

Feature / By Devorah Klein

Remembrance and Renewal in Bardejov

May 15, 1942. The Jews of Bardejov, Slovakia, were rounded up by the dreaded Nazis, herded into cattle cars, and deported to ghettos in Poland and to concentration camps.

May 15, 2012. Hundreds of Bardejov survivors and their children gathered in Bardejov in a meaningful and poignant two-day event sponsored by the Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee and The United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad to commemorate the destruction of the Jewish community, honor the memory of their loved ones who perished, and celebrate the renovation of the town's cemetery and other key communal buildings.

Mr. Emil Fish, an active member of the Los Angeles Jewish community, established the Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee in 2006. As a survivor of Bardejov and Bergen-Belsen, Mr. Fish returned to his roots in 2005 and visited Bardejov. Appalled by the state of the old Jewish community buildings, and especially the cemetery, Mr. Fish was determined to return at least some of the glory to his hometown.

History of Bardejov

Bardejov, a beautiful town located just a few miles from the Polish border, was home to a Jewish community for about 300 years. Before World War II it boasted a population of approximately 10,000 people, about one-third of whom were Jews. The Jewish community of Bardejov was close-knit and well-organized, consisting mostly of chassidim, including a large number of Sanzer chassidim. Many members of the Bardejov Jewish community originated in Poland and escaped to Bardejov during pogroms that were frequently unleashed on the Polish Jewish communities.

The Jews of Bardejov were very devoted to these refugees and did what they could for them, helping them to settle in the town. Emil (Menachem Mendel) Fish was born in Bardejov in 1935 to a family of chassidim.

Life Under the Nazis

Life was peaceful for the Jews of Bardejov until Hitler, *ym"n*, came to power and Slovakia became an ally of Germany in 1938. On May 15, 1942, a mass order was issued for all Jews of the town to gather. On that day and the next, May 16, over 3,000 Yidden were deported from Bardejov and surrounding areas.



Members of the Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee inspecting the progress on the preservation of the Old Synagogue in Bardejov's Jewish Compound, known as "Jewish Suburbia."



Mayor of Bardejov Boris Hanuscak and Emil Fish in November 2010 when the city agreed to dedicate a parcel of city land for construction of the Bardejov Holocaust Memorial.

Emil's father, Reb Tzvi Elimelech Fish (a descendant of the Bnei Yissoschor), was one of the lucky ones. As the owner of a successful business that manufactured railroad ties, he was considered a crucial member of the community and was granted a coveted yellow card, which granted his family an exemption from deportation. However, the Fish family knew that this reprieve would not last.

The Nazis forced all remaining Jews in the Bardejov region to move west towards Bratislava, deeper into Slovakia. Subsequently, the Fish family went into hiding for several months, living in the roof of a barn in Nitra that belonged to a Baptist. When it became too dangerous to hide, they moved to Bratislava under Aryan papers, until they were caught in the fall of 1944.

At first they were taken to a camp in Sered. Shortly afterwards, the family was separated and Emil's father was sent to Buchenwald, while Emil, together with his mother and sister, was taken to Bergen-Belsen.

In Bergen-Belsen, Emil and his family were allowed to

remain together. There was nothing to do but wait for the next meal, hoping not to die of hunger and hoping not to contract any diseases, especially typhus. Emil's sister did contract typhus and was sent to a "hospital" where most of the people died. Emil went to visit her every day to encourage her to survive. Happily, she did survive.

Then, on April 15, 1945, an impressively dressed British officer entered the barracks and announced those long-awaited words: "You are liberated!"

Emil and his family returned to Bardejov, hoping to be reunited with their father. Emil's father and mother had arranged before their separation that should they survive, they would each return to Bardejov to reunite.

It did not take long before the Fish family was happily reunited. However, not everyone from Bardejov was so lucky. Of the 3,000 Jews that were deported on May 15-16, it was estimated that only about ten percent survived.

In June 1949, Emil made *aliyah* with "*aliyah hanoar*" and went to a yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael. However, his family emigrated to Montreal and in 1951, Emil returned to his family. In 1955 the family moved to Los Angeles, where they became an integral part of the community.

Return to His Roots

For many years, Mr. Emil Fish resisted returning to Bardejov to visit the town of his roots, despite the fact that many other survivors had returned to visit. Finally, in 2005, thanks to the urging of his children, Mr. Fish broke down and decided to travel to Europe with his wife Jenny and one of his children and visit *kever avos*, the cemetery in Bardejov where his grandmother is buried.

Upon reaching the cemetery, Fish was shaken to the core, as the cemetery was in an extreme state of disrepair. Although it had not been vandalized and the tombstones had not been damaged by human hands, the area was overgrown; many tombstones were not readable and had fallen off their foundations. Fish could not find the graves he was seeking.

