

Kletsk: A Town Without Memories

by Henry Neugass

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The trail back to my ancestral town is a fragile thread. About one hundred years ago my grandfather, Yaseph Kirzner, left his native town in Eastern Europe (Russia then, Poland before that). This man came to the new world, married, and sired two children. One of them was my mother, born 1915 in Brooklyn. His old-country history is represented by a single pre-war photograph. The only physical lead to the old country, to Kletsk, is a photographer's stamp on the reverse:



Photograph...
W. Kurnos
Kleck
Slonimska 2

There is also an inscription in Yiddish script: *To remember us... To my Brother and Sister-in-Law. Family Kirzner, 1937.* A much later note in my mother's hand adds, *This is the family of my father's brother. Killed by the Nazis.* The emulsion on the other side is the only memorial, the only trace of my great-uncle, Morduch Kirzner, and his family. The names of his wife and four children are not recorded.

I followed the leads provided by the photographer's stamp. In those days a family was unlikely to have traveled far to have a photo taken so I assumed that this must have been my ancestral town: Kletsk. I learned the common variants of the town name: Kletzk, Kletsk, Kliecak, Klieck, Klechesk, Klyetsk—and others in Cyrillic. The most commonly used variant of the town name I found was Kletsk. The photographer's shop was on a street named for a place called in English, Slonim, a town about 100km away. The Polish language was entirely unfamiliar to me. The mark across the "l" is a stroke, a diacritic, and the town name is pronounced approximately Swoneem. Was the photographer's studio on the road to Slonim?

Finding My Grandfather

Extensive research revealed no records of my grandfather's arrival in this country, nothing. He simply appeared in New York about 1910. He never used the family name Kirzner in America. He took a job with a photographer named Smith. When the boss retired or died he took over the business and the name. My grandfather became Joseph Smith—a name that is impossible to research. In this and in other ways, Grandpa Joe was an elusive fellow.

Eventually, I found distant relatives who replied to my queries, "Kletsk? Yes, that is where we came from." They added a little more about my maternal ancestors. The Kirzners were farmers in Kletsk; they had an orchard, growing plums or maybe cherries. My great-uncle Leibe brought home a bride, Rachel. His parents, my great-grandparents, mistreated Rachel; a determined young woman, she returned to her parents and did not rejoin Leibe until years later after he came to America where his name was now Louis. It is thought that my Kletsker great-grandfather was Avram and his wife was probably called Shimka. Eventually I found photographs of these two: a graying man with sad eyes—my eyes—and a fierce and unhappy woman glaring out of a hand-colored photograph. Nothing more.

Finding Jewish Kletsk

Starting from nothing and knowing almost nothing, these were the questions that I wanted answers to:

- How can I find out more about my Kletsker ancestors?
- How can I learn about the Jewish social, religious, and cultural life in pre-war Kletsk?
- How can I learn about the geography of Kletsk?
- How can I learn about the relationship of Kletsk to other *shtetlekh* in the region?
- What traces of historical Kletsk can I find in Israel and the United States.?
- Where can I find out more about the Holocaust in Kletsk?
- How can I find other people interested in Kletsk?
- How can I keep up to date with work others are doing?
- How can I find out if my question about Kletsk has already been answered?
- What is the appearance of modern Kletsk?

With so little information about the people in my own family, and no prospect of finding more, it seemed clear that further family research was hopeless. So, I decided to do what I could to recover the environment in which they lived, to recreate the *shtetl* of Kletsk. Perhaps in that way, I could picture the world of my great-grandfather, Avram Kirzner.

First, I searched for photographs of the town on the Internet. I could find only two small images of nondescript buildings in Kletsk. I showed them to a neighbor, an ethnic Pole, who said he had passed through Kletsk years before and the photos reflected the small, provincial town of no distinction that he recalled. Next, to encourage others to help me in finding out more about my town, I built a web page. Some people complained that the page was difficult to read, cramped, and crowded. That's exactly what I intended, to evoke the feeling of the narrow streets of the town as I imagined them. I posted the general headings that interested me and answers that would help the novice learn more about our town. Then, posting to the JewishGen

Digest and using the JGFF (JewishGen Family Finder), I started gathering a mailing list of people descended from Jewish Kletsk.

Collecting Memories

In emails to descendants, I found myself pleading for anything that recalled the town. I heard over and over, “So much was lost...” So much was lost that I had the feeling finding objects from the town would be very rare. Eventually, I heard a story about a pair of candlesticks from Kletsk in Albuquerque, but I have never managed to see them. A 1920s Klezmer musician of Kletsk is pictured holding a fiddle. I found the fiddle in the possession of his descendants in South America. They sent me some photos. But the candlesticks and the fiddle are the only substantial objects I’ve been able to discover.

