

In Defense of the History of Micháleshik

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Whether intentional or not intentional, the failure adequately to research the history of the Jewish community of Micháleshik resulted in what may only be characterized as shamefully misleading, inaccurate and revisionist information being etched into the handsome polished-stone monument designed by Belarusian architect Leonid Levin¹ which was installed at Micháleshik in 2009 to commemorate the Micháleshik victims of the Great Patriotic War.

The monument at Micháleshik, installed through the efforts of the Belarusian Jewish Community with funding support from the Simon Mark Lazarus Foundation (UK), the Miles and Marilyn Kletter Family Foundation (US), and the Warren and Beverly Geisler Family Foundation (US) is inaccurately inscribed: *To the everlasting memory of the victims of the Holocaust. 158 Jews from Astravets region were brutally murdered here in 1944.*

There is no excuse for this. Almost every document cited herein in this on-line *Yizkorbukh for Micháleshik* was available in 2009 when the monument was erected. It appears that in their haste to erect monuments remembering the 500,000-800,000 Jews (80-90% of the pre-war Jewish population) who died in what is now Belarus during the Great Patriotic War, the Committee for the Preservation of Holocaust Victims' Memory in the Republic of Belarus never asked whether such information was available and simply assumed that it was not, thus committing a great injustice to the Micháleshik victims it sought to commemorate, to their descendants, and to history.

The number (158) of Jews alleged on the monument to have been murdered at Micháleshik in 1944, appears to have come from a 1939-1941 Soviet-era list (discovered in the State Archive of the Russian Federation ca. 2010) of 157 Micháleshik property owners/heads of households (both Jewish and Gentile²) numbered 1 through 158 representing less than a quarter of the Micháleshik population at that time. [See List of Micháleshik Holocaust Victims published in a 9 May 2011 commemorative article in *Astravetskaya Pravda* (Belarusian regional newspaper in Astravets,

¹ Leonid Mendelkovich Levin (1936-2014) perhaps best known for the Khatyn Memorial at Khatyn near Minsk.

² Six of the names on the list are clearly marked as *Pole*.

current county seat town including Mikháleshik/Michalishki), and its annotated translation in this on-line *Yizkor Book for Mikháleshik (Michalishkek) in Vilna Province (Michalishki, Belarus).*]

Among the names on the list are several known to have been murdered at Ponary; one known to have been murdered at the Kena Labor Camp; and three known to have survived.

There were no Jews at Micháleshik in 1944 and while a few Jews were earlier brutally murdered at Micháleshik, no *Aktion* ever occurred at Micháleshik. Rather, in late March/early April 1943, when a 50-kilometer-wide stretch of land was made *Judenrein* on the order of Horst Wulff, Gebietskommissar of Wilna-Land (the rural areas surrounding Vilne), the ghettos at Micháleshik, Oshmyany, Solys, and Smorgon (into which Jews from smaller *shletlach* had been consolidated) were liquidated. As told by Micháleshiker Urke Bliakher (and others), those Jews with family in Vilne were permitted to go to the Vilne ghetto, those with family at various labor camps were permitted to join them, and the remaining Jews were to go to the Kovno ghetto. According to Yad Vashem, about 1,250 went to the Vilne ghetto and about 1,450 to various labor camps.³

On 5 April 1943, the first trainload ostensibly heading for Kovno and carrying most of the Micháleshiker Jews, passed through Vilne where about 350 Vilna Jews joined them but was then rerouted to Ponary where its passengers were murdered. Several hours later, the second train arrived at Vilne where seven cars were disconnected, and the remaining cars were sent to Ponary where the passengers met a similar fate.

Approximately 3,800 Jews (including most of the Jewish population of Micháleshik) were murdered at Ponary on 5 April 1943. The following day, nine wagons loaded with the food and belongings of the victims arrived at the Vilne ghetto, much of it in neatly labeled cloth sacks. Several days later, Micháleshiker survivor Urke Bliakher, in Vilne to pick up supplies (food and clothing) for the Kena Labor Camp, was offered cloth sacks, bearing the names of his *lantzmen* Chaim Karpel, Avraham Karpel, and Israel Kotler and saw, in an open sack, a coat belonging to a son of Rubin Kaplanovitch.

There were no Jews remaining at Micháleshik when it was liberated by the Soviet Army in early July 1944. A handful of Jews, including Urke Bliakher, returned from their hiding places shortly thereafter.

³ “5 April 1943, Jews transported from ghettos in the Vilna area and murdered at ponary” at www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/this-month/april/kovno-ponary-train.html