

Translating a memorial book opens window on Jewish history

by Elaine Durbach

New Jersey Jewish News, January 9, 2003

For 62 years, the memorial tribute book created by survivors of the Felshtin pogrom remained closed to their descendants. Created to memorialize their 600 loved ones who were slaughtered in the 1919 pogrom in the Ukrainian shtetl (now called Gvardeyskoye), the tribute book was written almost entirely in Yiddish. Only the introduction was in English "for our children who cannot read Yiddish.

It took one of the survivors' offspring -- Sidney Shaievitz of Livingston, who reads some Yiddish -- to initiate efforts to make the book available to the Felshtin descendants and to a wider public. While a final version is still in the works, in recent years those descendants have at last been able to read in English the heartrending personal accounts of the brutal attack, and the lovingly recalled descriptions of Jewish life in the village before the horror.

Shaievitz explains that his motivation at first was personal, but as he became more familiar with the book's contents, he became increasingly aware of a greater significance.

As the second *yizkor* (memorial) book ever written, the Felshtin document was a model for the many volumes compiled after the Holocaust to commemorate communities wiped out by the Nazis. The first was about the neighboring city of Proskurov, a much briefer work. The Felshtin book, almost 700 pages in length and illustrated with photographs and



sketches, has been described as one of the most vivid records of prewar Jewish life in Eastern Europe.

Shaievitz grew up with the book as a familiar fixture in his home. His mother had come to New York from Felshtin as a teenager with her mother and brother after her father was murdered in the pogrom. They moved in with relatives who had immigrated a few years earlier and joined the Felshtin *landsmenschaft*, or organization of former residents of the shtetl, whose members later compiled the book. The mother of his aunt by marriage, Sore Oksman, wrote a chapter titled "Our Great Disaster."

Shaievitz remembers that his mother had said almost nothing about her father, his terrible end, or her childhood. "Like my own children, I was interested in the past," he says. "I didn't ask her about anything, and she didn't talk about it. I don't know if she wanted to forget about what had happened or if she wanted to shelter me from it. It took her dying to make me ask questions -- and maybe it'll be the same with my daughters."

When his mother died and Shaievitz was unable to determine her father's name for the burial records, he turned to the old black volume and discovered an entry about his grandfather: "No. 84, Shlomo Huberman. Stabbed in the house."

"I realized for the first time that I was named after him!" Shaievitz exclaims.

As a child, growing up in the south Bronx, Shaievitz spoke Yiddish with his family and studied it briefly. His formal education led to a career as a chemical engineer, and, while working fulltime, he earned a law degree. After his mother's death, he decided to take on another intellectual challenge and brush up on his Yiddish. He took classes with Rivka Levine at the Jewish Education Association of MetroWest in Whippany. Thanks to those classes, he was able to decipher the book's entries -- though with great difficulty.

As his fascination with the work grew, he thought about having it translated professionally. "We had a meeting of the cousins, and we passed around a hat to collect money. I had no idea what it would cost to get it translated." He turned to a modern resource -- the Internet -- in search of other Felshtin survivors or descendants and also did a search of families with names listed in the book.

Continued next page.

Translating

(Continued from page 1)



"The Massacre." A section title page by New York artist Notta Kozlovski, who created illustrations for the *yizkor* book based on information from former Felshtiners.

Out of 174 messages he sent, he received six replies -- and those led to other contacts. He found about 15 extended families with Felshtin connections. The Felshtin Society was formed, with Shaievitz as its head, to share information and promote the translation project.

In 1998, at a meeting in his

Bloomfield law offices, the society members were introduced to a Yiddish translator, Sora Hoffman Ludmir, and agreed that she would handle the job. She completed the initial version in less than six months. That year also marked the 80th anniversary of the pogrom, and more than a 100 Felshtin descendants met for a *yahrtzeit* reunion in New York.

But that was just the beginning. As Shaievitz soon learned, a translation like this involves the possibility of multiple interpretations. With help from his wife, Rhoda, a recently retired teacher, from members of his Yiddish class in Whippany, and from various friends and associates in the United States and abroad, Shaievitz produced a few copies of a second translation-- on paper and CD, this time including copies of the drawings from the original. And he continued reworking the 650 pages of Yiddish himself, inserting footnotes and explanations for the benefit of readers who may not have a

Jewish background.

But Shaievitz acknowledges that a professional translator is still needed, someone fluent in Yiddish and Yiddishkeit, for a definitive version. "This is what I did last night, working for about two hours," he says, showing a visitor a page from a yellow legal pad with one paragraph of handwriting, stapled to a version typed by one of his office assistants. "As you can see, it's very slow and time-consuming for me -- and it's time-consuming for my staff. We really should have a professional translator do it." Having exhausted the society's funds on the first version, its members are eager to find individuals or organizations interested in helping to finance the work.

"At first," Shaievitz explains, "I wanted the translation for our children, for future generations. But I've come to believe that it's a very important work for the Jewish community and that it would be of great value to anyone who's interested in Jewish history."

Excerpt from the Felshtin Yizkor Book:

Our Great Disaster

by Sore Oksman

(From Chapter 14. Editor's note: Sore Oksman came to America with four of her children right after the pogrom. After her death, her children found among her possessions her handwritten description of the pogrom.)

We lived two miles from Proskurov in the town of Felshtin, Podolia Gubernia. When we heard about the terrible disaster in Proskurov (Sabbath, the 16th day in the Month of Adar I), we went to the Rabbi for advice and counsel because we knew the pogromists were heading in our direction. The

Rabbi instructed us to fast that day, and we did. We also collected a few hundred rubles so we could bribe the hooligans when they would come into town, hoping that this payoff would spare our lives.

Monday evening after the fast, soldiers rode into town ... The townsfolk fell into a panic and, leaving everything behind, ran for their lives. They did not know where to run and followed wherever their eyes took them. The soldiers had already blocked the roads and let no one escape from town. The gentiles of the town and of the surrounding villages were forewarned that if they harbored any Jews, they too would be killed along with the Jews.

Continued next page.

Disaster

(Continued from page 2)

They followed orders accordingly and let no one into their homes., As a result, we were forced to hide in attics and cellars.

When I fled my home, my three sons were with me. Somehow, along the way, the two older ones got separated from me, and I had no idea where

they were or what happened to them. Only my youngest son was still with me ...

I, who write these words, am a driven woman. The mother of two murdered sons. The oldest, Isaiah son of Khayim, was 28 years old and the youngest, Tsvi, was only 15 years old. They were torn from their mother's side and killed in the worst way. It is six years now that I am here with my children and my middle son and his family. May they be well.