



Yaffa Eliach (center) with Tammy Menaker (left) and Holly Levinson (right) last year in Charlotte.

## Shtetl

(Continued from previous page)

Our excitement grew as the bus approached Eishishok, about 35 miles south of Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. What did we expect to find? We knew there would be no family members left to greet us (or any living Jews, for that matter), but my brother and I hoped to get a feeling for the place that had shaped our father's early years.

Yaffa had said that when she visited about ten years ago, our family home was still standing. Beyond that, we expected to look for gravestones in the ancient cemetery; after all, if our family was named for the local river, we thought, we must go back a long way.

How naive we were. The bus stopped first at the spot where the 900-year-old Jewish cemetery had been. Now on the site, desolate acres and acres of adjacent vacant land, stood a large school that the Soviets had deliberately built there to wipe out centuries of Jewish history in Eishishok; they had paved the streets with the ground-up headstones. We walked angrily past the school through the fields; children were playing soccer upon the graves of our ancestors.

After a short walk across a cow pasture, we entered an enclosed area with one large commemorative stone, erected after the collapse of Soviet control. Carved into the black granite was an inscription: "In this place, 25-26, 9, 1941, the Nazi assassins and their local collaborators murdered ferociously about 1500 Jews from Eishishok and its environs." We listened as Zvi Michaeli, the sole survivor of this massacre, described what had happened here and how he — a boy of sixteen — had lived. Sobbing, he told how the Nazis marched the village men, row after row, to the edge of a trench and shot them. Zvi counted the seconds between the regular volleys of fire and jumped into the trench two seconds before the volley that would have killed him. The bodies of his father, brother, teachers and all the men he knew fell in on top of him; at night, bloody and naked, he crawled out of the mass grave. Now, 56 years later, he is standing before a PBS camera, telling his story. We recite the Kaddish.

From here we travel across town to the site of the women's and children's massacre. Here, the marker indicates that 2500 are buried. But this time we have no eyewitness; no women crawled out of this grave. Again, we recite the Kaddish.

Followed by curious local children, we somberly wander the town. Arguments erupt among the survivors: Is this the Goodman house? One says "yes," one says "no." Aren't these the original paving stones in the marketplace? Isn't this where the summer house of the synagogue was?

We stand in the square that once housed a famed yeshiva and synagogue; these historic buildings have been replaced by uninspired, Soviet-style structures. An elderly

local woman appears and presents Yaffa with a pretty needlepoint picture of a village cottage; she says she found the piece unfinished in a Jewish home during the war. She has finished it.

As we stand in the deserted market square, Yaffa describes the former thriving local economy. People

would travel for miles on Thursdays to trade at the bustling Eishishok market, known for its abundant, quality goods and full selection. Looking at the broken windows and lifeless stalls lining the square and the dusty deserted streets, we find the scene she describes hard to imagine.

Yaffa delivers the disappointing news to my brother and me: The Soltz house is no longer standing. We look at each other soberly, but at this point, we are not surprised. There is no longer a cemetery, there is no longer a marketplace, there is no longer a synagogue or yeshiva. Our heritage in this town seemed more real in the museum, where our family's photos hang.

Nothing is left of us here but the river. ☆

## Beyond Survival

### How A Jewish Day School Education Honors the Memories of the Victims, the Dreams of the Survivors

*This article is adapted from a recent speech Sherry Wilzig Izak delivered at her children's Day School dinner in New Jersey. The article originally appeared in this form in The New Jersey Jewish Standard and The Jewish Parent Connection.*

As the child of a survivor, I felt helpless in responding to the past. As an adult and a mother I feel an obligation to shape the future - by educating my children. And in a sense, the growth and continuity of Judaism, which comes from educating all of our children, was what survival was really all about, not just remaining physically alive - as incredible as that was in itself — but remaining alive in spirit and planting seeds for generations to come.

It is now, in my role as a mother, that my role as a daughter of a survivor comes to the forefront. For now, I too, must pass the responsibility of bearing witness from generation to generation.

Being the child of a survivor is at times a burden. You grow up with the weight of six million vic-

tims on your shoulders and a responsibility to carry on literally in their name. Sure, I could listen to my father's stories, but how do you deal with hearing that the parent who keeps you warm went on three death marches through ice and snow; how the parent who feeds you; how the parent who comforts you when you are nothing but dandelions for days to stay alive; how the parent who protects you from pain received a brutal beating from a sadistic guard.

When your parents are your whole world, how can you hear of them seeing their loved ones murdered in front of them? And how do I explain the inner panic I feel when I try to remember all the names, the dates, and the places — knowing I can't. But if I don't who will?

Yes, it's not always easy being the child of a survivor. But being a child of a survivor is also a gift that gives you a pride, a strength, and a family bond that is indescribable.

We don't honor our survivors for "merely" surviving, as miraculous as that was — we honor them

for how they survived. We honor them because within their frail bodies, their humanity and decency remained strong. Yes, that their hearts remained beating was incredible - but that their hearts remained full of charity and compassion was even more incredible. And the miracles did not stop there. Our survivors had children. And still raised them as Jews, with a sense of identity and a connection with the Jewish people so strong that their children are our students today.

I worry that I cannot possibly convey to the third generation all of what's been passed on to me. In fact, when my younger son asked me just last year, "Mommy, why did the Nazis kill grandpa's parents?" I have to admit, with all my learning, I was at a loss to answer him. And I realized how glad I am that his Jewish Day School is there to help me. Especially, because while this school will pass on the tales of Jewish deaths, it will also pass on the beauty of Jewish life. For every story it teaches about

(Continued on page 28)

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