

A Unique Journey

Rabbi Ronald S. Roth

Rabbi Emeritus, Fair Lawn Jewish Center/Congregation B'nai Israel

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A few weeks ago, I spoke to a customer care person at United Airlines, going over the details of my flight from Newark to Krakow, Poland and my return from Prague, Czech Republic. She asked me, "Is this trip for business or pleasure?" Knowing that it was only half true, I replied, "For pleasure." I did intend to do some touring and bought a new camera to record the sights. That was not the main purpose of my trip, though. I was going on a pilgrimage. No, I was not traveling to Jerusalem, nor to the grave of a mystical Rabbi. I was planning to visit Pacov, a small town of about four thousand residents, in southern Bohemia, some fifty miles southeast of Prague, preceded by tours of Oskar Schindler's factory and Auschwitz/Birkenau. Once there was a thriving Jewish community of about two hundred individuals in Pacov. Today, there are none. I went there to participate in the annual Czech Day of Jewish Monuments and to connect more closely to the history and memory of those Jews. How did that come about? In 1978 a member of the Fair Lawn Jewish Center/Congregation B'nai Israel, Ed Davidson, traveled to London to bring to the synagogue a Holocaust Memorial Torah. It was one of some 1600 Torah scrolls that had been brought to Prague in 1942 after the Nazis closed down all the synagogues in Bohemia and Moravia. In 1964 a British philanthropist arranged to have the scrolls taken to London. Many were sent on "permanent loan" to any Jewish organization that would display them as a memorial to the victims of the Shoah. Our Torah came from Pacov. The airline even gave the Torah its own seat on the flight over the Atlantic. It has been on display in the main sanctuary of our synagogue ever since. The year 2014 was the 50th anniversary of when the Torah Scrolls were brought to the Westminster Synagogue in London. Each congregation that had one was asked to create a poster about their Torah for a celebration at Westminster Synagogue. I decided that I might find out a

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little bit about the Torah with a Google search. I was surprised to find photos, articles, and even home movies from the Jewish community of Pacov. I even learned that I was pronouncing the name of the town incorrectly. I did not realize that in the Czech language the “c” in Pacov has a “tz” sound. I found a 1934 article, in Czech, about the history of the Jews of Pacov. I had the article translated into English and published it in a booklet in 2016.

A little over a year ago, I decided to work on a second book about the Jews of Pacov, with a list of all of their names and as much information about each of them that I could find. I had been in contact with two individuals, Pavel Tychtl, who grew up in the Czech Republic and spent his summers with a relative who lived just outside of Pacov, and Karen Koblitz, an American artist and professor, whose great great grandfather had been married in the Pacov Synagogue. They were working to preserve the memory of the Jews of that town. I cannot thank them enough for all they have done devoting so much time and effort. They created the Tikkun Pacov Synagogue Association, to quote from its website, a “non-political, non-profit, non-governmental, charitable organization...with the objective of striving to keep alive the Jewish history and cultural heritage in the Pacov area...the name Tikkun (Hebrew for repair) implies not only physical repairs to the Pacov Synagogue but also revival of the memory of the lost Jewish community and revival of their place in history, lest they be forgot.” This year a program was planned for August 13th in Pacov on the annual Czech Day of Jewish Monuments. I wanted to be there to participate and to see the synagogue, the home where the rabbi had lived, and the Jewish cemetery in Pacov. Before I went to Pacov I spent several days in Krakow, Poland. There I toured Oskar Schindler’s factory, now a museum, the old Jewish section of that city with synagogues, cemeteries and memorials to what was once a thriving Jewish community.

I went to Auschwitz, and recited a memorial prayer there to those murdered by the Nazis. I traveled to Tabor, a small city in the Czech Republic, to stay in a hotel in the largest city near Pacov. There I walked a few blocks from the hotel to two sites. The first was a parking lot with a large photo of the synagogue that once stood there, serving the five hundred Jews who lived in Tabor. I was pleased that the town had marked that place to recall its Jewish population, but I was a bit disturbed that the text next to the picture of the synagogue read in part, “The synagogue

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was used as a place of worship until the 1930s. The following years were not kind to the synagogue.” I walked two blocks down the street where a large school building stands. Ninety-seven Jews from Pacov spent a night there after being uprooted from their homes in November, 1942. The next day they were deported to Terezin, the concentration camp primarily for Jews from Bohemia and Moravia. From there almost all were sent to Auschwitz where they were murdered.



