

A Single Jew in a Sea of Gentiles

By Ben-Tsiyon Klibansky

Snowflakes fell and accumulated on the brown ground. Slowly I tread upon the muddy snow, trying to make my way to the Market Square, where my father's house stood. I finally arrived and looked around. The roof of the house was full of snow, and behind the beautiful river was at the beginning of its freezing. The waters stood still, and so they would remain until spring comes.

This was the town of Kidan in central Lithuania on 10th of Tevet a year earlier, the General Kaddish Day (Day of Remembrance). And I am the only Jew in a sea of Gentiles. There hasn't been a Jew here since the local community had been destroyed. Its sons had been one third of all the residents before the Holocaust. With the onset of "Operation Barbarossa", and even before the Nazis entered the town, Jews were cruelly attacked by local Christians, and dozens of Jewish youngsters were murdered by their neighbors. Unnamed Jews. No one knows the place of their burial and there is no date to mention them. I wondered how I would memorialize them on the General Kaddish Day, since I didn't know their names.

I decided to walk to the place where the dead of the town were buried before the days of evil began. Again I trudged through the snow on one of the main roads. All was still. On both sides of me I saw stores, galleries, auto garages. I knew that before the war many of the stores on this street had been owned by Jews. This I had learned through a research that students in the local Lithuanian gymnasium had done. Their English teacher, Laima Ardaviciene, had spent the last years preserving the memories of the Kidan Jewry. One year, she asked her students to research and chart the Jewish owned businesses which had operated in the town, and to post their findings on the virtual map of the town. This is the path I now followed. Tragically, there was no sign whatsoever, that the Jewish community had ever existed. All was erased as though it had never been.

Twenty minutes later, I arrived at a small intersection. To the right was the Jewish cemetery. It is definitely not a frequent sight to see a Jewish cemetery in Lithuania, certainly not one that has been preserved almost in its entirety. Here is where the Jews of Kidan were buried since the 1870's onward. My own ancestors are buried here as well. I halted. If I continued on the main road, I would arrive at the valley of death, the pit where thousands of the town's Jewry were murdered after two months of being chased and humiliated by local Christians. It is reasonable to assume that the wagons carrying them to their death travelled on this very road. These Jewish souls, who were exhausted after thirteen days of utter starvation, knew that to their right was the cemetery where their fathers and forefathers were buried. What went through their minds in these awful moments? I have no doubt that some of them pondered the words of Ecclesiastes "Then I accounted those who died long since more fortunate than those who are still living". Those being transported to their deaths certainly were jealous of their forefathers who had merited a respectable burial.

I turned right and arrived at the entrance to the cemetery. I opened the gate and entered. I remembered my visits here a decade earlier, when it was well kept and neat. This is what entered my mind as I stood there now looking at it; desolate and neglected, with weeds and moss that covered the graves. The graves of my forefathers I arranged and cleaned with great effort. However, I couldn't do so to the hundreds of other gravestones. Who would care for them as they had no savior? I stood there pondering what to do.

The same day, I met with the teacher Laima, who I mentioned previously. She wanted to show me the annual project that her students had done. I entered her classroom. I was shocked to see on the wall a large drawing of a tree, its roots coming out of the Kidan study hall and synagogue that survived the Holocaust, and its branches pointing skyward. As I neared the work of art, I saw that inside the branches were written the names of the Jewish families who had lived in Kidan before the war. I stood amazed in front of it.

I remembered that the teacher would be initiating a new project to eternalize the Jewish community that year. I daringly suggested that the graves in the Jewish cemetery be cleaned. In order to impress her, I showed her the pictures of my great grandparents' graves after they had been scrubbed. She stared at them but didn't react. However, apparently the pictures made an impression because several weeks later she did in fact accept my suggestion. Over the course of last summer, she and her students toiled and scoured all the tombstones in the cemetery.

This year on the General Kaddish Day I will be in my home. I will, of course, think about those buried in the Kidan Cemetery, and no, not about the fact that their tombstones were cleaned. I will think about the young people who cleaned the graves. They certainly are unaware of their ancestry because of the official denial by the Lithuanian society of the crucial part of Lithuanian Christians in the murder of their Jewish neighbors during the Holocaust. It is natural that these same young people who took the time and trouble to labor and clean the stones developed a connection to the cemetery and its dead residents, the Jews. I would like to believe that in the future they will continue to protect and preserve this holy place.