I asked Kletskers for documents: letters, passports, immigration papers, recipes. School report cards would be interesting, too. What about stories? A few descendants recalled hearing stories from parents or grandparents. Could they remember the stories? In most cases, no, they could not. I asked them to please keep a notebook to collect anything that might suddenly be remembered. Don’t worry about complete sentences—even disconnected phrases could be valuable. What about jokes? What better way to understand the concerns of Kletskers than to hear what they joked about! So far, none have turned up. Songs? Nursery rhymes? What was it like to walk the streets of Kletsk? What smells were in the air? What sounds? Did the inhabitants whistle popular tunes? Operatic arias? What sound did their boots make?

As time went on and I heard from more descendants, I discovered that most Kletsker families passed down fond memories of the town. Kletsk, I was beginning to find, was by no means a paradise, but life was generally good, people had enough to eat, and relations with other groups were usually peaceful. Some descendants seemed to have a much more negative view, using words like “mud hole” and implying worse. Perhaps there was no way to get a reality check on these kinds of memories handed down through generations in America.

Collecting Facts

Kletsk was part of a virtually endless network of towns stretching across the region linked by heavily-traveled roads. It was expected that travelers would stay in their general area for fear of traversing unfamiliar roads in areas strange to them. Historically, Kletsk is referenced as having several “dependent” villages, typically with populations of 500 or under: Kajszyce, Laukwcem, Micklewicze Wielkie, Polonkowicze, Zubki. Did these towns have Jewish populations?

Some facilities in Kletsk—most notably, the justice of the peace—were shared with other area towns: Babajewicze, Cepra, Domatkanowicze, Holynka, Jakszyce, Kuchczyce, Lisowoko, Morocz, Panacz, Siniawka, Zaostrowiecze. There are shtetl web sites for neighboring towns, Lyakhovichi, and Nesvizh. Looking at the street scenes of Lyakhovichi, and a modern picture of Kletsker Road between Lyakhovichi and Kletsk, I wondered, except for the utility poles, is this what

our ancestors would have seen in the early 20th century?

I collected maps of the town. I studied the maps. I redrew and compared them. The Kletsk Jewish community was centered around the *shul*, which was located on Jew Street. (This name, I learned, carried no negative connotations). Jew Street joins the main town square at its southwest corner. The earliest map I have seen, dated 1655, shows much the same arrangement of streets and square.

The web site of the Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum of Tolerance offers a page containing a regional map and fifty-five words about Kletsk: *When the Germans began to liquidate the Kletsk Ghetto, the Jews revolted and fought back. They set fire to their own houses. A small number escaped to the forests and joined the Resistance. I found a woman who somehow survived Kletsk as a child. Shortly after the war, she was taken to an orphanage in Israel. The other children mistreated her, she said: they told her Eastern European Jews were passive, cowards, and allowed themselves to be slaughtered.*

I did more research, made more contacts. A virtual colony of Kletskers settled in a Massachusetts mill town. As the town fortunes declined, the families spread across the United States. I found two other Kletsker families in my West Coast community of 60,000. One of their children was recently in my wife’s pre-school class at the local JCC. When I asked, his parents showed no interest in their Kletsk family history.

The Kletsk Yizkor Book lists 900 Kletsk residents. The Central Database at Yad Vashem lists information about Holocaust victims with ties to Kletsk. Recent searches disclose 900 people who were born in Kletsk, 900 individuals who lived in Kletsk before World War II, 800 people who lived in Kletsk during the war, and 900 individuals who died in Kletsk. The information in the Pages of Testimony often includes parents, siblings, and children. The submitter of information is often identified, and he/she or a descendant can sometimes be located. This information can be used to reconstruct family trees and locate survivors. Ellis Island resources list Kletskers who immigrated to the United States. I extracted the names of 750 Kletsker arrivals between 1900 and 1924. By examining the original Ellis Island documents, I was able to gather additional information about members of families traveling together, family members, or landsmen already in the United States, as well as those remaining behind.

An Untold Story in Photographs

I made contact with a descendant whose father returned to Kletsk from the United States in the 1920s. He took his camera, and he used it. His daughter gave me over fifty large prints of Kletsk photos, a treasure beyond estimation—and a heavy burden—because I find myself struggling to do them justice, to place them in context, to bring them forward to modern eyes. I see the main square of Kletsk, lined with Jewish homes, many of them doubling as small shops. The square is dominated by an Orthodox Church.

The Shul was a main feature of Jew Street. Bearded Jews dressed in stereotypical clothing appear in many

photos. But I also see young adults in fashionable clothes—styles that might be seen at the time in Warsaw, or London or Chicago. This seemed to reinforce what I had heard: Kletsk men were considered snappy dressers, dandies. The 1929 Polish Business Directory lists 28 tailors in Kletsk.