On the morning of August 13th, I arrived in Pacov. I stood outside the synagogue. It survived World War II, but had been used for various commercial purposes in the intervening years. It had been neglected and in need of repair. Tikkun Pacov was able to purchase the building, have it

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declared an official Czech historical site, and complete some preservation work. There was a new roof. Four of the ten windows had been replaced and two exterior sides were renovated. There was still much to be done with the hope of making it a memorial to the Jews of that town, as well as a community center for Pacov.



I walked around the building. I paused for a few minutes just looking and sensing what this place meant to the Jews of Pacov. I took a breath and finally stepped inside. It looked familiar from the photos I had seen. Pavel Tychtel had created six large posters with photos of the Jews of Pacov and they were arranged along the sides. He had sent me several of those pictures and I recognized many faces. There they were, posing for the camera, standing with their families at a simcha, playing musical instruments, riding bicycles or simply enjoying a vacation. As I knew from my research, and as the photos attested, the Jews of Pacov were very

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modern and well-integrated into Czech society. This was not a sheitel. I also knew that only seven survived the Holocaust. One of them, Vera Lederová, appeared in several photos with her large extended family.

I looked around at the walls and the ceiling. Decaying plaster covered many parts of it, but in numerous places, the structural bricks appeared. There had been one hundred seats on the main floor and sixty in what had originally been the women's balcony. The stairs to that upper level had recently been discovered. I thought not only of the prayers recited but how this space had been a sanctuary filled with warmth; a place where families and friends renewed the bonds between them. There is a unique feeling that occurs when a small community gathers together. The total number of Jews in Pacov and the surrounding towns had peaked at a little over 200 in the late nineteenth century. Many of them lived in even smaller towns in the surrounding area. At least a third of them were related by blood or marriage. I was thinking about the atmosphere during the times of greatest attendance, the High Holidays. The younger Jews who had moved away as opportunities became available in the late 19th and early 20th century. No doubt they came back to their home town to be with family for those special times. As they gathered it was not only the prayers they offered but the smiles, kisses, hugs and the feeling of truly being at home that made their gathering unique.

The seats in the synagogue were full as the program began. In the front row was Stefan Bader. His father, Hanus Bader, was a prominent citizen of Pacov who survived Auschwitz, forced labor in Germany and a death march at the end of the war. The Swedish Red Cross brought him to Sweden where he lived out his life and where Stefan continues to live. Towards the back were Audrey Knoth, her husband Phil and nephew, Tristan. Her grandfather, Josef Robitscek, a brilliant and accomplished engineer, was the only Jew from Pacov to escape to the United States. Part of his professional training was in Germany in the 1930s. He saw Nazi antisemitism firsthand, and knew he had to leave. He converted to Catholicism, the religion of his wife, and had his daughter converted as well, shortly before they left Czechoslovakia. They changed their last name from the Jewish sounding Robitscek to his wife's maiden name, Lucas. He never told his grandchildren that he was Jewish. Recently Audrey, her brother and sister-in-law had been doing some genealogical research. They found my name because of the book I published about Pacov's Jews. We spoke on

the phone last November and I was able to confirm what they had suspected, that her grandfather was in fact, Jewish. I also told them what I had discovered in my research. Josef's mother, their great grandmother Cecilie Robitscková, had been murdered at Auschwitz. That was a shock to them. Audrey, Phil and Tristan came to the Czech Republic not only to be at the Pacov program, but also to visit their great grandfather's grave, to see her great grandfather's home in Pacov, and find out more about their family.

I had asked for a few minutes to speak and pray at the beginning of the program. Pavel introduced me. I spoke about the book I am working on, listing all the Jews of Pacov and their fates, as Pavel translated my words. I quoted the following, from the last paragraph of what will be my introduction to the book, noting that so much material about the Jews of Pacov has been lost. I had to settle for the incomplete information that is left about each Jew from Pacov. For some, all I could find were their names and when and where they were born, and when they were sent to a death camp and little else. The Hebrew word for soul is *neshamah*. Central to that word, are its middle two letters, shin and mem. Together they make up the Hebrew word *shem*, 'name'. It is believed that your name is the key to your soul. It is a reflection of your being. In my new book I will list name after name. I hope that recording them maintains some small portion of the essence of each. I recognize that those who read the book will not necessarily go over every word on these lists. No, it is not scintillating reading. However, I like to imagine, that the readers will peruse at least some of those names and the details of their lives, imagining what has been lost. I have dedicated the book to a simple task, seeing that not only the names, but at least part of the essence of each of the Jews of Pacov is never lost.

