

Ira Lulinski



Central Feature

By tending Belarus mass grave, a couple honors family, history

A memorial, now also bearing an official government plaque, marks the site where German troops shot to death almost the entire Jewish population of Miory.

by

NJJN Bureau Chief/Central 08.23.07

Libby Lulinski hoped that going with her husband to the site where most of his family were killed might help him achieve closure.

"I thought that this might be his last trip back," she said, "but instead it made us want to go again, maybe with our children or our grandchildren. It was very painful and uncomfortable, but it was also incredibly moving. We want to go back."

The trip earlier this month to Miory in Belarus was Ira Lulinski's fifth return to the town where he was born and where, in June 1942, Nazi soldiers shot almost all of the town's 1,000 Jews, including his mother, his two brothers, and his sister.

Ira, then six, managed to escape with his father, fleeing into the forest as bullets whizzed past them. They joined other survivors and Russian soldiers who had also escaped from Nazi capture and fought together in a partisan unit for the next two years.

Together with two of those partisans — boys who were also from Miory and who both now live in Israel — Ira has returned again and again since the breakup of the Soviet Union to monitor the preservation of the memorial in the field where all those townspeople died. He had a wrought iron fence erected 10 years ago, and he has paid a local woman to tend the ground.

For all those visits, Libby was unable to go with him, but this time, she felt it was imperative that she go. They went first to Israel, where they joined up with the other two men — one also accompanied by his wife, the other by his daughter. They flew to Minsk, and from there traveled by van with a Latvian driver the two-and-a-half hours to Miory.

They spent just the day there. If arriving at Minsk's dark, dingy airport was a shocking contrast to Ben-Gurion's gleaming modernity, coming to Miory was like going through a time warp, Libby said.

There is nowhere for visitors to stay, the local people still use horses and carts, there is little electricity or indoor plumbing, and most town inhabitants are very poor. "They live the way they did 65 years ago," Ira said.

The woman who Ira hired to tend the mass grave site was warmly welcoming and laid out food for them. The Lulinskis keep kosher but they ate what they could to show their appreciation. They were also welcomed by the one surviving witness to the massacre, a man now in his late 80s or early 90s. "He has had to live with that memory all these years. It's been very difficult for him," Ira said.

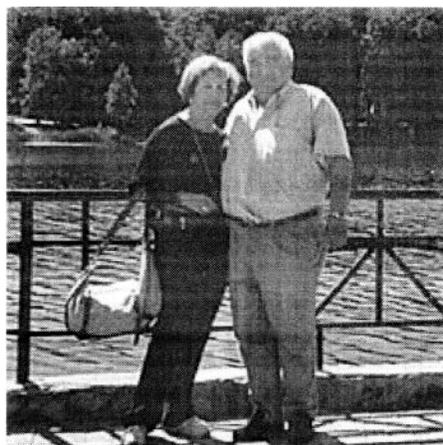
From others they got a less welcoming response. Libby wondered whether, seeing this group of foreign visitors, some of Miory's residents were afraid that they had come back wanting to reclaim their property.

Ira has never had any such intention, but even if he did, it would be impossible. Where his home stood, there is now a park, with a memorial to the country's war dead. When they visited, there were vagrants hanging out there, though neither there nor at the memorial site has there been any vandalism. Ira said that is because the Belarus government has declared both places war memorial sites and protects them.

Asked how he felt being in his hometown, Ira said simply that it is always painful. But it helped, he said, to have Libby with him this time, "to have someone to lean on."

He goes back, he said, out of a desire to get back to his roots and a commitment to honor those he lost, to prove over and over that they are not forgotten. He said he is also deeply disturbed by all the graves in other former Jewish communities in the region that lie untended because there are no survivors to take care of them.

For Libby, it was a unique experience. "I'd heard about this place and heard the names of these people since I was a teenager," she said. "I had to go. I had an unrealistic excitement, almost like a desire to be embraced by them."



Ira and Libby Lulinski visit the lake near Miory, the town in Belarus where he was born and where most of his family and almost all the town's Jews were massacred by the Nazis.

The Lulinksis met when Ira and his father came to live in Elizabeth, where Libby grew up. They started dating when she was 15 and got married five years later, in 1948.

They live in Cranford, not far from their three daughters and nine grandchildren. They belong to a number of synagogues, including Temple Beth-El Mekor Chayim in Cranford, the Jewish Educational Center in Elizabeth, Temple Israel in Union, and the Union County Torah Center in Westfield. The couple, who look forward to celebrating their 50th anniversary next year, work together in Union in the steel business they own.

"I somehow felt that going to Miory would be like having contact with his family," Libby said. "But it wasn't like that. There was such an absence. It was mesmerizing to be there, at the site where so many people lost their lives. And yet, there was something incredible about being there."

After Miory, they visited other memorial sites in Druya and Gluboki and went to the graves of Ira's relatives who died in Vilna and Riga. They timed the trip especially so that they could celebrate Shabbat in Riga, where they knew there was a functioning synagogue.

Libby said she felt instantly at home there. "Architecturally, it's almost exactly like the shut where I went as a child," she said.

The sense of belonging didn't end there. The rabbi, Rabbi Mordechai Glazman, noticed the strangers and joined them as they were setting out for the long walk back to their hotel. He insisted that they come meet his wife and that they stay for Shabbat dinner. To their delight, they discovered that they and the rabbi knew quite a few people in common in the United States, including Rabbi Levi Block from the Union County Torah Center.

That made their sense of connection to the region even stronger. "We will be going back," Libby said.