

# My Galician Story

by Jacques D. Barth and  
Maria van Beurden Cahn,  
Gesher Galicia Members

**THE PAST WAS** not a topic of conversation in my childhood home in Amsterdam, and asking personal questions is an art form that none of us learned to master. After World War I, and especially after the Holocaust, there were no relatives left on either side of my family. In that vacuum, we simply went on with our lives. We spoke about Judaism and Israel, which was most important of all, but not about the past.

History was my favorite subject in school, and I was fascinated by the idea that my father had survived half a century of violence. I knew the basic trajectory of his life, from Rzeszów to Vienna to Amsterdam, and over time, I've been able to fill in the details. In the early 1970s, I returned with my father to his Galician birthplace, which was then part of communist Poland. It was a disorienting and disillusioning trip for him; for me, it was the prelude to a quest I would begin more than 40 years later to uncover my family's history.

## From Rzeszów to the Eastern Front

My father, Jeremias Barth, was an old-school, eastern European Orthodox Jew, not in how he dressed but in how he practiced the traditions of his youth in Jewish Galicia—traditions that I have continued to pass on. He was born in Rzeszów in 1894, the son of Jakub Shulem Barth and Sara Leichtag. He grew up in an Orthodox family and attended the two synagogues near the *rynek* (market square).



*Jeremias Barth, 1953*

My father started his secondary education at a gymnasium in Bielitz, a district in Austrian Silesia, and continued at a gymnasium in Vienna. When World War I broke out, he returned to Rzeszów to be with his family, and after fighting erupted on the eastern front, he brought them back with him to Vienna.

The Russian offensive had caught the Austro-Hungarian army by surprise. It took almost a year before the army was able to halt the Russians, with the help of the Germans. (Editor's note: See Hilsenrath, Christina, "Tutorial: WWI Military Records," *Galitzianer*, March 2021, pp. 11–19.) When the tide turned, my father and his friends—all from Rzeszów and the surrounding areas—volunteered to join the Austro-Hungarian army.

I would have liked to have known more about my father's wartime experience. As a young man, I was very interested in World War I, with its trenches, mustard gas, and offensives that went on for weeks. However, my father said little more than, "Our regiment consisted of lots of Jewish boys, and we, Jews, could fight, believe you me!"

I now know he served in the 40th Infantry Regiment of the Imperial and Royal Army of the Habsburg Empire. His regiment was called Ritter von Pino and consisted almost entirely of Jewish soldiers. Many Jewish young men in the Austro-Hungarian Empire enlisted at that time because of their loyalty to Emperor Franz Joseph, who had instituted civil rights for the Jews. The fact that they would be fighting against Russian Jews among the soldiers on the other side did give some men pause. Nevertheless, pervasive Russian anti-Semitism and support for Emperor Franz Joseph made the situation easier for the Jewish soldiers from Austria-Hungary.

I knew that my father had been wounded in the abdomen by a bayonet, which left lasting scars on his stomach. I didn't know—until I read through documents that had been crammed into a suitcase in my mother's house—that he was training to be an officer, was wounded in Lutsk, and was awarded the Cross of Merit for bravery. I also learned that he had contracted tuberculosis while at the front, making his recovery even more remarkable.

## From Vienna to Amsterdam

My father graduated from the Medical Faculty of the University of Vienna in 1924 and earned a specialization in oral surgery in 1927. He had a successful practice in Vienna until the Nazis put an end to it in 1938. He then focused on escaping Austria with his wife and young son, my half-brother, Peter. After the Germans robbed him of everything—house, money, and medical practice—my



*The wedding of Jeremias Barth and Trude Bunzlau in Vienna, 1936*

father fled with his family to the Netherlands, with the goal of using Rotterdam as a port of transit to the US.

The family rented a small apartment in Amsterdam while awaiting their departure on the SS *Simon Bolivar*. However, they never got the chance to board the ship because it sank during an ocean crossing in November 1939 after hitting a German mine in the North Sea. My father and his wife and son stayed in Amsterdam while seeking other opportunities to escape, but by May of 1940, it was too late. The Germans attacked the Netherlands and conquered the country four days later—the Barth family was trapped.

The Nazis implemented anti-Jewish legislation, which was met by acts of Jewish resistance in February 1941. The Nazis responded by launching violent roundups of Jews for deportation. In opposition to these Nazi actions, the Dutch Communist Party organized a labor strike that extended throughout Amsterdam and into surrounding

towns. (Although it was a remarkable act of resistance by non-Jews on behalf of Jews, according to Dutch professor Dr. Johannes Houwink ten Cate, only one percent of the Dutch people came to the aid of Jews during the war years.) Fearing the strike would go national, Nazi security forces crushed the protest with violence on the streets. One of the casualties was my father's wife, Gertrude Bunzlau Barth, who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time; her role in the protest has never been acknowledged.

