

COULD A SURVIVOR RETURN TO HIS/HER HOMETOWN?

Was it possible for those concentration camp victims who were still alive after experiencing the horrors of the “Death March” to return to the countries of their origin? – A return to Hungary? A return to Poland, a return to Russia, a return to Czechoslovakia, a return to Austria or Germany?

Poland and the former Polish territories now controlled by the Russians were indeed the first destination of many survivors, in spite of the reality that these areas had a long history of anti-Semitism--years, even centuries, before the Nazis came on the scene. And yet the pull to one’s homeland was very strong. Certainly, they had left land, homes, apartments and valuables behind, but it was their hope that other missing family members and close friends might have survived and would also return. This became a major motivating force for many survivors to return to the countries which had given them up to the Nazis.

A return to Polish territory, however, was by far, the most difficult.

The vision of an idyllic past life, expressed in the poem *Forced March*, represents for the survivor, a beautiful past life that could never be recaptured.

The following account illustrates that the hatred of the Jews by many Poles did NOT end with liberation and the end of World War II.

Now read about the **Kielce Poland Pogrom**.

Please **note** that one of our longtime St. Louis residents and docents at the St. Louis Holocaust Museum returned to the Kielce region, and was a witness to the new wave of anti-Semitism.

1946 POLAND ANTI-SEMITISM CONTINUES

Prior to World War II the city of Kielce in western Poland had a population of 75,000. A third of them were Jewish and most were deported and murdered by the Germans in Treblinka in the summer of 1942.

When the war against the Nazis came to an end in January 1945, there were no Jews left in the city of Kielce. Gradually some 200 Jews, mostly former residents, returned from the death camps and forests where they had been hiding. They had hoped, in vain, that many of their family members had also survived and returned. Most of them were crowded in one building where they tried to work, waiting for an opportunity to emigrate to Israel.

On July 4th, 1946 – eighteen months after the city was liberated by the Soviet armies, in the morning hours, a rumor spread in the city that in the building at #7 Planty street, Polish children were being murdered by Jews who would use their blood for the Passover

bread. It should be noted that this was an anti-Semitic belief dating back to the Middle Ages. The fact that this was the month of July, two months after Passover, did not prevent the rumor from spreading like a wild fire.

Within a short time crowds gathered before the building and started a bloody pogrom in which 42 Jews were massacred to death and twice as many wounded.

Participating in the massacre were people from all walks of life: peasants, factory workers, housewives, soldiers, students and members of the Intelligentsia.

Thousands rushed out into the streets to actively take part, or at least to see the horrors.

Mr. Itzhak Zukerman, one of the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and one of the founders of the Kibbutz of Ghetto Fighters in northern Israel happened to be in Kielce Poland at the time of the pogrom. In a letter to his wife, living in an Israeli Kibbutz, he describes the streets of Kielce, flowing with Jewish blood and crazed multitudes of residents.

Although the mention of the Kielce pogrom was taboo in Polish circles for almost 50 years, various writers have tried to explain away the causes of the events, suggesting that it was a provocation or a conspiracy by certain political elements, or even by the Zionists themselves, who would gain from the exodus of the Jews from Poland to Israel. Ironically, some Poles maintained that Polish animosity to Jews was caused by German fascists who coerced the Poles to cooperate with the Germans in locating and identifying the Jews.

All these “explanations” were lies because the pogrom occurred eighteen months after the city had been liberated and there were no more Germans. The pogrom proved to the whole world that the Poles, at least the great majority of them, needed no German encouragement.

The Impact of the Kielce Pogrom was manifold:

For Poland – it finally freed the country from its Jewish minority, as some 200,000 surviving Jews, most of whom came back from Russia, eventually left Poland. However, the pogrom became known as the “mark of Cain” on the forehead of Poland.

For Israel – the exodus of Jews from Poland and other east European countries eventually brought some 200,000 Jews to the young state, following the end of the British mandate which, to some extent, was the result of this exodus.

For the Americans – when the occupation authorities in Germany and Austria repatriated almost all non-Jewish Displaced Persons, they tried forcibly to send back the Jews to Poland, claiming that after all it was their country of birth, their language and culture, their compatriots and homeland. It was after the Kielce pogrom when some Jewish

repatriates came back badly wounded, that the Americans understood that the Jewish problem is of a different nature.

For the church – the fact that no priest was sent out to speak to the crowds at the site of pogrom is a stigma on the church. According to survivors in Israel, several days before the tragic events, a Jewish delegation, feeling tension in the air, went to the bishop, but were told that the church could not intervene on behalf of the Jews, because they brought Communism upon Poland.

For Jewish history – those who still believed in the possibility of rebuilding the Jewish communities in Poland and in Europe in general, had to change their outlook and reconcile themselves to the fact that this chapter came to an end.

Some Polish historians say that after all, compared with the crimes of the Nazis against the Jewish people, the killing of 42 Jews in Kielce was a minor event. However, considering the timing,-- 18 months after the Germans were gone – the mass participation of the Polish populace, and the fact that in no place in Europe were Jews molested at that time – it was a grotesque testimony to continued Polish anti-Semitism.