Remembering the Jewish Community of

Tarnopol, Poland

Remembered by Lori Lieberman

The city of Tarnopol was at times part of Poland, Russia, Galitzia, Austria, and the Western Ukraine Republic. From the end of 1918 until September 17, 1932, Tarnopol was a district town of independent Poland. My first exposure to the name of this town came on a photograph of my great grandmother Malka Werfel (born 1886) and her parents, before she emigrated via Ellis Island in 1903. My great grandfather, Zecharia Mendel Werfel, her cousin, emigrated later to the Lower East Side, but his parents remained.

There was a Jewish presence in Tarnopol beginning in 1550, with a few dozen families living there by 1560. Until the Cossack pogroms of 1648 and 1649, the Jewish community was quite prosperous. Then there were about 300 families. There was a cemetery in Tarnopol and a glorious synagogue. In 1740, the Jews were free to live all over the city and trade. They were butchers, ran pubs, produced and sold liquors. They were allowed to buy and sell their homes and took part in elections to the municipality; their obligations to the city were similar to other citizens.

With the annexation of Tarnopol by Austria, Jews were subject to severe fiscal policies and decrees, including the requirement of sending their children to secular schools, which the Jews were obligated to support by a tax on candles. The climate changed for the better when Tarnopol was in Russian hands in 1809. A Jewish school was established as well as a modern synagogue. Tarnopol was famous all over Galitzia and abroad for the large concentration of educated people in the city.
The Jewish community in Tarnopol was distinguished during the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century in education, welfare, and culture. There was a local Jewish theater and the Jewish community was also distinguished in music and sports. Tarnopol as a whole was distinguished by tolerance between Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians. Conditions for Jews varied over time, however, depending upon the country in control and the political climate.

In 1939 there were eighteen thousand Jews living in Tarnopol.

On July 2, 1941, the city was conquered by the Germans. Two days later a pogrom was begun that lasted over a week. The synagogue was a place of collective murders, approximately 100, and the synagogue was itself burned. The Ukrainian policeman and the urban mobs were very active in the pogrom. They barbarically murdered men, women and children, using iron clubs, knives, and in other ways. They also destroyed the apartments of the Jews, their places of prayer, and robbed their property. While the pogrom ran wild all over the vicinity of Tarnopol, the farmers, especially the Ukrainians, murdered the Jews in the villages. In Tarnopol 5,000 Jews were murdered, the majority of them men.

Restrictive decrees were issued against the Jews and hundreds were taken out daily for forced labor. In September, an order was issued to set up a ghetto. The concentration of the Jews in the ghetto and the fencing of its area continued until the beginning of December. The Judenrat (Jewish Council) allocated the houses in the ghetto, conducted a census, and supplied forced laborers. In the fall and winter of 1941-1942, the Judenrat was compelled to send groups of young people to the labor camps set up in the area. At the beginning of 1942, the Germans dismissed the chairman of the Judenrat, claiming that he was not sufficiently compliant in executing their orders, and replaced him.
At the beginning of 1943, a labor camp was established in the area of the ghetto in which Jews classified as "useful" were assembled and employed in factories vital to the German economy. Jews from other parts of the ghetto attempted to infiltrate the camp in the belief that its inmates would remain unharmed. In the Aktion of April 8 and 9, 1943, one thousand persons were removed from the ghetto and killed in pits adjacent to the city. In April and May 1943, the murders in the ghetto continued, culminating in the final Aktion on June 20. The sick and the aged were killed on the spot, while the others were murdered in fields in the vicinity of the city. The labor camp was closed on July 22, when all its inmates were put to death, with the exception of a group of workers who were kept alive for another two weeks to sort out the belongings of the victims. At the beginning of August, they too were killed.

In the late 1960's, 500 Jews lived in Tarnopol. I continue my efforts to learn of the fate of my relatives who remained in Tarnopol.