My father became a widower with a young son and little means to support him. He earned a small amount by fixing teeth and presumably received help from friends. Eventually, he found an empty room and set up a practice at the top of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* (Dutch Theater), which had become a holding place for Jews prior to deportation. His services were even used by Ferdinand aus der Fünften, who oversaw deportations from the Netherlands. With such a high-level Nazi patient, my father was able to provide some help to the Resistance, including obtaining information on upcoming transports.

In 1943, my father was arrested for not wearing a yellow star. He was interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo, who shattered his right kneecap, resulting in permanent lameness. He was deported, but while en route to the Dutch concentration camp Amersfoort, he was tipped off by a Dutch policeman who signaled when there was an opportunity to escape. He traveled back to Amsterdam, went into hiding, and continued his resistance activities by working as a courier, delivering food stamps, and operating on people at home. He also helped set up a hidden synagogue and when possible, tried to organize a minyan.

In 1944–1945, the so-called Hunger Winter arrived, which was a period of great famine in the Netherlands. At the end of the war, my six-foot-



*Jeremias Barth (right) at the eastern European synagogue in Amsterdam, 1960*

tall father weighed about 86 pounds and was hospitalized with hunger edema.

He stayed in Amsterdam, where he married my mother, Maria Goudekot, and where my brother Michael Reuven and I were born. He created a Polish-Jewish life for himself there, meeting every day with a group of Jewish survivors from Galicia and other parts of eastern Europe in the reopened Galician shul on *Nieuwe Kerkstraat*, which is popularly referred to as the Russian Shul. He supervised services and used his own money to meet many of the synagogue's needs.

He and the other survivors continued many of the Jewish practices that they had grown up with in Galicia. There was a Jewish life that most Dutch Jews were unfamiliar with, and many frowned upon. The survivors spoke Yiddish among themselves, drank *slivovitz* (a plum brandy popular among Jews in central and eastern Europe), talked about the numerous *yeshivas* and Jewish places of learning in the old country, and reminisced about what their lives had once been like. They wept together as they discussed the persecution and murders. The older ones, including my father, sometimes even talked about the times before World



War I. Their memories were animated imprints, and their customs bore witness to deeply religious feelings. Judaism had really been alive in Galicia. Theirs was now a Jewish life filled with yearning for what had once been, a reality that no longer existed.

## Returning to Poland with My Father

The Communists were still in charge when my father and I traveled to Poland in 1972. The goal of our trip was twofold. First, we needed to make sure that I was not considered a Polish citizen, thereby ending the threat of my having to enlist in the Polish army. Second, my father wanted to say Kaddish for his family who had been murdered in the Holocaust. Although he had never investigated exactly how they died, saying Kaddish was important to him.

In Warsaw, we relinquished my Polish citizenship, and then we traveled by train to his birthplace of Rzeszów. When we arrived, my father, who was 78 at the time, hesitated, becoming confused and uneasy as he struggled to find things that he could relate to. He could not find the house where he was born, nor could he find his sister Rivka's house. He recognized the famous Rzeszów Castle, but he was so disoriented by the demolition in the old Jewish neighborhood, the unfamiliar street names, and the new buildings constructed by the Communists that he barely had any interest in searching further. He became glassy-eyed when he saw the dilapidated state of the large synagogue and realized that the smaller one was being used as an archive.

He wanted to see the Jewish cemetery where Jews had been buried for centuries, but the eternity of that eternal resting place had been short-lived. The old Jewish cemetery had been replaced by a small public park with an engraved sign commemorating all the loyal citizens who had fought the Fascists. There was also a gigantic Soviet

monument that symbolized the communist utopia—a blissful state that neither my father nor I was impressed by.

He approached one of the locals and asked where the other Jewish cemetery was. My father had come to say Kaddish and was determined to do so. We were told to go to a spot outside the city limits, and the next morning, we set out on foot. Two hours later, we spotted a field surrounded by a wall, where an elderly Pole opened a rusty gate for us. We saw a collection of cracked and broken gravestones, weeds, trash, debris, and grass that hadn't been mowed in years. It was a sad sight. Somewhere amidst all this lay my grandfather Jakub Shulem, who had died of a heart condition in 1933. Standing next to a sturdy-looking tree and a random pile of stones, we said Kaddish. Then we quickly left Rzeszów.

## Searching to Fill the Void

My father died in 1984, and when I retired in 2014, I couldn't stop thinking about our family history. As a result, I began a search that has been continuing ever since and has taken me to places that I didn't even know existed when I visited Poland with my father. Not having been told much about the past whet my appetite, and I hoped that somehow, somewhere I would find a missing relative.

Were my two brothers and I the only Barths left in the world? Did the whole family come from Rzeszów? Did my grandparents have other children? If so, where did they live, and could I find any trace of them?

I have since learned that I had relatives who once lived in Tarnów and in the Galician towns of Gorlice, Brzostek, Rymanów, and Bełżec (a place I prefer to avoid). Seven years have passed since I began searching, and the quest is not nearly over. It turns out that Galicia had been full of my relatives. I took careful notes about everything and

did detective work on the Internet. Research in the archives did not produce many documents. Since official sources seemed to be scarce, I have had to travel and see things with my own eyes. Local guides and a partner who is a historian have served as my gold mines. It has been a time-consuming and expensive process, but one that has yielded so many results that a kind of family saga has emerged.