Bardejov has a well-built Jewish compound, a group of communal buildings including a large Old Synagogue, *beis medrash* and *mikveh* buildings. These buildings had also been desecrated and were being used as a hardware store and a warehouse for building supplies.

A second shul, the Bikur Cholim shul where Emil had celebrated his bar mitzvah in



The Bardejov fish market, circa 1937.



Participants in the Memorial Gathering at the Bardejov Jewish cemetery.

1948, was still intact. After most of Bardejov's Jews had left, two families remained; one man, Mayer Spira, cared for the Bikur Cholim Synagogue. During the war, one elderly lady boarded up the Bikur Cholim shul, locked the door and would not let anyone enter the building.

Subsequently, Meyer Spira continued to use the shul on a daily basis, including reading from the *sifrei Torah*, and thereby claimed the shul to be in active use, saving it from being taken over by the Communist Slovakian government. Hence the shul remained intact, and when Fish was able to enter the building after Meyer Spira passed away, he found that it appeared exactly as it had almost 60 years earlier.

Upon witnessing the deplorable condition of the cemetery and the Jewish compound, known as the Jewish Suburbia of Bardejov, Fish resolved to act. He created the Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee, whose mis-

will restore them to proper use.

The work done in Bardejov by Mr. Fish has been recognized by Jews and non-Jews alike. On April 25, he was appointed a member of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad.

Memorial to the Victims

Another project of the Bardejov Jewish Preservation Committee is the planned Bardejov Holocaust Memorial designed by Giora Solar, an internationally renowned preservation architect, and a local architect, Milo Olejar. The Memorial will consist of a facade wall with a partial roof surrounding a Memorial Garden and descriptions with some history of the Holocaust in its interior. Mayor Boris Hanuscak has been working closely with the Committee and is encouraging the establishment of this memorial.

Let us hope that with the approval of the proper authorities, the names of approximately 2,400 victims will be inscribed on the walls of the *beis medrash* inside the Suburbia. In this manner, the names of those who perished will be memorialized.

"For many of us, and especially those who are survivors, this may be our last chance to memorialize our families and friends," Mr. Fish explained. "This accomplishment will guarantee that our children and grandchildren will have a place to come to learn about their roots and to honor the memory of their ancestors."

The Memorial Gathering

An extensive and intense program took place on May 15-16, including a visit to the cemetery; a memorial service at the train station; a walk to the shul that reversed the steps of Bardejov's citizens as they were rounded up by the Nazis, *ym's*, from the shul to the train station; a ceremony in the shul; a reception with Mayor Hanuscak; an award service to righteous gentiles who helped Jews during the War; and a tribute dinner to recognize Jews and non-Jews who helped others during those difficult times and who work to preserve the Jewish heritage of the town today.

About 130 family members and friends traveled to Europe to attend the program. It is hoped that the gathering will bring additional pressure on the responsible parties controlling the Suburbia so that the remaining buildings of the Jewish Compound will be returned to proper use.

Wednesday's program included a seminar on the history of the Holocaust and the town of Bardejov, and visits to surrounding villages.

"As Jews, we believe in memories," concludes Mr. Fish. "I was angry that there is no memory of those who perished left in the town. Many Jews, as they were being thrown into the gas chambers, begged, 'Please, do not forget us.' That message had a great impact on me—we must find ways to memorialize the memories of the six million. We must teach about the past so that our children will know where they came from. This is why I feel it is worthwhile to preserve and restore the Jewish heritage in the town of Bardejov and the memory of those who lived there."



Corrie Siegel

Memorial Gathering participants on a Solidarity March.

sion is to preserve and restore Bardejov's Jewish communal properties, commemorate Jewish heritage in the Bardejov region, sponsor Jewish educational programs in Bardejov, provide genealogical resources for Bardejov's descendants, and collaborate as an international advocate for Slovakia's Jewish heritage.

Restoring the Cemetery And Communal Properties

Emil began making frequent trips to Bardejov to pursue his goals of restoring the cemetery and to urge the restoration of the communal properties.

His first project was to restore the Jewish cemetery. He contacted the Heritage Foundation for Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries (otherwise known as Avoteinu), an organization located in Brooklyn that specializes in restoring cemeteries throughout Europe. Under Emil's direction and sponsorship, HFPJC cleaned up the cemetery and restored the *matzeivos*, placing them on new foundations. Mr. Fish created a website for Bardejov survivors (www.bardejov.org) and catalogued all the *matzeivos* on the website for easy reference.

Once the cemetery restoration was complete, Fish turned his attention to the Jewish Suburbia. Determined to return these hallowed buildings to respectable condition, Fish met with Bardejov's mayor and pressured many politicians and organizations responsible for the suburbia. At the present time the Old Synagogue is being restored to its former condition. To date, the *beis medrash* and *mikveh* continue to be occupied by the hardware store and warehouse, but it is hoped that in the near future and with Hashem's help, the authorities controlling the properties

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