

Elsa Lost and Found by Sylvia Flescher ('70)

After too many years of avoiding it, I finally felt ready to do a “roots” trip to Eastern Europe this past summer. My husband Tom and I signed up for a group trip, organized by the *Holocaust Education Foundation*. I was excited to explore the world where my father’s family had lived and perished. Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Theresienstadt, names that had taken on a mythic quality in my mind, would at last, I hoped, become concrete present-day villages and towns.



Treblinka

It was a transformative experience. I had not expected to respond so viscerally to the pastoral landscape of Poland, or to find its people so warm and welcoming. Our hotel in Lublin was four-star; a beautiful, stately building that had once been a world-famous yeshiva. Klezmer music played in the lobby. For the Poles, the Jews are now an exotic, nearly extinct species. Nevertheless, in Warsaw, a brand-new *Museum to the History of the Jews in Poland* all the signage appears in three languages: Polish, English and....Hebrew!

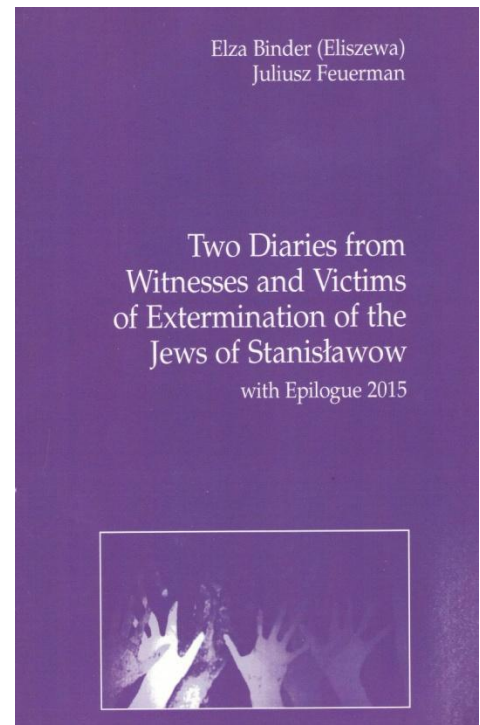


Museum to the History of the Jews in Poland in Warsaw

After our return from Europe, we drove up to my family's lake house in the Adirondacks, where I have spent summers since I was a baby. My father, Joachim Flescher, born in 1906 in what was then Poland and is now Ukraine, always said that this area in upstate New York reminded him of the Carpathian Mountains where he had vacationed with his family in those peaceful pre-World War II days. We described our trip to a neighbor from across the lake, and she urged me to contact her dear friend Andrea Axt who lives in Montreal, explaining, "Andrea lived for many years in Poland after the war and has worked on translating diaries written during the Holocaust. I know you will have a lot to talk about!"

As Tom and I had been planning a trip to Montreal, only two hours away from our lake house, we arrange to meet Andrea for Sunday brunch. A lovely petite woman with reddish curly hair, I sensed a sadness underlying her vivacious, feminine manner. I have barely sat down, when she takes a slim volume out of her pocket-book and hands it to me. Its title: *Two Diaries from Witnesses and Victims of Extermination of the Jews in Stanislawow*. Stanislawow is precisely the small city where my father's family had lived. I tell this to Andrea, who says she could as easily have picked any of the twenty-plus books in the series of diaries she has been involved in publishing under the aegis of the Polish- Jewish Heritage Foundation.

I look more closely at the cover and read the names of the two diarists at the top. Elza Binder...wait! ...Binder... that was my grandmother's maiden name...yes....Sala Binder Flescher. Andrea reacts excitedly, "well, then certainly you are related! Binder is not that common a name."





Jewish cemetery in Stanislawow

My head spinning, I try to take in some of the details Andrea is providing us. As she has written in the foreword to *Elisheva's Diary*, this notebook was found in a ditch by the side of Batory Street in Stanislawow. This is the street that leads to the Jewish cemetery, site of several mass executions of the local Jews. Stanislawow was pivotal in the development of the Nazis' "Final Solution." There they achieved their goal of a "juden-frei" town, exterminating virtually all of the roughly 30,000 Jewish inhabitants.

Aware of some trepidation at what I might discover, I put off reading the diary until later that day when we return to the little flat we have booked. I open the slim volume. First comes an introduction by Andrea, explaining that the diarist Elsa, who was 22 years old, no doubt perished in the so-called Aktia of 6/18/42, the date of the last entry. Next is a map of Stanislawov. Then comes a sample of Elsa's actual handwriting, looking so much like the many letters my father had kept but never told us about: letters his family in Poland had written to him while he was studying psychiatry in Italy.

I take a deep breath and begin to read the first entry of the diary:

"12/23/41

Yesterday, my aunt, tears flooding her eyes, brought over a letter from her son in Italy..."

I feel like my heart will stop. I literally don't know whether to laugh or cry. The son Elsa refers to in these opening lines can only be my father! I realize I am holding in my hands the diary of my father's cousin! And the aunt she refers to is my grandmother! What are the chances?

The entry continues:

"... he complains that he wasn't told earlier of his father's illness. In his innocence, he claims he would have come to save his father (straight into the jaws of the lion). He asks that flowers be taken to the grave--How little idea he has of our conditions!--"

My father had left Poland years before to follow his dream of becoming a psychiatrist. Surely, Elsa was motivated to begin her diary by that letter from my father. His naive wish to have flowers brought to his father's grave was proof to her that the outside world was clueless to the desperate conditions in which Poland's Jews found themselves trapped. Elsa must have resolved then and there to bear witness by keeping a diary.

How to describe the intensity of the reactions which discovering Elsa Binder's diary provoked in me? It's like having my family's very own Anne Frank! Elsa sounds smart, she writes beautifully, she is self-aware, sarcastic, despairing, terrified. She has left behind a heart-breaking eye-witness account of the liquidation of the Stanislavov ghetto. She has no illusions about anyone surviving, exactly as in the last letter my father got from his family, with these words from my grandmother,

"My dear son, this is my last letter to you. We have all been condemned to die"

and from my aunt:

"No one will survive this hell."

My long-lost and new-found cousin Elsa is now the representative of all the relatives I never knew. Her written words both underscore what I have been cheated of, and yet also serve to begin to fill in the huge black hole I have lived with all my life.

Now, when I sit down to write, I feel Elsa's DNA living on in me. By some miracle, I have found Elsa. Or... did Elsa find me?

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Elsa Binder (left) with friends