In 2019, we visited Brzostek, a town at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, where my paternal grandmother, Sara Leichtag, was born. By the end of the 19th century, the population of the town was about one-third Jewish, with most of the Jews engaged in trade and some in crafts. Residents had their shops or workspace on the street side of their houses and slept in a back room or in the attic.

The Leichtags were a large Orthodox Jewish family, who began emigrating to the United States at the end of the 19th century—but not my grandmother, who met my grandfather, Jakub Shulem Barth, a young man from the petroleum town of Gorlice, and married him. The couple's journey eventually took them to Rzeszów, where they started a hotel with a restaurant and café near an army barracks, meaning they served a large military clientele. Located on the outskirts of Rzeszów, the hotel building is still there and is now being managed by the town.

After visiting the renovated Jewish cemetery in Brzostek, we proceeded to Gorlice, which was a three-hour drive from where we were. Around the mid-19th century, this town had rapidly experienced enormous economic growth when oil was discovered there. Reminiscent of this brief period of economic activity, there is still a large drilling rig, heavy steel beams, and an oil pump with a counterweight on top that once moved up and down constantly as if it were nodding. However, the discovery of "black gold" did not lead to sustained, large-scale industrialization in the region.

There is a museum in a former mine shaft to remind visitors of petroleum's short-lived promises here.

In Gorlice, my paternal great-grandparents had owned a combined hotel, restaurant, and café in the center of town. In 2019, the building was still there, still operational, and still in its original state, except for a recently constructed addition. It was a shabby little hotel with low ceilings, thick walls, narrow hallways, and a couple of rooms for provincial traveling salesmen. A few doors away from the old family hotel, there is a regional museum and archive. Exhibits clearly show the violent history of Gorlice and the surrounding villages, with the bloody battles fought in the region during World War I.

From Gorlice, we hurtled down one-lane roads through the Galician countryside in the direction of Rzeszów. Every few hundred yards, we saw signs on the side of the road pointing to cemeteries from the two world wars. The cemeteries were rarely large or very official looking, usually just green fields with some wooden crosses, and all around, farmers were farming. Without the signs, we wouldn't have even known these burial grounds existed. And while we imagined a huge battlefield, with the civilized world seeming to have been lost, the farmers just went on farming.

In Rzeszów, the great-granddaughter of my grandparents' chambermaid was waiting for us. We had first met her by chance in 2018 during the annual Holocaust memorial ceremony in the town. At that time, she had told me about the prosperity of the family my father had grown up in. This time, she had a pile of printed information and was able to help us find where my father's family had once lived. She showed us the house of my father's sister Aunt Rivka and the house where my father grew up. There was an enamel sign near the front door of my father's family home saying that improvements were being made to the

building and that it was under the temporary custody of the town of Rzeszów. The sign also said that until further notice, the owners were deported Jews who “did not return.” In other words, the house was waiting for us, its rightful owners.

Of course, we wanted to have a look inside, and after a couple days, we mustered the courage to walk in. The high, heavy door at the entrance led to a wide corridor with little tiles. Ascending the staircase was downright unnerving. We saw the names of lawyers and notaries. On the second floor, there were two apartments. We rang the bell at one apartment and were almost relieved when no one answered.

We had already turned to leave after ringing the second doorbell when a woman opened the door just a crack. We smiled and tried to look friendly as we explained that our family had lived there before World War II, but the woman slammed the door in our faces. What did we expect? It was almost 80 years later, and of course there were other people living there now. Time had passed here, as it had for us, but the emotions of these people were not the same as ours. We were descendants; to them, were we nothing but rich Westerners?

After we had already descended the stairs, we heard the door open again, and a young man wearing a cap came running after us. He apologized in perfect English, explaining that his grandmother was afraid that we would kick her out of her apartment. He offered to walk us around the outside of the building, which was much larger than we could see from the street.

Murdered relatives, world wars, cemeteries, a silent father—and here we were, born after World War II, still searching. Despite the weight of the past, our lives are moving forward. We know there is much more to find in Galicia, both for us and for younger generations, not contaminated as

much as we have been by wars and genocidal violence. We search and pass on what we find.

**Editor’s Note:** *The authors are leaders of the Tree-Genes Study, the first Dutch study to investigate the physical effects of the Shoah on the lives of the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors. Dr. Jacques Barth is the principal investigator on the study, and Maria van Beurden Cahn is the head historiographer. This article was originally translated from Dutch by Sheila Gogol.*

## FACES of GALICIA



*The Zinn family from Podhajce, Galicia. Submitted by Jean Rosenbaum, a Geshher Galicia member, whose mother, Leah Zinn Peterman (1902–1982), is the baby in the picture (photo circa 1903; Galveston, Texas).*