After I explained what my new book will be, I chanted Hebrew words that had not been heard in that holy space for so many years, the traditional memorial prayer for the dead. I added words for the victims of the Holocaust. I repeated it in English and paused. The words of the Mourner's Kaddish needed to be recited at this place, at this time for the Jews of Pacov. Some thoughts quickly came to mind. Was there a minyan of ten Jews in this synagogue, the quorum required for the recitation of the Kaddish? I knew there were a few Jews present, but maybe not ten. Then I stopped my thoughts and said to myself, how foolish I was being. It did not matter how many Jews were there, because this was a rare time when the necessity of the moment superseded the

traditional rules of Jewish law. I had to recite the Kaddish and I did. It was one of the most emotional moments of my trip. I spoke the words, slowly, and deliberately. It took some effort as I thought of the souls of those who had once graced this space. Afterwards, when the program was over, the wife of the Rabbi of the Czech city of Brno, who knew many of those present, told me we did indeed have a minyan of ten Jews in the synagogue. While I was glad to hear that, I was certain that on the one hand it did not matter, and on the other hand, it was a tribute to those departed souls.

As the program continued there were readings by students from the local high school. One of them was from a family of Vietnamese refugees settled in Pacov. Two survivors from Terezin, Lucie Ledererová and Helena Glancová spoke. There was a video of a Czech children's story and a puppet show about a Jewish couple in the Czech Republic. I could not understand much because it was in Czech. Pavel translated some of those words. While listening, I could not continue to look at the photos of the Jews of Pacov on the walls. It was too difficult as I knew so much about them and how their lives ended so cruelly. I just kept looking at the crumbling walls and the peeling ceiling. After the ceremony ended, I went to the Rabbi's home in Pacov, also maintained by Tikkun Pacov, and the Jewish cemetery.



The only remaining survivor from Pacov, the Rabbi's daughter, Nelly Prezma lived in that house. She was able to make Aliyah a few years after the war ended and survive the attacks on Oct. 7th that came close to her home. She survived being sent to Auschwitz/Birkenau and taken from there to Germany as a slave laborer. She was liberated while being marched to Bergen Belsen. After the war she returned to Prague, but did not feel at ease living there as a Jew. She finally was able to leave for Israel, using a false name, just before the Communist Government stopped all

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immigration to the Jewish State. She settled in Kibbutz Dorot, a place where she felt comfortable because many of the residents were originally from Czechoslovakia. It is located in the Negev less than five miles from the city of Sderot. On Oct. 7th The Hamas terrorists reached Sderot and came within a few miles of her home, but her kibbutz was not attacked. I cannot imagine the fears and thoughts that came into her consciousness when she became aware of the terrorists near her home. At first after Oct. 7th, she did not want to be relocated but finally agreed to go to a safer place in Israel. I was pleased to learn that she has two sons, six grandchildren and ten greatgrandchildren.

While I was in the Rabbi's home, I saw a tray with black and white stones in it. Pavel had arranged for children in Pacov to paint them. The black stones were decorated with white paint and the white stones with black paint. Many were adorned with the word, "Tikkun" and a Jewish star. He said to me, "Take some." I picked two, a black and a white one, held them in my hand and put them in my pocket. They are now on a bookshelf where I can see them when I sit at my computer. To me, the white stone is a symbol of life and the flourishing of the Jewish community of Pacov, and the black one is a reminder of its tragic end. My pilgrimage is over. I will return to work on my book about the Jews of Pacov. Now, that task has become even more necessary and urgent.

I will be giving an illustrated lecture about my trip to Pacov on Monday evening, January 22nd, 8:00 PM at the Fair Lawn Jewish Center/Congregation B'nai Israel. For those who cannot attend in person, livestreaming will be available. The program is one way our congregation is honoring International Holocaust Day, January 27th, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz/Birkenau. More information about the program will be available soon.