Reconstructing Felshtin

A small Jewish community in Ukraine was bloodied by pogroms and destroyed by the Holocaust. Today its history is being revived through everything from Yiddish translations to the Internet.

By Barbara Fischkin

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Feldman Family Photo
Fina Feldman's family, in a photo taken in Felshtin in the early 1930s. Fina sits on the floor, left.

THIS apartment complex in Port Washington belongs in a Communist country, with its identical brick buildings, stolid and unimaginative. But the sturdy woman who opens the door, her long white hair pulled carelessly back in a ponytail, raised two children in a one-room apartment in Moscow. This, she says, is an improvement. Still, Fina Feldman is no more a Muscovite than she is a Long Islander.

Feldman, 71, comes from a place in Ukraine that used to be called Felshtin, a quintessential shtetl straight out of Sholom Aleichem. Felshtin in its heyday -- before it was fractured by a brutal pogrom in 1919 and then destroyed in the Holocaust -- was a miniature hub of Jewish life. It was close-knit, emotional, messy and full of characters.

I know this because my mother was born there, too.

Felshtin had a matchmaker, an undertaker, a pauper and a selection of rabbis and schoolteachers. Local Bolsheviks tried to organize -- but then realized they all worked for their fathers. Young lovers would meet at the well while their parents took Sabbath naps. Before Passover, when the spring rains came, a typical Felshtiner could find himself stuck in the mud, along with his horse and cart, if he was lucky enough to have one. The strongest men in the village would then be summoned. In Felshtin, that could be the entertainment highlight of the month.

The best-selling item in Felshtin's version of a dry-goods shop?

Boots.

"Yes! Yes! I am from Felshtin," Fina Feldman says, as she gives me a bear hug worthy of Boris Yeltsin.

I hug her back. My mother, who left the shtetl in 1919, had told me that I would never find anyone like Feldman, a Felshtin Jew who had survived the Holocaust.

Fina has a strong Russian accent -- or is it Ukrainian or Yiddish? I search her face for a family resemblance. Maybe it's my

imagination, but I see the same downcast brown-eyed look I saw in my mother before she died, and which I recently noticed in an elderly aunt and a distant cousin. Felshtin was small to begin with, often under siege. Jews only married Jews. We could be related.

* * *

My mother, born Chaya Manya Siegel, left Felshtin for America eight years before Fina Feldman was born. She was 6 years old, and months earlier had saved her own life in the midst of the Felshtin pogrom. On Feb. 17, 1919, in the chaos that followed the Russian Revolution, Cossack mercenaries rode into Felshtin. Hired by a Ukrainian nationalist strongman, they had come hunting "Bolsheviks," a term applied to every Jew in the village. During a massacre the following dawn, 600 men, women and children, a third of Felshtin's Jewish population, were murdered. My mother ran from the Cossacks and hid in a haystack. A Gentile farmer took her in and then summoned her father, who had believed she was dead.

It was my mother who told me this story -- my grandparents died before I was 3. She told it to anyone who would listen. But she only had one story. The hapless Bolsheviks, the well where lovers met, the mud -- I have only learned about them in the past few months, after deciding that if I wanted to tell my own sons about Felshtin, I would have to know more.

In 1937, American immigrants from Felshtin wrote their own book about the village, but it is in Yiddish, a language the adults I knew only spoke when they didn't want children to understand what they were saying. So I began looking for a Yiddish translator. Instead I found Sidney Shaievitz, a Bloomfield, N.J., lawyer whose grandfather was killed in the Felshtin pogrom. Shaievitz also wanted to have his Yizkor, or Memory, book translated. But he wanted to make it a group effort. Through the Internet and word of mouth, he located 15 extended families throughout the United States with roots in Felshtin. Members of seven of those families live on Long Island.
Within months, money was raised and a Yiddish translator was hired.

Earlier this month, on Feb. 7, about a hundred Felshtin descendants and their spouses met at a kosher restaurant in midtown Manhattan to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the 1919 pogrom. They also celebrated the completed translation of the Felshtin Yizkor Book and heard a noted Jewish scholar speak about it as a historical prototype.

