with a population of about 75,000. The Germans resumed deportations from Lodz. Ghetto residents were told they were being transferred to work camps in Germany. In August 1944, the Germans deported the surviving ghetto residents to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp.

Two of the women sent to Auschwitz from the Lodz Ghetto in 1944 were my mother and grandmother, Sara and Reizel Parzenczewska.

After arriving in Auschwitz, they went through the infamous selection. My mother, 24, was selected to live as a forced laborer; my grandmother, 55, was sent to the gas chamber.

Lodz Remembered

From the conference in Berlin, I traveled to Lodz with my good friend Mirka Gluck, who lives in Lodz.

That evening, Mirka, her husband and I attended the opening ceremonies, a perfor-

mance by the Klezmer orchestra, Brave Old World. The music was very powerful, capturing the joys of Jewish Poland as well as the suffering that the Jewish people experienced in the five years of the ghetto.

In contrast to the Berlin conference, mostly positive and hopeful, being in Lodz brought home the magnitude and devastation of the Holocaust.

The next day, we attended ceremonies in Survivors' Park, created to remember and honor all Jews who survived the Lodz Ghetto. Last year, a tree was planted in memory of my beloved mother, Sara Parzenczewska Silow. Mayor Hanna Zdanowska welcomed us. She spoke about the importance for all to remember and, in particular, for the second generation to remember what happened to the Jews of Lodz.

Later, we attended ceremonies in the remarkable and oddly beautiful Jewish cemetery in Lodz. We heard many speeches of dignitaries from around the world talking about the importance of remembering the horrors of the Lodz Ghetto and the

Holocaust.

In 1942, my grandfather, Chil Parzenczowski, died of starvation in the Lodz Ghetto. With the help of a genealogist, I was able to find the location where he was buried in the Lodz cemetery. Chil, who I am named after, did not have a *matzevah* (a monument) placed on the site where he was buried.

From Detroit, I arranged for a *matzevah* to be built that would honor him, my grandmother, Reizel, my two aunts, Chaya and Malka, and my little cousin, Mirka, all who had no graves. It was very powerful and meaningful for me to have had this tombstone erected in their memories.

The people who had gathered at the cemetery all walked to the Radegast train station, where Jews were deported on boxcars to Chelmno and Auschwitz. Memorial ceremonies took place there. A new memorial museum was built at Radegast station, including a locomotive with two boxcars that transported Jews to the concentration camps.

At the boxcars, a Holocaust survivor was speaking in Hebrew to a group of Israeli

teenagers. She described her arrival at Auschwitz and the selection. She continued in Hebrew to the teenagers, “Yamin, smol, yamin, smol (right, left, right, left), indicating Mengele’s choosing who would live and who would die. Several teens were holding onto each other, crying, as the survivor told her story inside the boxcar.

That afternoon, we attended a concert at the Lodz Philharmonic Orchestra where four very solemn pieces were performed. Photographs of the suffering in the ghetto were displayed at intervals, giving even more meaning to the music.

On Shabbat morning, I attended services at the only surviving synagogue in Lodz. Because this small synagogue was used by the Nazis as a salt storehouse, it was left standing. Lodz had some of the most magnificent synagogues in the world and, other than this one, they were all destroyed.

Tracing Roots

Through my genealogist, I was able to find the two addresses where my mother and her family lived. 33 Pilsudskiego was in a rundown area, about one block away from the synagogue. After services, I talked to some of the elders. Maybe

they remembered a Parzenczewski family? No one did. One man, Leon Weintraub, said he also grew up near the synagogue. He was a retired physician living in Stockholm.

Interestingly, Dr. Weintraub said he had been to Detroit a few times and had family here. Their names have been Americanized from Weintraub to Wayne. As it turns out, Detroiters Larry and Jack Wayne were his cousins, and their children and other relatives are very good friends of mine.

Dr. Weintraub was in Lodz for the ceremonies. He said that he had a happy boyhood in Lodz but that he always had mixed feelings coming back because of what happened.

My friend Allen Mansfield, Dr. Weintraub and I walked to my mother’s apartment building. There was a little shop nearby and Dr. Weintraub asked



Silow in front of the building where his father lived in Lodz

in Polish if anyone remembered a Parzenczewski family. No one did.

I said my grandfather used to own this building. One woman was alarmed, thinking I was there to take the building back. I said no, that I was just visiting my family’s home. When we asked if we could see her apartment, she graciously said yes and she showed us her small, comfortable studio apartment, which gave me a sense of where my family lived, of my roots.

Later, Mirka, Allen and I walked to my father’s apartment building, 44 Zeromskiego. My father used to talk about how they would go the *Griene Marek* (the Green Market) to buy their fruits and vegetables. Sure enough, right down the block was the *Zielony Rynek*, the Green Market.

We walked a little further and came upon 33 Gdanska St. — a nicer area where

my mother and her family later lived.

Finally, we came to *Manufaktura*, the center of Lodz, known for its textile production. Israel Poznanski was a major Jewish industrialist in Lodz. After the war, the Communists took over and ran Lodz’s large textile industry into bankruptcy. Today, these old factories are alive with a modern hotel, mall, restaurants, shops and fountains. There is live music every night; there is a volleyball court in the summer and an ice skating rink in the winter. The young come to Manufaktura.

Before the war, Lodz was a vibrant and lively city with 233,000 Jews. Today there are only 200 Jews left.

In Lodz, I felt a unique connection to my family’s home and discovered more about my roots. I learned about the richness of Jewish life as well as about what happened to our people in Lodz. We, the Jewish people have survived, we are here. □

Dr. Charles Silow is director of Jewish Senior Life’s Program for Holocaust Survivors and Families. Silow and Rene Lichtman will speak about the Berlin Conference and the Lodz Ghetto at 11 a.m. Sunday, Nov. 23, at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills. Free.

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