



# Meet Szyjek Magier and His Family



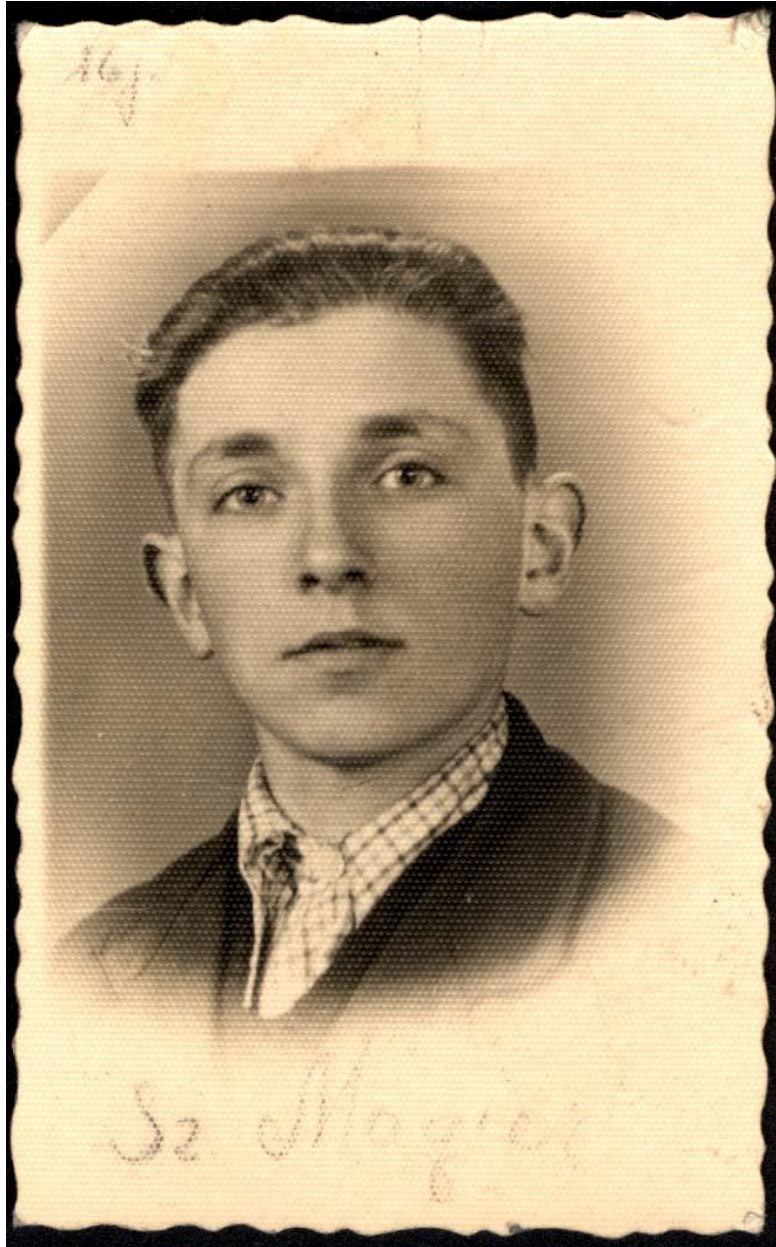
**By Russell Kaback**

A photo guide in presentation with  
Russell Kaback: 25044 - A Jewish Grandson's Musical History of the Holocaust





The only surviving photo of the Magier family, probably taken around 1930 or 1931. Szyjek is in the center, the youngest. He told me that this must have been around 1st grade because they shaved your head before you started school. Left to right: Abo, Zelda, Motek above, Josef and Monjek. You can see the parents are wearing their finest clothing and hats, and the older boys are wearing typical school uniforms. This photo had been sent to an American family member when it was taken, which is how it survived the war.



