

Felshtin's Last Jew

By Dr. Michael Nevins

Polina Shvartz Lerner was born in Felshtin in 1947, the last Jew born in the shtetl. Her maternal grandfather, Sruel Modick, had been killed by the Petlurists during the 1919 pogrom. Her grandmother had nine children and was unable to leave the ravaged town. Several hundred others survived the dreadful conditions during the 1920s and 30s. By the time of World War II, about 3,500 Jews lived in the town. At the end of the war, only about two dozen had survived. More than 3000 women and children had been taken to a forest a few miles from town and forced to dig a mass



Polina Shvartz in Gvardeyskoye (formerly Felshtin) in 1957.

grave for themselves before they were shot. During the war the Shvartz family fled to Tashkent. When they and a few other Jews returned after the war, the Shvartz family was the only one to resettle in Felshtin. Their house was still standing, and they moved back along with her



High school in Gvardeyskoye (formerly Felshtin), 1949.

mother's sister, a widow, and her four children. Her father had worked as a tailor before the war and now was able to scratch out a living. The family kept a low profile, celebrated Jewish holidays secretly, and baked their own matzohs. Although Polina knew Yiddish, to her schoolmates she was just an ordinary Ukrainian girl. She was the only Jew in school and describes early



The last Jewish family in Gvardeyskoye (formerly Felshtin), who lived there until 1970: Mendel Shvartz and his wife, Sura Modick, seated, far right. Polina is sitting on Mendel's lap. Polina's sister, Zoya, is standing behind Mendel and Sura. To the left of Mendel is Polina's aunt, Chaika, with her four children, Effin, Sonya, Sergey, and Raisa. Photo 1949

photographs of herself as just like a shiksa.

When Mr. Shvartz retired in 1970, the family moved to Proskurov, where they remained until 1994 when they moved to Philadelphia to join Polina's sister who had emigrated four years earlier. Before leaving the Ukraine, Polina visited Felshtin for the last time. She saw the few stones that remained of the Jewish cemetery dating back to Petlura's massacre. Her mother and others had paid a Ukrainian peasant to look after the place.

She also visited the long mass grave outside of town. More than 3000 Jews had been exterminated and buried in two locations near the village of Leznev and in the forest near the village of Geletentsy.

In 1999 Polina read in *The Forward* about the 70th anniversary event in New York that commemorated the 1919 Felshtin pogrom. She contacted Rabbi Novoseller and visited him at his synagogue. Mrs. Lerner learned English in the United States. Today she is 53 and is considering writing her memoirs. She has two daughters, Marina and Rochelle, and an aunt, Fanye Spector (Faygele Modick), who lives in Brooklyn.