Our Visit to Roth's Hill in 1993 by Ruth Chevion

As we approach Holocaust Remembrance Day this year 2024, I'm hoping, dear reader, that you can take with you some of the stories I've told over the last two years.

Usually, the annual Holocaust Remembrance takes the form of reviewing what was done to us. But there is a way in which reviewing the details of what the Nazis did can blind us to our own accomplishments, our own beautiful culture under stress, and the goodness of people who helped us. Horror has a way of absorbing our attention.

As an antidote to the review of horrors, I would like to bring up the memory of my mother's Grandfather Mechel Roth.

For the first two years of the war, my mother lived with her grandparents, Mechel and Esther Roth, on their farm. Their house stood on a hill they called Roth's Hill in the village of Zniesienie, (Znyeh-**she**-nyeh) in the outskirts of Lvov. There was an orchard with plum trees on the top of the hill, plus a barn for cows and horses. Down below, there was an expanse of fields for corn and potatoes.

My Mom loved her grandfather. He was more of a gentleman farmer, as we would say, in the sense that he generally wore a suit, not overalls. My Mom described how in addition to reading the Jewish newspaper every day, he read Kant for self-education; how he befriended the local Russian Orthodox priest and played chess with him; how he introduced the use of fertilizer in the village. Mom loved to remember how during the war when she felt so lost and lonely, her grandfather would roast corn on the cob specially for her, using the ribs of Grandmother Esther's umbrella for a stick.

I had heard all these stories and many more about life on the farm, but nothing prepared me for what happened when we went back to Poland.

My mother and I travelled to Poland in 1993, with a group of Survivors and Children of Survivors. The idea of the tour was to visit pre-war places, either where the Survivors lived before the war or where they were hidden. There were about fifteen people in the group, including, besides me and my mother, my mother's cousin Carl who had grown up on the farm. One notable stop on the tour was a visit to Roth's Hill.

The view was spectacular, just as Mom had described it. The group of us were walking about on the hilltop listening to Mom and her cousin Carl talk about what life was like back then, showing us with sweeps of their hands where Grandfather's fields lay, where the well was that they drew water from, etc., when suddenly a young Polish man showed up, approaching us politely, holding by the hand a little girl, dressed as if for church, in a sweet dress and nice shoes, whom he introduced as his daughter.

They had heard we were there, the man explained. We had caused quite a stir in the village. The man said he wanted his daughter to meet us because the stories of the Roth family were legendary in his family. He recounted how his own grandfather had spoken of old Mr. Roth, what a good neighbor he was, how he knew everyone in the village by name, how well he treated the workers on the farm, how he had taught the villagers about fertilizer and improved their lives because of it. The man asked if we would please walk through the village because other people wanted to see us too.

These kind villagers deserved our thanks in return. They had hidden the family when the Nazis invaded. You may recall the night my mother spent hidden in the rose garden on the first night of the Nazi invasion.

I want to thank the people of Zniesiene for this wonderful memory, and for the spirit of reconciliation that they extended to us that day. But as for the rest of the story, maybe a few photos will be better than a thousand words.

Photo of Mechel & Esther Roth before the war

Photographs from our trip in 1993

Mad Honey by Jodi Picoult and Jennifer Broylan is a suspenseful novel that explores the themes of gender identity, friendship, self-acceptance, conformity, and individuality. To receive the ZOOM link, please RSVP Ken Cohn at Newbegin04@yahoo.com.