Today the village that used to be Felshtin is called Gvardeysk and is said to be unrecognizable as the place where my mother was born. There are no Jews left, a story that has been repeated throughout Eastern Europe.

Here in America, though, we Felshtin descendants are not alone in this desire to preserve what we can of our own little lost shtetl. As the study of the Holocaust and events leading up to it become even more intricate -- and as Yiddish experiences a resurgence -- it is the shtetl's turn. The last generation of Americans who came from shtetls or heard their parents' shtetl stories is trying to find a way to pass on what they remember. Notable among recent books on the subject is "There Once Was a World: A 900-year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok" (Little, Brown), a 1998 National Book Award finalist. It was written by Yaffa Eliach, a renowned Holocaust scholar who was born in that Eastern European village. "I wanted to re-create for readers the vanished Jewish market town I had once called home," she writes.

"They surrounded me now, my family, my parents' friends, and my own little friends, asking with new urgency to be remembered, not as heaps of skulls and bones but as the vibrant dynamic people I'd known," Eliach

writes about standing on a mass grave in the shtetl. "They wanted the world to see them as they had looked at their weddings, on their picnics, in their social clubs, and during the course of their daily lives."

* * *

Each time I heard my mother's story, I would beg her to take me to Felshtin.

"Feh!" my mother would answer, almost spitting. It was the midst of the Cold War. "I would never go back there, not after what they did to the Jews."

When I was older, she hated it when I asked her if there could be people alive like Fina Feldman, Jewish Felshtiners who stayed after so many of the other villagers fled to the United States, Israel and Argentina. What happened to the ones who couldn't leave -- or who gambled that the pogrom was as bad as it would ever get?

"Hitler killed them all," she said.
My mother had named me after her Aunt Brayntse, a woman who never left Felshtin -- and who had not been heard from since the war. When my mother died in 1987, I had more questions than answers about the place she came from.

I went to see Fina Feldman, who answered an ad I placed in the Yiddish Forward, hoping she could answer some of those questions.
The Port Washington apartment where Fina Feldman lives with her husband, Valentin, and grown daughter, Marina, has only one bedroom and is sparsely furnished. But the dining table is busy, covered with photographs of her children and grandchildren. In one corner is the picture she knows I want to see most.

"We took this when the traveling photographer came to town," she says. "That little girl in the front is me."

Behind her are her parents and grandparents,
Feldman Family Photo
From left, members of Fina Feldman's family -- Srv, Sonia and Nachman Bubel.

aunts and uncles: Felshtiners. They are standing outside what looks like a whitewashed hut. "We hung -- what do you call them? -- towels outside the windows for decoration," she explains. They look more like rugs; nice rugs.

By the time Fina Feldman was born, in 1927, my mother was speaking unaccented English, dancing the Charleston and thinking about dropping out of junior high school and getting a secretarial job. Eventually, she would marry my father, David Fischkin, a graduate of City College of New York and an accountant, and with her parents' help they would buy a semi-attached brick house on Avenue I in Brooklyn.
As a little girl, Fina Feldman heard stories about the pogrom and about people like my mother. But life in Felshtin was, more or less, back to normal.

Then World War II began.

The German army occupied the Kaminetyz-Podoloski region that includes Felshtin between July 2 and 18, 1941, and reportedly killed 477,600 civilians and prisoners of war. A letter recently found in Ukrainian archives describes what happened in the tiny shtetl of Felshtin.
The writer -- it is unclear whether she is still alive -- is believed to be a woman who escaped

to Proskurov, a larger neighboring town to the east.

"I want to tell you the tragedy of one little place . . . called Felshtin, where before the beginning of the war in 1941, the total population of Ukrainians, Poles and Jews was about 3,500. When the Germans came only 8-10 families managed to escape. On July 7, 1941, the entire shtetl was occupied . . . By the time the town was freed by our military forces only four Jews survived out of more than 1,000, two boys age 13, one girl age 15 and a woman aged 25. All the rest, old people, women and children, were shot by the Germans . . . Of the Ukrainian civil population, almost no one suffered. In fact, a middle school teacher named Feodor Kovalchik talked at a meeting calling for killing the Jews."

