Remembering the Jewish Community of

Chortkov, Poland (Galicia)

Remembered by Sharon Piran

It was written that Chortkov, the birthplace of my mother, Edzia Spielberg, was a town of charming beauty, crossed by two rivers, and surrounded by mountains green in summer and snowcapped in winter. Located in western Ukraine in the historic region of Galicia, throughout it's history Chortkov was periodically under the rule of Austria, Poland, Russia, the Nazis, and the Ukraine.

Jews surely lived in this town prior to 1616, though this is the earliest recorded evidence engraved on a tombstone. The early history of the Jews of Chortkov was difficult politically and economically. Some had access to limited education and professions, while most remained very poor and made their living by trade related professions.

For 20 years preceding World War II, Chortkov was occupied by Poland, and a campaign was conducted against the Jews. The Poles tried to implement the slogan "Poland for the Poles" and thus tried to compel the Jews to emigrate. The Jews were discriminated against economically through job loss, high taxes, and other kinds of economic pressure.

Despite these hardships, the Jewish community of Chortkov was a bustling and lively one. Throughout it's history it was renowned for its Rabbis, famous for their genius and learning. Over the years, a large class of intelligentsia began to spring up and was active in many social movements. Chortkov was among the first towns in Galicia to have a modern Hebrew School. In addition to educational institutions such as the Hebrew Gymnasium and Talmud Torah, there were public institutions such as an
orphanage and a home for the aged, libraries, musical and drama groups, and even sports teams. There were Zionist youth movements and a number of Halutzim were successful in immigrating to Israel before the Holocaust.

The Nazis invaded Chortkov in the fall of 1941. Since they had already been sowing hate against the Jews for years, at first word of the German occupation, the Ukrainian peasants attacked their Jewish neighbors in all the villages and towns of Galicia, murdering many entire families, and looting their property. The Ukrainian Police perpetrated the worst brutalities against the Jews. In Chortkov, the Nazis immediately set up a Judenrat and demanded a list of those Jews in the liberal and educated professions. Hundreds were taken to the "black forest" near the town, brutally murdered, and buried in mass graves.

For the Jews of Chortkov, each new day brought more death. Groups of Jews were taken to mass graves and murdered on the spot, or sent to forced labor camps in which the majority of the Jews perished. Also, more than 2000 of the Chortkov Jews perished in the gas chambers at the Belzek Death Camp. Many of the Jews, including my mother, fled Chortkov and spent years hiding in forests, fleeing from town to town, or hidden by Christian friends. Sadly, many of these Christian friends betrayed the Jews and delivered them to the Gestapo. By June of 1943, the Nazis decided to completely liquidate Galicia and either brought the remaining Jews to camps or shot them on the spot. By August of 1943, Chortkov was declared Judenrein (cleansed of Jews).

Of the approximately six thousand Jews in Chortkov before World War II, only about one hundred remained alive. My mother estimates that, before the war, her extended family located in Chortkov and surrounding towns numbered in the hundreds. After the war, only 7 members of this extended family survived.
There is a small, though hopeful, post note to this story. I was recently introduced to Erna Strenger, mother of fellow temple member Rochelle Strenger. Upon hearing Erna's accent, I inquired where she was from. When she told me Poland, I said that my mother is also from Poland and mentioned the name Chortkov. Erna was visibly shaken and said that she, too, was from Chortkov. The miracle is that, not only were these two ladies from the same town, but that they also both lived in Breslau, Poland for a year after the war and were good friends. Erna and my mother Edzia, now known as Elaine Flitman, were reunited this week after 62 years.

*Chortkov was in Galicia—the part of Poland that was ruled by Austria. Between the World Wars it was part of Poland. It is now in the Ukraine. There is a very well organized page about Chortkov on [JewishGen](https://www.jewishgen.org). This includes a 150-page [memoir](https://www.jewishgen.org) about Chortkov during the Holocaust.*