

Yizkor—Remembrance

When my niece asked me to visit Poland with her, I agreed enthusiastically, but after reading the last letters from my mother's sisters, I wasn't so sure.... by **Bonny V. Fetterman**

I always knew they were there—the packet of letters from my mother's family in Poland tucked in the bottom drawer of her bureau. The letters written in Yiddish were from her father in Dabrowa through 1939. Those written in Polish were from her three sisters in Krakow, then Mielec, up to 1941. When my mother died, I transferred them from her bureau to mine, knowing they were precious and fearing them at the same time.

I finally found the courage to have them translated when my niece Tammy, a young mother and wife, asked me to visit Poland with her. At first I agreed enthusiastically to join her, but after reading the letters from my mother's sisters—Rechja, 17, Chaija, 14, and Anna, 28, with an infant daughter—I decided that Poland was the last place I wanted to go. I felt that I couldn't bear to be in the place where they suffered so much. In the letters they pleaded for visas they knew would never reach them in time. Hearing their voices for the first time, I was deeply shaken, and my mother's grief became my own.

My niece understood my hesitation, and in the most beautiful letter I've ever received, explained her reasons for going. "It is heartbreaking that there was no way to help them at the time," she wrote. "I know it will be difficult to be in the place where they were and know that we are too late to save them. I wish I could have been here to help them when they needed help but there is nothing I can do about what is past. All I can do now is go and visit and not forget. In the letter Rechja says she had thought that they had been long forgotten. When I go it will show that even sixty years and two generations later, they have not been

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RECHJA AND ANNA ROSENBLUTH, KRAKOW, 1938.

forgotten. It doesn't change anything but it means something to me."

Her words prompted me to reconsider the trip—and towards that end, I began to read the accounts of others who discovered their own packets of letters. Holocaust historian Michael Berenbaum calls these letters, now emerging from attics and basements and drawers, "a new genre of original Jewish documentation," reflecting the experience of individuals at that time, in that place, and in their own words.

The Lost: A Search for Six of the Six Million by Daniel Mendelsohn

(Harper Perennial, 528 pp., paperback \$15.95)

Growing up on Long Island, Daniel Mendelsohn took a strong interest in family history even as a child and listened attentively to the stories of his grandfather, Abraham Jaeger. But there was a dearth of stories about his grandfather's eldest brother Shmiel, his wife Ester, and their four daughters, all of whom perished in

the Holocaust. After his grandfather's death, Daniel discovered the contents of the old wallet that Abraham always kept in the breast pocket of his jacket—Shmiel's last letters.

Since he knew nothing about the circumstances of their deaths, Daniel was determined to learn more about these relatives who seemed more lost than dead. In August 2001, together with three of his siblings, he traveled to Bolechow in western Ukraine. Local Ukrainians told them there had been a massacre in 1941 and showed them the site. One recognized the family name. The house no longer existed.

The real discoveries came later, when they shared a video of the trip with relatives in Israel, who in turn put them in touch with Bolechow survivors around the world. The first call came from a man in Australia who had been the boyfriend of Ruchele, the third sister. Daniel and his brother Matt, a photographer, went to Sydney to meet him. Over the next five years, they traveled to Beersheva, Haifa, Stockholm, and Copenhagen to interview other Bolechowers who knew the family. Returning to Bolechow in 2005, Daniel knew the right questions to ask to verify some of the stories he had heard.

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