

Hope in a horrific place LETTER FROM BORINIA / A search for ancestors ends with a new generation singing Hatikvah.

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I FIRST heard of Borinia in the genealogy column of the Canadian Jewish News. It was the shtetl in southwestern Poland that was the place of origin of the Borinsky family, who, to avoid Canadian anti-Semitism, became the Borins family. The next time I saw Borinia was at the Holocaust Museum in Washington on a wall listing towns where the entire Jewish population was killed by the Nazis.

After a conference in Berlin last month, I stayed on to search for Borinia. Using a Jewish genealogy Web site, I discovered it at a railway junction 40 kilometres from the industrial centre of Katowice, Poland.

A Jewish heritage map showed a cemetery in Zory, a place whose co-ordinates -- especially the railway junction -- matched Borinia's. With two colleagues, not Jewish but curious, I drove into Zory, an agricultural market town that banners on the main street boasted had been in existence since 1271. We had learned enough Polish to ask directions but not to understand the answers.

Our first interlocutors led us to the cemetery at Zory's main church. More knowledgeable people steered us to a suburban railway station. My friends' curiosity turned to determination, and after more encounters and many gestures, we finally located Borinia's cemetery on a suburban lane, beside a schoolyard.

Climbing over the fence, what we found was reason for dismay. The cemetery was overgrown and unkempt; most of the tombstones were knocked over, and many were defaced, with the names scraped off the stone or covered in spray paint. I could make out some names in Hebrew and German -- Borinia was in Silesia, the region contested between Germany and Poland -- but nothing like Borinsky.

The trail ended, and only questions remained. Did the Catholics of wartime Zory know that their Jewish neighbours in Borinia were being herded onto the trains? Did they know what the Jews' fate would be? Will someone ever cut the weeds, raise and clean the tombstones, and write the history of the Jews of Borinia?

That all the Jews of Borinia perished is no surprise, for it was only an hour by train from Auschwitz. We then drove to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest of the concentration camps, where, the monument told us, more than a million and a half people, mostly Jews, were murdered.

Two moments on that visit stand out. Auschwitz, the original camp, is a well-documented (and, on that particular day, uncrowded) museum. In one of the barracks, a large room contains a case of shoes worn by the victims, another of eyeglasses, and a third of children's clothes. At the clothes, one of my colleagues broke into tears, and for many heartbreaking moments his sobbing filled the empty room.

Birkenau, three kilometres from Auschwitz, was a death machine. Prisoners were taken off the trains there. Those who were healthy were assigned to the rough wooden barracks, many of which are still standing. Those who were not were dispatched to the gas chambers and crematoria at the end of the railway line. The factory of death now stands in ruins because as the failure of Hitler's grand design became evident to his lieutenants, they clumsily tried to destroy the evidence. At this spot, the most fitting and necessary act would be to say Kaddish, the memorial prayer. However, prayer in Judaism should be communal, and there was no community.

At that moment a Jewish youth group arrived and began a service beside the ruined crematorium. Together with them, I said Kaddish. We concluded by singing Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem -- a poem of hope set to the main theme of Smetana's Moldau, a composition inspired by the countryside not far from this horrific place. Although most of the young people were in tears, their presence changed my perspective on that depressing day. The second generation of Jews born after the Holocaust was standing at this site where more than a million of our ancestors were martyred, saying Kaddish and singing Hatikvah. Could there be any clearer, any more powerful, evidence of our people's survival?

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