

## A Holocaust Survivor Visits Poland

By ISAK ARBUS

**I**N THE fall of 1945, shortly after my liberation from Nazi concentration camps, I returned to Warsaw, my home town, to search for relatives and friends. The city was in ruins. The "Aryan" Warsaw had still preserved some semblance of a city, with recognizable streets and an occasional building still intact, but the former ghetto was completely obliterated. A vast pile of bricks, overgrown with weeds, stretched as far as the eye could see. A single church, its unobstructed spire seeming to soar, stood, untouched, amid the desolation. Streets, entirely buried under the debris, were unrecognizable. Occasional pedestrians moved, ghost-like, along paths carved out in this wasteland. Not very successful in my search, I left Poland soon after.

Ever since, I have had a strong yearning to go back to Warsaw for a visit. I tried twice, but was unable to get a visa. When I heard that the Polish Government was inviting Jewish groups from abroad to come to Poland for the 40th Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

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ISAK ARBUS, a new contributor, was captured as a Polish soldier by the Germans. After being returned to the Warsaw Ghetto from a POW camp, he was arrested and sent to the following Nazi concentration camps: *Konskowola, Budzyn, Mielec, Wieliczka in Poland, Flossenburg in Germany, Leitmeritz in Czechoslovakia, Dachau, Augsburg, Leonberg, Kaufering and Ganacker in Germany.* He recently retired as Senior Reference Librarian at the Medgar Evers College of the City University of New York.

Commemoration in April of this year, I applied again, this time with a group of survivors. I was granted a visa for 10 days.

Still, there were misgivings. Because of the martial law in Poland, the trip became controversial. After reflection, I decided that, if I waited for the right conditions, I may never be able to go. I packed my suitcase.

On arrival in Warsaw, we were given large buttons, bearing the legend: 40th Anniversary of the Uprising in Warsaw's Ghetto, Warsaw, 1983, in English. We were to wear these buttons as our I.D.s for the duration.

The entrance to our hotel, a modern, high-rise building, in the center of Warsaw, was guarded by several militiamen. Apparently because of the heavy presence of Arabs in the Polish capital, the Government thought it prudent to post guards at the three major hotels, where most of the Jewish visitors were housed. The militiamen checked everybody's credentials on entering, and our buttons served as our passes.

The large lobby of the hotel reverberated with the many languages of the international gathering. Hebrew, Yiddish, English, French were constantly heard. In a corner, a large table was set up to provide information about a scholars' conference on Nazi war crimes, which was being held in Warsaw at the time. A small art gallery in one section featured Jewish and Holocaust themes. A separate little office was selling commemorative medallions struck for the Anniversary. Later I also saw a commemorative stamp issued by the Polish Post Office, featuring the Ghetto Monument.



*Isak Arbus with Polish scouts at Treblinka.*

The next day we were given the opportunity to see Warsaw. The city is now a modern metropolis, with broad avenues and neon-lit signs. Except for the Old Town (*Stare Miasto*), the medieval section, which was rebuilt from old prints and photographs shortly after World War II, the bulk of the city is of contemporary, utilitarian design and lacks the warmth of old Warsaw. What I saw made me feel like a tourist, visiting a strange place for the first time.

The Monument to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, standing at one end of a parklike area, built on the ruins of the ghetto, is an arresting sight. The ugly, pedestrian apartment houses, built behind the monument, are in sharp contrast to the expressive work of the sculptor, Nathan Rapaport.

Our final destination was the Jewish Cemetery. At the gate a sign in Polish admonishes those who enter to cover their heads. How strange, I thought,

to find such a sign in a country ruled by an atheistic government. There was no such sign in the old days. There is an unusually large crowd at the cemetery, mostly visitors from abroad. Trailing the crowds are two or three TV crews, eager to record what is going on.

The cemetery was neglected for many years; only in the last few years was work begun to rehabilitate this witness to the once vibrant Jewish community. So far, only the front part of the cemetery was cleaned up. The rear, from what I saw, is a mass of broken trees, fallen tombstones and weeds. During my two visits to the cemetery I found out that a number of Poles come here regularly — some to tend graves of relatives, such as the Polish woman I talked to, who was scrubbing a stone with tender-loving care and then planted some flowers. Others come here to study the Jewish past, or make rubbings of more interesting inscriptions.

