

## The Last Jew

I don't know if it is instinct, genetics, or a plain and simple need, but every living creature seemingly has an uncontrollable urge to return to its birthplace.

The delicate monarch butterfly will travel thousands of miles from the vastness of Canada, through all kinds of adverse conditions, to return to the Carmel area in California, or to a particular wooded area in Mexico where it was hatched—there to mate, and to lay eggs in the exact place where it was born.

Similarly, every year the great Gray whales return from their rich feeding places in the waters of the Arctic Circle, giving birth to new generations in the same warm lagoons of Baja Mexico where they were born.

The same deep desire and feeling must also exist in humans.

Life in the shtetl was not easy, but it was the only life that the Jews knew. Year in and year out, it flowed with its normal rhythm: birth, growing up, marrying, having children, eventually dying, and being buried in the old cemetery.

For hundreds of years, the Jewish people lived their lives, and died, in this way. The old Shul, the neighborhoods, the Beth Olam—everything was right and in its proper place. The

several thousand Jews who lived in this hamlet believed this normality would last for eternity—or perhaps until the true messiah would appear and bring them back to the Promised Land in Israel.

Unfortunately, history has shown us a different fate for the Jews, including those of Shebreshin. In 1939 the powerful Wehrmacht of Germany, led by the criminal forces of the Nazis and their fascist hordes, invaded and occupied Poland. One of their declared master plans was to eliminate all the Jews living in this old land.

Germany, a nation once considered the most civilized in Europe, began the systematic slaughter of innocents. By 1942 there were no more Jewish people in my town, nor in any of the neighboring towns and villages.

The Jewish inhabitants of our shtetl were led to the old cemetery where they were forced to dig five pits, which were to form their own mass graves. Devoid of any human dignity, they were all killed, then buried without ceremony in the cold Polish earth.

So there were no Jewish witnesses left in our village to count the passing trains of cattle cars packed with other Jews on their way to the nearby Belzec death camp. There they were gassed and burned in the horrible ovens, reducing them to ash that was scattered in the fields and river. “Neat, clean, hygienic, and orderly,” according to the self-declared “master race.”

Silence and obedience became the order throughout Poland and Germany. After 1944, when the Nazis were clearly being defeated, the citizens retired to their nice homes, blaming all that happened on others: “It was all the fault of the Nazis; no one could stand up to them.”

My shtetl, now purely Polish, had changed dramatically. Poverty and destruction were everywhere. A different town

tried to cope with its past, tried to heal itself. It was not an easy task.



When I started to write about my old shtetl, trying to describe a form of life that doesn't exist anymore, I had no expectation that anyone would really be interested. I wrote for my family, so that they might know something about my childhood and learn a bit about their ethnic and family roots.

I was wrong—very wrong.

Within days after my son started posting these stories on the Worldwide Web, I began receiving e-mail from all over the world! People actually wanted to know more about this hamlet of Shebreshin or *Szczebrzeszyn*. Some descendants of family members who had lived there wanted to know what I could recall of their family. Others were simply curious about the life and traditions of a town whose history reaches back more than 600 years.

I answered all the correspondence, and then one day an e-mail arrived from Poland. Its author, Tomasz Panczyk, was actually born and raised in my home town! At the time, he was living in Warsaw, but he maintains his own Web site about our mutual birthplace: [www.szczebrzeszyn.net](http://www.szczebrzeszyn.net).

We began to compare stories. I describe a village I left 75 years ago as a teenager. Tomasz tells me about the town as it exists today. He has mailed me many photos showing how it has changed. Some of the buildings I have mentioned in other stories are still standing.

Tomasz and I have been corresponding via e-mail since 2000, sending messages to one another several times a week. Our contact has become personal and intimate—all the more

so, after he moved to northern California in 2002. At last, we met in person, and in April 2004 Tomasz and his family joined mine at our traditional Passover Seder in my San Francisco home.

Still, we both love our birthplace.

Some time ago, Tomasz told me a story about Jankiel Grojser, a Jewish man who was born in our township in 1904. He was a soldier in the Polish army when the Nazis invaded Poland. At one point he was interned by the Russians, but he managed to escape and rejoin the Polish army. He distinguished himself in the Allied fight during the opening of the Second Front in Italy, primarily in the bloody engagement on and around Monte Cassino. He was wounded.

Although I am only five years younger, I can't specifically recall this man from my shtetl. But I do remember the very large Grojser family—who, like all the Jews of Shebreshin, were slaughtered by the cruel, criminal Nazi bastards.

After the war Jankiel returned home, the only place he wanted to be—but his home had tragically and irrevocably changed. All the Jews had either been murdered and buried in mass graves or sent to Belzec or Auschwitz, there to be gassed, burned, and scattered to the winds. And the rest of Poland was little different: The Jewish population had been reduced by over 90 percent.

Jankiel found himself to be the only Jew in an all-Gentile town. Yet it was his home.

I have tried to put myself in his place. The homing instinct is one of the strongest urges—fundamental and powerful. And perhaps he wanted to prove that Hitler had not won in his effort to eliminate all the Jews from Europe.

In any event, Jankiel chose to remain at his birthplace. He lived with his neighbors among the ruins, surrounded by the

shadows of his ancestors who had resided in that part of the world for so many centuries.

Others have written that the shock of finding none of his family, none of his Jewish friends—no Jews at all, for that matter—affected his brain. Over time, he grew mad. Even in his lucid moments, he would sit in various public areas for hours at a time, weeping.

The butterfly had returned to its source—but not to mate and beget a new generation.

In 1970, Jankiel died at the age of 66. His death created a major problem for the Polish people in *Szczebrzeszyn*. He was not a Christian, but there were no Jews to give him a traditional Hebrew burial. Moreover, the old Jewish cemetery was in such shambles that it would be insulting to bury anyone there.

The citizens called a meeting. They would honor this man—this Jew, this Jankiel Grojser—by giving him a dignified resting place in their sanctified, beautiful Catholic cemetery.

Townspople prepared a large plot. They built a stone fence and erected a permanent marker, placing a big Star of David on top—so no one would ever mistake this as an ordinary gravesite.

Nor did the people of the village ever forget this lonely man. I have received photographs showing many bouquets of fresh flowers placed on his grave. And as is traditional and customary for Jews, people still place pebbles and stones around the monument to indicate that he has had visitors. It is as if they were leaving calling cards. I am told that some people even bring candles, lighting them in Jankiel's memory.

I look at the pictures, and I am proud of the people in my birth town—that they gave shelter and honor to this poor man.

I am also very sad about this misplaced human being. I see and feel the loneliness of his lost tribe.

Damn! Damn all those who called themselves “the most civilized people.”