Remembering the Jewish Community of

Stepan, Ukraine

Remembered by Manny Press and his father

Our Temple Israel member, Manny Press, and his father, were both born in Stepan. When his father was born in 1896, Stepan was part of Russia. However, when Manny was born in 1926, Stepan was a part of Poland. Now it is in the area known as the Ukraine.

In 1386, communities existed in the area so one could infer that Jews lived in the Stepan area then. The Turks ruled Crimea. Crimean Jews traded with Jews of Volhynia and some Jews from Crimea moved into Stepan in the 1500's. In the 1500's, a charter allowing Jews to live in the Volhynia area was renewed. The Jewish population grew. They worked in trading, tailoring, and running saloons. In 1890, there were 3,384 people in Stepan, 47% Jewish, 512 households, three churches, one Gothic style shul, two stieblich, one brewery, two flour mills, six markets, and one candle factory.

From the 13th to 20th centuries, Jews lived in Stepan. Jews suffered under many attacks. However, there were signs that local Ukrainians tried to defend the Jews. But that was not what happened when the Nazis and Ukrainians destroyed the Jews during the Holocaust.

A survivor, who was in Russia, said that he visited the town of Stepan with the Red Army. The shuls were standing but their doors and windows were broken. The Great Shul was used to store wheat. Few houses remained standing from before the war and the Ukrainians were living in them.
However, one incident was told by a former Ukrainian friend. The Germans mobilized, with the help of the Ukrainians, a convoy of 300 wagons on a main street in Stepan. All wagons were facing south to Kostopol. This was on the 11th of Elul, in August 1942. At dawn, Jews were put onto the wagons and taken to the forest. Two thousand Jews were surrounded by a ring of Ukrainians. The Ukrainians were ordered to do so by the Germans. Individuals who tried to escape, mainly the young, were shot. Very few could flee into the forest. Most of those who did were found by the Ukrainian police. Most of the Jews sitting in the wagons were crying. Some were davening loudly, and all displayed fear. They didn't try to escape when they saw the Ukrainians appearing happy and shouting wildly. Huge pits were predug to eventually become mass graves. The sky of land and sea of the forest were silent witnesses of the death caused by Hitler's soldiers and their Ukrainian friends. They stood people up, naked, next to the pits. They pushed them and hit them without mercy. They forced them to lie face down and shot them. Many Jews were buried alive.

Two months after, blood started to come through the earth. Farmers were hired to reopen the pits and to pour lime into them to eliminate the smell and plagues that might occur. The farmers found young babies and children on top of one another. Some bodies were complete and they still could recognize many of them. There were no traces of bullets in many bodies. They were just buried alive. A few days after this killing, 300 more Jews from the town were found, who had successfully hid. They were shot and buried in a pit in a forest in Stepan.

Manny and his father emigrated to the USA in 1928. However, they left behind his father's parents, four sisters, and an unknown number of their children. They all perished at the hand of the Germans in 1942 during the invasion of Russia. There are no Jews left in Stepan today.
The information just read was obtained from The Yizkor book for Stepan, a project initiated by the Jewish Genealogy Society to publish a book for each stetl that existed in Eastern Europe. The information is obtained by interviews with survivors.

Here is a link to Jewishgen.org shetlinks site about Stepan.