Many illustrious names are found here. The grave of Dr. Ludwik Zamenhof (1859-1917), the creator of Esperanto, is adorned with a green star, a symbol of hope. Zamenhof was a pacifist dreamer who believed that an international language will help achieve peace. A very elaborate grave is that of Esther Rachel Kaminska (1870-1925), known as the "mother of the Yiddish theater." Thousands came to her funeral. Another impressive stone bears the names of three foremost Yiddish writers: I.L. Peretz (1851-1915), Jacob Dineson (1856-1919) and S. An-ski (1863-1920). A Polish inscription on a slab of black marble says: "To Feliks Perl, 1871-1927, creator of the program of Polish socialism, our leader and faithful fighter for the cause of the working class. P.P.S." (Polish Socialist Party). A number of graves here are symbolic, erected for people who died in Nazi death camps. One of them is a striking statue of Dr. Janusz Korczak, the writer and educator, who went to his death in Treblinka, unwilling to abandon the orphans in his charge. The TV camera crews are still around, hoping for something dramatic to occur. They should have been here 40 years ago; there was plenty of drama then, I thought.

**On Tuesday, April 19, the official ceremony at the Ghetto Monument starts with a Polish Army band playing the Polish national anthem. Then, to the accompaniment of drums, soldiers receive flowers and wreaths from various delegations, turn stiffly around and deposit them at the foot of the monument, on both sides of which large menorahs are aflame. In the next two days I was to see the same ritual repeated, and I must admit that the sight of these indifferent soldiers intercepting our wreaths was definitely galling.**

After the official part is over, the soldiers and officers with bared sabers march away. Now a large crowd surges toward the monument. Some begin to recite the Kaddish. The TV crews and reporters try to get close and lift up their mikes to record the sounds. Many people sing *Hatikva* and then Israeli songs.

After the bulk of the people disperse, I look at the ribbons on the wreaths and see inscriptions in Polish, Hebrew, Yiddish, French, Italian, Czech, even German. However I failed to find any signs of a Soviet presence at these ceremonies.

Next morning we are off to Treblinka. On arrival we find a large crowd of Polish children, scouts, and beribboned veterans. As the various delegations begin to march toward the site, the scouts on both sides of the road link arms. Signs on both sides of the road proclaim: "No More War, No More Treblinkas!" We pass a stretch where on large tablets, in a dozen languages, the countries are listed from which people were brought here. Scouts stick burning torches in front of the tablets. In the distance smoke rises from many such torches, and the acrid smell brings back the awful memories of the crematoriums once busy here. I suddenly realize that most of my family members probably perished in this place. The presence of the crowds around me helps to lessen the pain.

Delegations line up and the same military procedure is repeated. After the official part is over, a man approaches the microphones and demands that they are turned on again. He is near hysterics, and demands that they play the *Hatikva*. "It is unfair," he almost sobs, "I lost my whole family here." Friends take him away. Reporters and TV crews come running. They want to know the man's name. Nobody seems to know.

A friend and I begin to walk among the stones, which form a most unusual monument to the extermination camp's victims. About 15,000 stones, large and small, standing upright, form a symbolic cemetery. The larger stones bear names of cities and towns from which Jews were brought here.

While searching among the stones, looking for familiar names, we encounter a most moving scene. A group of scouts is lighting candles and sticking them into the ground in front of a stone marked "*Miedzyrzec Podlaski*." We stop and talk to the group. They are boys and girls of various ages, whose leader, a young woman, explains to us that they come from that town. They wish to pay their respects to the townspeople who perished there. Touched, we take pictures with them, then they give us some of their shoulder patches, a friendly scouting custom.

Before leaving this heart-breaking place, we locate the only stone marked with a person's name: Janusz Korczak and children, with many flowers in front of it.

***Next day we are off to Auschwitz.*** This is a long trip through the industrial heartland of Poland. We stop briefly at Czestochowa, to take a look at the famous Black Madonna monastery.

At Auschwitz we encounter the largest crowd yet, 35,000 by official count. A sizable group of Hashomer Hatzair youth, holding aloft an Israeli flag, draws the stares of the Polish participants. One of the more visible delegations is a group of Gypsies, many of whose compatriots were exterminated here.

After the laying of the traditional wreaths and flowers, again with military assistance, we sit on benches in the blazing sun, awaiting speeches. A young woman from Polish Radio briefly interviews me, a tape recorder in

hand. Where did I come from? Why did I come? Do I think such commemorations are necessary? What is the meaning of all this for the young?