There are other sources of photographs. I was able to locate the catalog of *People of a Thousand Towns*, an extensive collection of photographs of Jewish Life in Eastern Europe at YIVO. See <<http://yivo1000towns.cjh.org>>.

I also found a photograph that depicts *Der Val*, a kind of ancient earthen fortification at the edge of town next to the river—not very clear in the old, poorly-reproduced photo. I tracked down a man in Canada who recalls his boyhood in pre-war Kletsk. He tells me that *Der Val* was a wonderful place for winter sledding.

There was a Yeshiva in Kletsk. The Yeshiva and the community at large were unusually well-integrated, I was told, very close-knit. During World War II, the acclaimed leader, Rabbi Aharon Kotler of the Kletsk Yeshiva, led the Yeshiva into exile, first to Siberia, and eventually to Lakewood, New Jersey, where it flourishes today. His grandson, also a Rabbi and an official of the Lakewood Yeshiva, tells me that the rituals practiced today in Lakewood are unchanged from those used in Kletsk. The Yeshiva community does not look back at Kletsk as history; they continue to live the same life in a different place. He invites me to come to Lakewood and experience it for myself.

My Journey to Kletsk

Some thirty-six months after starting my research, in May, 2007, I find myself at the city limits of Kletsk. There is a whitewashed concrete pylon just outside town. We stop for the obligatory photographs. Just beyond the sign, *Kletsk* written in Cyrillic, I see the east-west railroad. I remember that from the maps! The Germans built this railroad track during World War II. This highway crossing is the same simple warning sign I knew from my youth: two lights above a pole marked with an X. There is even an octagonal red sign that tells drivers to STOP before crossing and I wonder if I am really in the land of my ancestors or have I never left small-town America.

I studied the maps; I know where the Jews lived. I walk those streets. The main Jewish community occupied a modest area, about a mile square. Through a translator, a town official indicates the area of the Ghetto on a town map: "There... and probably there, too." An area of several streets, maybe 500 x 500m (1500 feet by 1500 feet). The Jews burned their houses here, the guide says. I walk the former Jew Street. It is a short block, about 300m long (900 feet). The shul is gone. The street is now lined with modern buildings, schools, government offices, the post office, and a museum. On the site of the shul is a low-rise apartment. My hotel is at the northern edge of the former Ghetto, a short distance away. There were Jewish houses on this site. The Germans destroyed what the Jews themselves did not. The



Kletsk Yeshiva building survives. Inside it is divided into storage and a small outlet of the local farm cooperative offering mostly bottled and canned produce.

I walk to *Der Val*. It is covered with lush green spring grass. I climb it and try to imagine deep snow, a crowd of kids and their sleds. I cannot hear their voices.

At the north side of town there is a ravine where 4,000 Kletsk Jews were murdered and buried. A monument stands there. Before I left the United States, a Kletsker had asked me to say

the *kaddish*. I am a secular Jew; I have no experience. So I struggle through the Mourner's Kaddish and the *El Maleh Rachamim*—in English. There are no other Jews to join me. I wonder, is this OK? Have I broken the rules? An incomparably sad duty, more difficult because of my inadequacy.

What is it About this Town that I Wanted to Recreate?

One evening my Belorussian hosts held a family barbecue in their back yard. In late afternoon we prepared a thick bed of birch coals in a low, open rectangular steel box. A relative of theirs arrived and started putting marinated meat on skewers: *Shashlyk!* Towards evening, we carried a table and all the chairs outside. Other family members arrived. Bread, plates of home-made pickles, and other plates of sliced vegetables appeared. Also, the largest vodka glass was set before me. We started eating and drinking. Everybody seemed to be talking at once. Somewhere after the servings of tasty *shashlyk* and the vodkas, I realized that these people could have been my neighbors. I felt honored to be included, and I wondered how I, as their neighbor, could adequately return their abundant hospitality. As the sun was setting against thin clouds in the southwest, I knew that my ancestors must have been terribly sad to leave such a beautiful place—Kletsk, a beautiful town on a broad rolling prairie, sitting among mixed birch-and-evergreen forests. Later, as my hosts gently escorted me back to the hotel in the pitch-black, I knew that I had found a piece of home—the land and the people of the land.

For me, this recreation of my ancestral town is a continuing story and it requires my complete involvement, intellectual and emotional. This story is full of stops and starts, detours, dead-ends, contradictions, questions, asides, frustrations, and a kind of confusion of past and present.

If history had turned out differently, these difficulties would not exist. If Jewish Kletsk still remained, and if I wondered about my Kletsker great-grandfather or the life he lived, I could contact a cousin—maybe his name was Moishe and I could ask him, "So, what about ...?"

In the absence of Moishe, I will need to ask, ask again, and, ultimately dredge up from every Kletsker descendant and their cousins, any shred of fact or memory that remains of my ancestral town. Unrepentant, shameless, persistent nosiness is a required skill for shtetl recreation. ■