Remembering the Jewish Community of

Dokshitz & Parfianov, Belarus

Remembered by Aaron Ginsburg

The following was written by Temple Israel member Aaron Ginsburg about the shtetlach his father left in 1921 to join a large number of family members in America; an equally large mishpochah stayed behind.

Dokshitz and Parfianov are neighboring towns located 10 kilometers apart in Belarus, 65 miles northeast of Minsk. Dokshitz had 210 Jewish taxpayers in 1766, indicating a well-established community. That community grew during the mostly peaceful 19th century, but immigration pulled away many between 1905 and 1921. The Jews who remained lived in a Poland that became less and less friendly through the 1920's and 30's, and they became increasingly impoverished. Nevertheless, a strong Jewish life existed.

Let's listen to Zvi Markman, one of the former residents:

I am reminded of a parade on Lag Ba'Omer, with the national flags and slogans, 'Long Live our National Language!' Then comes a Keren Kayemet Bazaar with the lovely exhibits and drawings, which emboldened the youth to transform during a folk-demonstration from love and sincerity to a Zionist mind set. And the lively ebullient youth-organizations: HaShomer HaTzair, HeChalutz, HeChalutz HaTzair, Beitar, Com-yung. Everywhere a flurry of activity, discussions full of zeal and passion. Evening group meetings with heated arguments that sometimes ended in blows. And overall-there was joy! A comrade travels to the Land of Israel. The entire shtetl sends him off with song and dance, on the bridge they dance a hora, and then the traveler commences on his long journey.
The noise of the matzo oven announces the approaching Passover. Milkhiks, Tisha B'Av -- with shtekhekhtz (little thorns thrown in the beard is an Eastern European Tisha B'Av custom). Dressed up and festive girls, strolling to the synagogue on Rosh Hashana to hear the shofar blow. By the river a multitude of Jews stands shaking out their pockets, they free themselves of all of their sins from the previous year. Later, the pre-Yom Kippur atonement ceremony of shlogn kapores begins. On the eve of Yom Kippur, Jews wrapped in talisim and kittles fast and pray more than a day and a night in the full synagogues, where the lights burn non-stop. Kol Nidre -- it is a tremendous experience for all the Jews in the shtetl.

Here runs the shames with an esrog and lulov to the women, so they don't miss this mitzvah. And the streets become filled with joy as do all six basey midrashim--Simchas Torah is upon you, Jews. In a state of light drunkenness, the congregation begins hokofotes. Blessings with "Shehaklen" (benedictions over drink) over full cups, entire families wishing a l'chayim! Again, the gray weekdays return, with the old worries and troubles. Quietly a funeral procession goes to the cemetery and the pine-trees rock themselves to the cadence, and shade the fresh grave. And comrades enlist jokes and pranks from one another to bring out laughter, and also anger.

That rich Jewish culture was suppressed when the Russians arrived in 1939. In June 1941, the Germans came in a war not merely of conquest but also of murder. In Dokshitz only 130 out of 4000 souls survived the Holocaust. The pattern was familiar -- the Jews were impoverished, ghettoized, and starved. Most were killed on three separate days in the spring of 1942. They were marched to a pit on the edge of town across from the Jewish cemetery and slaughtered.

In Parafianov, the Germans hanged my great uncle Aharon Levitan when they arrived, because he participated in the Russian town government. Most of the other residents
were marched into a nearby forest and murdered in 1941. My father's first cousin, Shmuel Markman, whom I met in Israel in 2004, listed 70 of his -- and my -- relatives in the Dokshitz-Parafianov Yizkor book, in the vain hope some might have survived. In Dokshitz there stands a monument to the liberators; there is no monument to the victims. (Actually, there is a monument to the victims. It fails to mention that they are Jewish.) In the nearby pit are not only the bodies of the martyrs, but also their memories and hopes.

And now I need your help. Help me remember the courageous nurse Fanya Scheinman who injected her two children with morphine to prevent their murder at the hands of the Germans. Help me remember the other innocent victims, in the pit and in the forest, in the streets and in the homes.

Please. help me. to remember them. Yizkor!

My interest in my family history has led to my effort to save the remains of the Jewish cemetery in Dokshitsy, and I with others, I have created a non-profit organization called The Friends of Jewish Dokshitsy, Inc. The site of the Friends include many links, including a link to the Jewish Gen shtetlinks site, and a link to the English translation of the Yizkor book.