By 1941, Fina Feldman was living with her father in Proskurov. They had moved there after her mother, a Felshtin schoolteacher, died in childbirth. Often, though, she stayed with her grandmother in Felshtin. She was there in June, 1941, but left suddenly with an uncle who wanted to sell eggs in Proskurov. She didn't return with him to Felshtin and a few days later the Germans began bombing Proskurov. On July 2, leaving all their possessions behind -- without even a coat for the winter -- Fina and her stepmother jumped onto an open coal car of a train. With that she began an odyssey to the Ural Mountains. Within five days after Fina left, her little village of Felshtin was occupied.

Eventually, she wound up at "Military Plant .50" in Sverdlosk City in the Ural Mountains, where she worked until 1948, when an uncle in Moscow sent her money to join him.

"I got to his house on Pesach [Passover], and his house is kosher," she says as we drink tea at her table surrounded by the photographs. We are eating a chocolate babka I brought from my local kosher bakery in Long Beach. "But I need food, and all they had was matzoh. I was so hungry. I went to the store and bought bread. I eat it outside, and I said, God will forgive me."

She returned to Felshtin in 1949 because she needed to get a birth certificate; it was illegal to be without one. She had no papers to prove that she was born anywhere, but she went hoping that someone in Felshtin would recognize her. When she got to Felshtin she found that all her relatives had been killed by the Nazis. An aunt, she was told, was tied to a horse and dragged to her death. She was sent to stay with the only Jewish family left in the village.

It was Passover again, and all alone she watched as they baked their own matzohs in their house. In the Felshtin Fina remembered, a special bakery went into operation each spring for the entire village.

Back in Port Washington, she gets up, goes to a drawer and takes out a folded card and hands it to me. Inside, in a beautiful purple script, I see the name "Gvardeysk," which is what Felshtin was called after the war. "I walked into the post office and the woman said, `I know who you are. Your mother was my teacher.' So she wrote this birth certificate for me."

Fina went back to Felshtin again in 1970 and 1977; she brought her daughter Marina with her. But Gvardeysk, she says, was not the same town as Felshtin. In 1978, members of the Jewish community in Dallas helped to bring her, her husband, Valentin, and their daughter, who now works at Publishers Clearinghouse in Syosset, to the United States along with other Soviet Jews. In Texas, the elder Feldmans worked in factories. Now, retired and on disability, the couple lives in Port Washington to be near their son, who came to the United States later and is now an electrical engineer. Before I leave, Fina draws me a map of the shtetl of Felshtin.

"This was the post office and this was the jail. The synagogue was here . . . "

When I ask her about Long Island, she says, "for me, Felshtin is the best place. I was born in Felshtin and my mamma died in Felshtin. She died the night of the first seder of Passover."

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In April, 1919, The New York Times mentioned the Felshtin pogrom by name and said that it had been part of "a systematic effort ... to annihilate the Jewish population of the Ukraine."

But on Feb. 7, 1999, the progeny of Felshtin filled Mendy's, a kosher cafe on East 34th Street in Manhattan. Standing by paneled walls, displaying plain silver plates that could have been the best dishes of the most prosperous families of Felshtin, they ate pasta primavera, Israeli salad and pastrami sandwiches. They exchanged phone numbers, networked their businesses and showed photographs of their children, their grandchildren -- and their grandparents.

There is no kind way to say this. Felshtin was a hick town, a Ukrainian "Petticoat Junction." A Yizkor book chapter tells about "the first fedora in Felshtin." The man who bought it was both awed by its modernity and embarrassed to wear it in the synagogue. Finally, he decided he needed to shave off his beard because it didn't go with the hat. Timidly, he did this bit by bit, until his wife noticed that one whole side of his face was clean shaven.

Yet when the pogromists came, there were plenty of Felshtiners who knew how to run and hide, bargain for their lives, befriend the right Gentiles, pray for luck -- and fight back.
And now here were the Felshtin descendants: American lawyers, teachers, accountants, rabbis, professors, authors and schoolteachers. There was even a yoga instructor.
It was the first time such a group with Felshtiner roots has met in decades; the First Felshtiner Progressive Benevolent Association -- the group that wrote the Yizkor book -- disbanded in 1952, after being in existence for 43 years.

