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Village life before the Holocaust

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The pre-Holocaust lives of Leon Alpert, far right, and other Jews of Michaliszki, Poland, are now preserved and recorded informally on a website.



Leon Alpert, center, with friends in Michaliszki before the Shoah.

Website answers questions Zeyde never addressed

I grew up surrounded by Holocaust survivors. Relatives debated and told jokes in rapid-fire Yiddish, tossed back tupples of Black Velvet whiskey, kvelled over my every accomplishment, fed me obscene amounts of fat-laden foods, and were overprotective

to the point of smothering. As most children and grandchildren of survivors can attest, it was both a blessing and a burden.

But now, after attending two funerals of Holocaust survivors in the span of three weeks, I realize that my link to one of the most horrific events of modern times is weakening. And my thirst for information about my grandparents' pre-Shoah life may never be fully quenched.

Perhaps because it was too painful to recall the events that marked his transition from adolescence to adulthood, my zeyde (grandfather) seldom spoke about life in the Polish village Michaliszki, where he was raised. On the rare occasions he recounted a memory, I clung to every word. Still, so many questions remained unanswered when he died 18 years ago.

Today, thanks to an informative website n www.michaliszki.org n I'm finding answers to some of the questions Zeyde left unanswered.

The site, created by a former Michaliszki resident, serves as a resource for survivors and their descendants. Sections detail life before the war, then move on to the Russian occupation, German occupation, liberation and aftermath. The site also provides maps, listings of former residents, names of survivors, and photographs of their families.

It is by no means a professional site. The quality of writing is poor. There are several errors in the photo captions of some of my relatives, and I suspect that's true for other families, as well. There are informational gaps, but it offers an invaluable glimpse at a distinct culture that Hitler's troops mercilessly destroyed. And it gives me a better understanding and deeper appreciation of my family's roots.

According to the website, about 800 Jews lived in Michaliszki, Poland, located 35 miles east of Vilna near Russia. They shared a synagogue and Hebrew school. Most of the town's non-Jews were Catholic Russians.

In the late 1930s, anti-Semitic residents urged townspeople not to buy goods from Jews.

In 1939, Russian troops abolished privately owned businesses, transformed the Hebrew school into a Russian school, burned the synagogue, and forced children to join a Russian youth organization. People who dared to protest were sent to Siberia.

The Germans made their way to Michaliszki and established a Jewish ghetto in the fall of 1941. A Judenrat was appointed to collect Jewish valuables for the Germans and select people for work assignments outside the ghetto. Many residents were taken to forced-labor camps; others were shot for "infractions" such as attempting to smuggle a chicken into the ghetto. The Michaliszki ghetto was liquidated in March 1943. Survivors could go to the Vilna ghetto or Kovno ghetto. Most chose Vilna and perished.

When Michaliszki was liberated by the Russian army in June 1944, only 82 Jews had survived. Some 22 had been hiding in the forests, with peasants, or in Russia. Sixty, including Zeyde and three of his siblings, had been in concentration camps.

Before the Russian and German occupations, Zeyde's family had a relatively cushy life. The website recalls that they owned a gas station and inn and held a liquor license.

I gained more from this site than my family's history. I learned that people living in a Polish shtetl were not all that different from people residing in modern, suburbs. Residents measured their wealth against that of their neighbors. (One family "had a water pump in their house and a shower.") Some were judgmental of others. ("Hile was a bit slow. He used to bathe in the River Vilia in the winter by cutting a hole in the ice. People made fun of him.") the site relates. Michaliszki residents also gathered at specific homes for various events. ("At Passover, people used to make matzah in this house.")

A website can't fully capture life in an Eastern European shtetl before the Shoah. But it's a precious gift for one granddaughter who didn't ask enough questions when her zeyde was alive.