

The tracks of their ancestors



Photo courtesy of Robert Katz

Harriet Katz, center, asks translator Roman Gula to pass on a question about her father's family to Janina Szajowska in Cieszanów, Poland.

Augusta family travels into its past — a small town where all Jews died

By BETTY ADAMS
Staff Writer

AUGUSTA — The smells of kasha, pierogis, even the chicken soup, were identical to those filling the kitchen of Harriet Katz's childhood home in New York.

This time, however, the delicious odors emanated from kitchens in Poland, helping confirm the identity of the village of her father, grandfather and other ancestors.

Katz, 71, of Augusta, undertook the pilgrimage to Cieszanów near the Polish-Ukrainian border, along with her husband, Sidney, her son, Robert, and her granddaughter, Shaina.

The three-generation family joined Maine schoolteachers on a tour sponsored by the Holocaust Human Rights Center of Maine.

Harriet Katz found joy in walking the same streets her ancestors did.

It had taken Robert Katz, 48, and a professor of art at the University of Maine at Augusta, seven years and seven trips to the region to locate the correct village.

"I grew up in Brooklyn with basically no information about my grandfather," Harriet Katz said. She grew up speaking Yiddish exclusively until she entered first grade.

Her father and several of his sisters had fled a section of Eastern Europe they referred to as Austria just prior to World War I. All 1,000 Jews in the village, including the remaining family members, were killed in the Holocaust during World War II.

"The town was right in the forefront of the war," Robert Katz said. First the Russians came and took the able-bodied men to the Russian front; the Germans followed, rounding up the Jews and setting up a ghetto within the village.

In August, the Katz family and the teachers heard from village el-



The search for their ancestry brought the Katz family to a grass-filled cemetery in Cieszanów, Poland. Gravestones in the cemetery were destroyed by the Nazis during World War II.



Staff photo / JOE PHELAN

Harriet Katz and her husband, Sidney, recently returned from a visit to her ancestral home, the village of Cieszanów, Poland.

were sent to the death camp at Belzec where 600,000 people were gassed to death and burned.

"They said they smelled the smoke of the burning bodies," Robert Katz said.

He characterized the visit as "a very bittersweet type of coming home." He and his parents and daughter walked through the burned-out shell of the village synagogue, the ruins covered with enough graffiti to show the village still retained animosity toward the Jews.

Harriet Katz asked herself, "What type of individuals could kill or murder so many people?" and she wondered, "What if I walked around Poland with a Star of David?"

At a meeting arranged by the village mayor, Harriet Katz heard first the name of her uncle, then a reference to his leather shop, then other names her parents and cousins had recalled.

"At this point, it was the first time that I shed a few tears," she said. "It was reality that I was facing." More information followed, including the fact that one of those elders lived in the home formerly occupied by her uncle, Nachum Furman.

"When we got to the cemetery, we realized our ancestors were probably buried there dating back 500 years," Robert Katz said. But in the absence of headstones, the family will never be sure. Today, the gates guard only a grassy field.

The trip to the village was part of the tour, fitted in among visits to other ghettos, death camps and lightings of memorial candles.

Harriet Katz saw a small crematorium built for children. "They threw them in alive," she said. She saw a thick braid of dark hair among the pile of women's hair at a death camp. The color was her hair color when she was younger. Shaina Katz, 13, saw a hair brush in



Photo courtesy of Robert Katz

The former home and leather shop of Nachum Furman, Harriet Katz' uncle, stands on a corner in Cieszanów, Poland.

one of the latrines at the camp.

Near the end of their journey, at the Treblinka death camp, Harriet Katz abruptly stopped walking and sat down when she felt her heart would burst.

Her son asked how she felt.

"It became too powerful for me to express my feelings," she said. "It took me back 55 years. If my father didn't leave, I wouldn't be here."

At every stop, Shaina Katz said Kaddish, a prayer of mourning, and she plans to make a presentation about the death camps to her eighth-grade class this year.

And Harriet Katz would like to join the next tour planned by the Holocaust Human Rights Museum of Maine in two years.

That one will start in Berlin, with participants riding the railway to the death camps in Poland, over the same tracks the Jews rode to their death.

"The first time was very emotional," she said. "The second time I think I'll be hearing things."