Included among Felshtiner descendants from Long Island was Vicki Held Perler of Syosset. For her, Felshtin had always been a place that existed only in family stories and artifacts.

Felshtin was the Torah her great-grandfather, Mordechai Baum, bought in Poland after he fled the village and tried to immigrate to America.

He died before he got his visa, but his son and daughter-in-law took the Torah with them. "He wanted his family to be Jewish and he didn't know what he would find in America," says Perler, who is director of early childhood education at Temple Beth-El in Great Neck. Now the Torah is kept at the Huntington Jewish Center and Perler's son read from it when he was bar mitzvahed.

Felshtin was also her great-grandfather's beard.

Months before he tried to immigrate, Mordechai Baum hid in his house while the pogrom raged. Cossacks came to his door, attacked him and pierced his cheeks with a sword. Later, at a makeshift hospital in Felshtin, the beard was removed. Like many observant Jews, Mordechai Baum had worn that beard as a symbol of his faith, and when it was cut off, he put a piece of it between the pages of his prayer book. That book was also carried to America by his children and Perler has it, as well as the remnants of her great-grandfather's beard.

At the gathering, a cousin handed Perler a translated copy of a chapter her grandfather, Joseph Baum, had written in the Felshtin Yizkor book. "I sat there mesmerized," she said, explaining that the chapter included details about the pogrom she had never known,

including that the Cossacks mistakenly believed they had killed her great-grandfather. "My grandfather never told me that his father was left to die," she said. Later, she went to speak to a group from another family and couldn't get over the way one man looked so much like her grandmother's father. "The resemblance, the look, his whole face," she said. "Even my younger son looks like that. I kept saying, `Are you sure we're not related?' When I saw that look, it took my breath away."

Finally she sat down next to a woman she did not know.

Fina Feldman.

"I am from Felshtin," Feldman told her.

"That was beyond me," Perler says. "You just don't hear that, because Felshtin is no longer a place, it was a place in the past."

Feldman told her that the village is now called Gvardeysk.

"I would love to go there," Perler now says. "I'm so glad that someone knows the name it is called now. It just brings me back to a yearning to learn more. How long were our ancestors there? For a hundred years? For 200 years?"

Sitting at a table near Perler and Feldman was May Mirel of Long Beach. Her father-in-law was Morton Hoffman, perhaps Felshtin's most prominent immmigrant and a beloved general practitioner in Brooklyn. (There were people at other tables who had been delivered by Dr. Hoffman and at least one woman whose mother was delivered by him.)

Nathan Forman was another prominent Felshtiner, a builder who was the "perennial president" of the First Felshtiner Progressive Benevolent Association.

Two of his sons, Jerry and Harold Forman, now retired builders from Great Neck, were also at the gathering. Their father came to the United States in 1908, 11 years before the pogrom, at the age of 16. Jerry Forman says his father rarely spoke about Felshtin, and he, himself, did not have a clear understanding of what happened until a few years ago when, after taking a Yiddish immersion course, he read the original Yizkor book.

The descendants also exemplified the variety of American Jewish life. Rabbi Novoseller of Pennsylvania -- whose father was the rabbi of Felshtin during the pogrom -- sat at the head of his family's table, his white beard resplendent. His sons, who joined him, are Orthodox like their father.

At another table sat Daniel Nevins, a Conservative rabbi from Detroit who recently delivered a sermon about his Felshtiner grandfather.

Fina Feldman, wearing her usual no-nonsense slacks and sweater, gently touched the elegant fur coat of another woman; in Felshtin, people kept their furs so long they wound up wearing them inside out. There were little boys in yarmulkes, and more than one Felshtiner came with a Christian spouse. One 8-year-old boy from Long Beach -- mine -- sat with his Irish-American father, who explained family history. "On my side, your family came from Fermoy, County Cork -- and Derry. On Mommy's side, they came from Felshtin."