Gen. Wlodzimierz Sokorski, the head of ZBOWID, the Polish veterans organization, Union of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy, introduces the speakers. After representatives of Resistance organizations speak in Italian and French, Z. Gertych, the vice-marshal of the Polish Diet, delivers a lengthy political speech. Before the American Jewish representative, Rabbi Alexander Schindler speaks, there is an interlude. On Tuesday a P.L.O. representative laid a wreath at the Warsaw Ghetto monument, explaining later to reporters that the Ghetto heroes had to face the same kind of fascism as the Palestinians now face . . . Rabbi Schindler demands an apology. Gen. Sokorski approaches the microphone and explains that the P.L.O. was not invited, that only those who were allies in World War II are participating officially, and he expresses his "deepest regrets." Rabbi Schindler speaks forcefully, and his speech is translated into Polish. Next day the official party organ *Trybuna Ludu* reports on the large anti-war demonstration at Auschwitz and gives the vice-marshal's speech verbatim. Not much else.

The speeches over, we move on to the museum part of the site. I am a veteran of a dozen camps, but even I found these displays hard to take. We return to Warsaw exhausted.

In the remaining days of my stay in Warsaw I walked the streets of the city and visited places of special interest. In addition to the interesting displays on Jewish themes at the Jewish Historical Institute, I saw an exhibit called "The Rescued Culture" at the Polish National Museum. Rare relics of the Jewish past, including silver objects, religious articles, docu-

ments and paintings by Polish-Jewish painters are on display in a main section of the museum. The attendance of interested Poles was quite large when I was there, and I also noticed frequent discussions in front of some displays.

The Pawiak jail, which was located in the former ghetto, was completely destroyed by the Germans, but the Poles on the site built a museum, which I visited. Documents on display depict the history of the jail going back to pre-war times, when prominent political prisoners were kept there. Looking at the faded photos and newspaper clippings, reports of trials, and of occasional escapes, from the turbulent period between the two World Wars, brought back many memories. Many of the names I saw there were quite familiar to me. I relived the past again.

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On the last day of my stay in Poland, Monday the 25th, I went



During the occupation, the Germans incarcerated many Poles and Jews here. Many were executed. Outside, near the entrance, stands a unique tree, covered with plaques, memorializing victims executed here. One of the most tragic bears Jewish names: "Kaplan Malka, Mother, 40 years old, Kaplan Sabina, Daughter, 10 years old, Kaplan Severyn, son, 17 years old, Kaplan Pawel, son, 7 years old. Jailed, tortured, and executed on 7/5/43 at the Pawiak. The miraculously saved father decries a fate worse than Job's."

*Warsaw is not your average tourist town.* Wherever one goes, there are these signs of a tragic past. The current difficulties of the Polish people, as serious as they may be, are almost trivial by comparison. Right near the entrance to our hotel there is a plaque on the wall, surrounded by flowers: "Here in August 1944 the Germans executed 102 Poles." This is repeated in various sections of the town. Al-

again to the Jewish Cemetery to look for my older brother's grave, which I knew was there. For two hours I searched up and down the rows of gravestones, until I was unable to penetrate any further. I asked the cemetery administrator for help. His father, for many years the administrator of the cemetery, died recently, and the young man took over, reluctantly, the unglamorous job. He promised to search after closing time. In the late afternoon I received a phone call at the hotel. He had found the grave and he was coming to pick me up. An half hour later, he and a Polish friend of his, the taxi driver, led me to my brother's grave. On a black granite stone, carved in Polish, were these words: "Bina Gezundhajt, Sala Spiewak, Dawid Arbutz, Mosze Miernik, perished in the tragic moments of April 1943. Family Gezundhajt."

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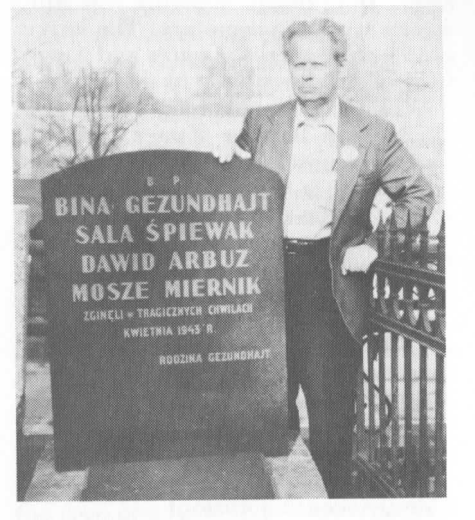
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A black and white photograph of a man in a suit holding a large, dark, rectangular memorial plaque. The plaque is inscribed with the names of victims of the Białystok Ghetto. The man is standing outdoors, leaning on a metal fence to his right. The background shows a building and some trees.

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BINA GEZUNDHAJT  
SALA ŚPIEWAK  
DAWID ARBUZ  
MOSZE MIERNIK

ZGINĘLI = TRAGICZNYCH CIWILACH  
KWIEŃNIA 1943 R.

RODZINA GEZUNDHAJT