Szyjek, in what appears to be an identification photo which would have been used during the time of the Nazi occupation of Bendzin. This is how he appeared during the time that the story takes place. In the top left corner is written "16j", which likely means "16 years", his age, and on the bottom "Sz. Magier", his name, abbreviated. This photo only became known to us in 2014, after my mother gave some family names to a Holocaust archivist.



Similarly to the ID photo of Szyjek, this photo of my great-grandfather, Szyjek's father, Josef, was found in an archive in 2014. Josef was one of four brothers himself, and the Magiers were prominent merchants in Bendzin. The families were close and spent holidays and special times together. Josef is presumed to have been murdered in the gas chambers at Auschwitz after all the Jewish of Bendzin and the surrounding area were gathered and sent out on August 1, 1943.

Some of Szyjek's memories of his father that he shared with me were when the circus came to Bendzin and he sat on his father's shoulders to see over the crowd, or when Szyjek was home sick from school one day and his father brought him a banana, which was a rare treat, or how his father, because he was the strongest guy in the neighborhood, was responsible for tapping the wooden beer barrel on Saturdays when the community would gather for the Sabbath.

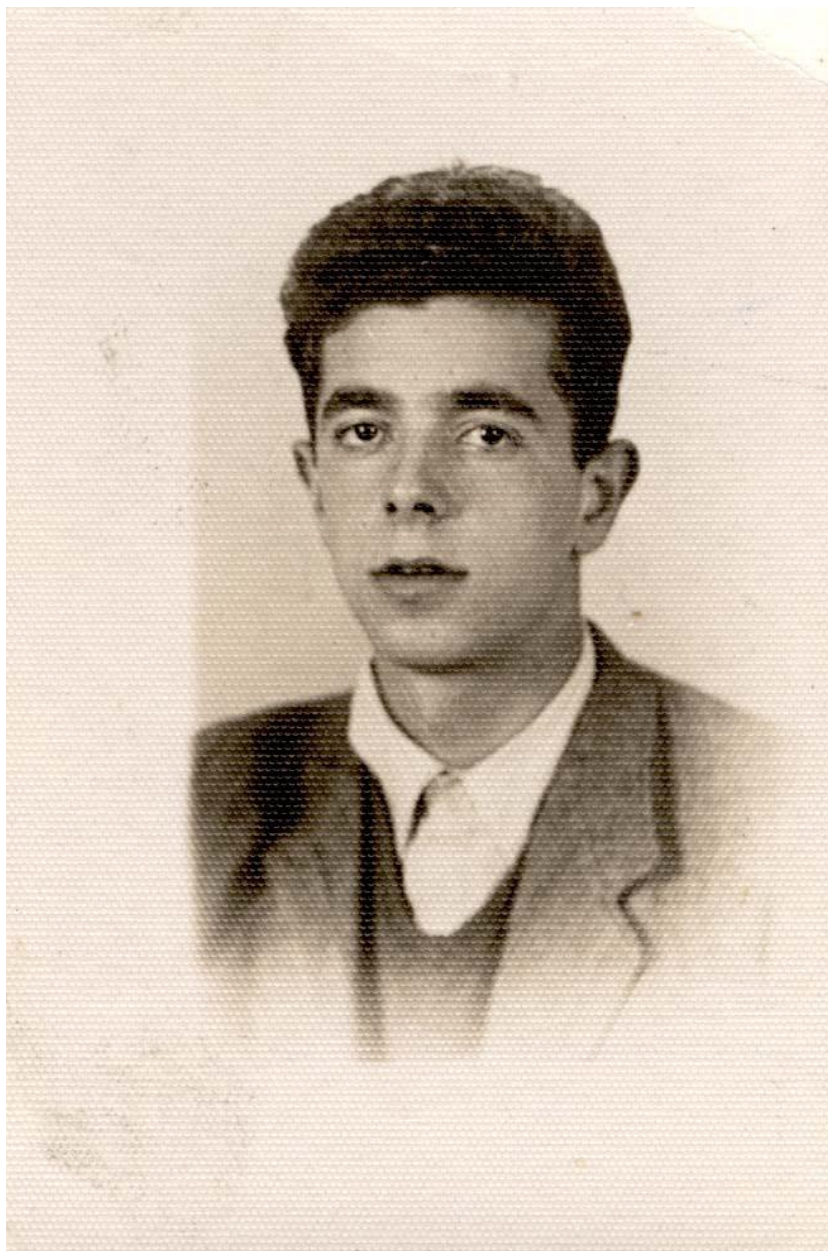
He was a strict but loving father.