Rabbi Novoseller said the motzi, the blessing over the bread. Adam Werbach, who served as the youngest president of the Sierra Club -- the grandson of a Felshtiner -- schmoozed with his father, Mel, a professor from California.

David Roskies, a professor of literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary and author of "The Shtetl Book," was the guest speaker. He has said that the Felshtin Yizkor book, published in 1937, was a prototype for hundreds more like it written after the Holocaust. It was the first book to depict not only a pogrom but the typical life of the shtetl that would soon be no more than a memory. In 1937, Jewish immigrants from Felshtin on a more

modest level had the same goal as Yaffa Eliach. But, as Roskies pointed out to their descendants, "in 1937, no one could have known what was to come."

He said that "without any embellishments, no metaphors, nothing fancy," the book tells the whole story. It tells of the shtetl's obscure birth, flowering as a community, martyrdom and then rebirth in America. "That's the story that is told by the Felshtin book and it is a story that is repeated again and again," he said.

"The symbolic landscape of the shtetl is as central to us as Jews as the Western is to us as Americans," he explained. "Each one of us has an image in our head of what a town in the west looks like: We know that there's a main street and there's a saloon and there's a church and there's a sheriff's office and a train depot . . . Well, the shtetl has a very similar kind of map and landscape. Instead of the main street, you have the market square, which is the core of the shtetl economy. A shtetl is a market town . . . Instead of the saloon, we have the Bas Midrash, the house of study . . . it was the pulse of the community . . . There was the synagogue . . . and just as there was the train station in the western that brought in the desperados and all kinds of dangerous things from the outside, well, the shtetl, too, had a train station that brought the outside world to bear upon it."

In one article in the Yizkor book, a former Felshtiner says, "The physical as well as the spiritual life of Felshtin will be erased, just as other cities and towns succumbed to natural catastrophes. The life that we once led, our youth, the memory of which we cherish deep in our hearts, in our souls -- that life is now washed away, as if it never existed at all."

When Roskies mentioned that shtetls had train stations, people wanted to know if Felshtin had one.

"She knows," Vicki Perler called out, gesturing to Fina, who was munching on a piece of matzoh.

Fina Feldman shook her head.

No station. If there had been one, her relatives might have survived the way she did.

"It was closed in," Perler said later. "That's a big piece of information about the town and the workings of the town."

What about the Jewish cemetery? Did it survive?

Fina shook her head sadly.

"There are no stones," she reported. "The Nazis used them to make the road."

* * *

Now there seems to be so much more to find out. Are there others like Fina Feldman? Will somebody surface who can tell us more about what happened in 1941? What happened to my Great Aunt Branyste? There must also be more Felshtiners whose relatives left right after the pogrom. One Felshtiner from Israel came to Mendy's -- and we know there are more there. There must be Felshtiners in Buenos Aires, too.

What about all the Ukrainians who helped Felshtiners? What about the farmer who, risking his own life, hid my mother until he could find my grandfather? What about the Ukrainians who didn't help, who made things worse, like the schoolteacher in 1941?

At Mendy's, David Roskies celebrated the revival of the Felshtin Society and recited the Shehechianu, a Hebrew prayer honoring a special occasion.

About preserving the image of shtetl life, he said, "It will not be done by raising memorials of stone . . . the line will be people telling the story, talking about the town and the legacy of the town, creating an association that is the link between the past and the present."

Barbara Fischkin is an author and freelance writer.

A Felshtiner's Tale

By Barbara Fischkin

EIGHTY YEARS AGO -- almost to the day -- my mother saved her own life in the midst of the Felshtin pogrom.

She was only 6 years old.

On the afternoon of Feb. 17, 1919, my grandfather, a young watchmaker named Ayzie Siegel, petrified about reports that Jews in the village were about to be killed, went to the market to see what he could learn.

Fischkin Family Photo
David and Ida Fischkin in 1935. At the age of 6, Ida survived the Felshtin Pogrom of 1919.

It was almost empty; then a Cossack rode in. He held his arm out and taunted my grandfather with a grenade.

My grandfather ran back to his family's hut. "Take the children and let's go," he ordered his wife. Their hut was too close to the village. Not a good place to hide from Cossacks hunting Jewish "Bolsheviks."

They ran out of their house, past the garden where sunflowers grew in the spring and down the hill in the direction of the synagogue. In the panic and confusion, my mother -- the eldest of three children -- lost sight of her parents.

An uncle who was also running picked her up, signaled to my grandparents and took her to hide in the cellar of the town hall, already crowded with other villagers, My mother couldn't stop crying, and the others scolded her, saying that she would get them all killed. Finally, they sent her uncle to find my grandmother. While he was gone, the building was set on fire.

My mother ran out the door and kept running into the countryside, where, exhausted, she crawled inside a haystack. She could hear and feel the Cossacks riding over it. She could imagine their sharp sabers, their tunics and boots.

Her parents cowered with their other children in a friend's attic. They heard screams through the night; there was a massacre at dawn.

When the Cossacks left, my grandparents went outside, looked around in horror and couldn't imagine that their daughter could have survived. More than 600 people were dead, about a third of the village's Jewish population.

Women had been raped and mutilated, infants lanced, pigs and dogs let loose to eat the corpses. The town hall, where they heard their child was taken to hide, had been burned. My grandfather went back to his hut and found his brother's body outside.

The next day, my grandfather buried his brother and his neighbors, while he searched for his daughter's body.

Then his work was interrupted.

"Your little girl is with me." It was a Gentile farmer my grandfather knew. He had fixed the man's watch.

When my mother spotted my grandfather, she ran into his arms. He took her to her mother. Years later, he wrote about this in the Felshtin Yizkor book: "Her heartbroken mother looked at her in a state of hysteria. Fortunate are those who did not witness this scene because it was one straight out of hell."

Ayzie Siegel, the writer's grandfather, above right, in a family photo long after the 1919 Pogrom.

My grandfather vowed he would find a way to get to America. Within two years of the Felshtin pogrom, my mother, her parents, brother and sister were living in an apartment on St. John's Place in Brooklyn. Chaya Manya Siegel of Felshtin had become Ida Siegel from New York.

I must have heard my mother's story about the pogrom before I started school because I remember having a child's sense of it on my first day of kindergarten in 1959. My mother and I were standing on the steps of Public School 203 on Avenue M in Brooklyn. A few children were crying, and the tears were threatening to become as contagious as chicken pox.

"I think I have to cry," I said.

"Kindergarten is not something you cry over," replied my mother, the pogrom survivor.

I knew what she meant and walked into the building dry-eyed.

Later, at dismissal, it felt so sweet to rub my face against the soft flannel of my mother's blue plaid slacks. My mother seemed softer in the afternoon, more relaxed now that the ordeal of separation and reunion was over. Often, she would tell me not to cry over little things, and her words always made me feel safe -- and determined. My mother, I knew, had lived one of a child's worst nightmares. She was proof that people could overcome and accomplish. She was proof that there was such a thing as luck.

As a child I never said that my mother's story frightened me. But now I believe it must have been terrifying. Why, when asked in the evening to fetch something from the basement of our cozy brick house, did I run up and down as fast as I could? I'd play in the basement during the day, but after dark it always felt that a stranger was down there waiting to pounce. Was that because my mother told me her uncle took her to hide in the cellar of the town hall, the building that was later set on fire? Why was I so afraid of fire as a child? Even today I can't go to bed unless I check the stove three or four times.

In elementary school I decided to write about my mother, and boldly titled my composition: "My Mother in the Haystack." I brought it home and innocently read the bawdy title aloud. My father started to titter. Even my mother started giggling.

I was too young to get the joke and couldn't believe they were laughing at something so serious. But maybe that was when Felshtin first turned into a burlesque in our house. Years later, my brother came to visit me in Dublin, where I was working as a freelance writer. We celebrated in a pub and when we got back to my apartment we called my mother in Brooklyn and sang, "Ida Fischkin, the Rose of Felshtin."

Maybe Felshtin became a burlesque because we had too little information. My mother told her haystack story many times, but she didn't tell us a lot about Felshtin.