A drawing that was made in 1965 from the Magier family portrait, this is the only known image of my great-grandmother, Zelda, whose maiden name was Zalcman. She was born and raised in Pinczow, the older of two sisters. Her father, the “Grandpa” in the story, was a religious man who followed all of the commandments of the Jewish tradition. He was an herbalist, and he made his modest living by traveling the countryside by horse and buggy, collecting wild plants and selling them at market.

Zelda’s mother died young, and when Zelda turned 18, she moved to the nearby city of Bendzin, where she worked as a maid in order to support her father. She was a great baker, known for her cakes. A hard worker, her idea of relaxing was sitting on a bench talking with a friend while she mended the socks of her four boys.



ID photo of Monjek, the second oldest brother. I knew him as a kind and gentle uncle. He lived out his days in Israel, and I am very close with his grandson, Yossi, my second cousin.



Elsa and Szyjek were married on March 25, 1947, in Weiden, Germany. She had been a prisoner at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where she was liberated by the British army. Szyjek had been liberated by the United States army, so he was living in the American zone in Weiden, and Elsa in the British. The city of Weiden was one of many places used to house the many thousands of survivors of the camps, liberated by the Allies (U.S., Britain, Russia), and was known as a Displaced Persons Camp.

Elsa's one surviving brother, Fritz, is the tall figure on the right side of the photo, and his wife Pnina is behind Elsa to the left with the darker hair. Behind Elsa to the right, with the lighter hair, is Sabka, the older woman who arranged for Szyjek and Elsa to meet.

My mother, Guta, was born later that year, on December 4th.





My mother, Guta, or Gusti, named after Elsa's mother, Augusta.





Elsa's family, the Fischers of Katowice. Her mother Augusta was one of 12 children, and her 11 siblings lived in the country, so the Fischer home in the big city of Katowice always had an open door, with people visiting all the time. My Grandma Elsa used to say, if more people ever wanted to come over, "We'll just add more water to the soup!"

They were an affluent family, and when the war began Augusta hid a lot of their gold and silver valuables, buried in a barn at her sister's house. Later, the two older brothers, Bernard (top left) and Leo (top right) would come back to the barn from time to time to get some of the gold to live on. One day, some Nazis came and demanded they show them where the gold was hidden, and then shot them both in cold blood. A letter came from a neighbor telling of the news, and Elsa saw that as her mother read of their murders, her mother's hair began to instantly turn white. I was named after Bernard: my Hebrew name is Dov, which means "bear".

Fritz is top center, Salo is seated lower right. Elsa was the youngest of four, the only girl, in her own words, a "spoiled rotten" princess.



Salo Fischers' "big corner building, shaped like an L, with a lively tavern and 100 apartments above". The surviving members of the family tried for years to get repaid by the German government for the theft of this property, to no avail. Bernard is in the center window above.





The tavern of the Fischer family, my great-grandparents. Salo in the center back, with the small mustache, his wife Augusta to the right of him.



Greenwald, the cousin who was captain in the American army.





Szyjek in the Displaced Persons camp in Weiden Germany, after the war. He is standing, to the right of center, with his hand down by his hip.



The wedding of Syzjek's oldest brother Motek, with Shanya. In the back, the second oldest brother Monjek, his wife Lola, Elsa, and Syzjek. Weiden, Germany.





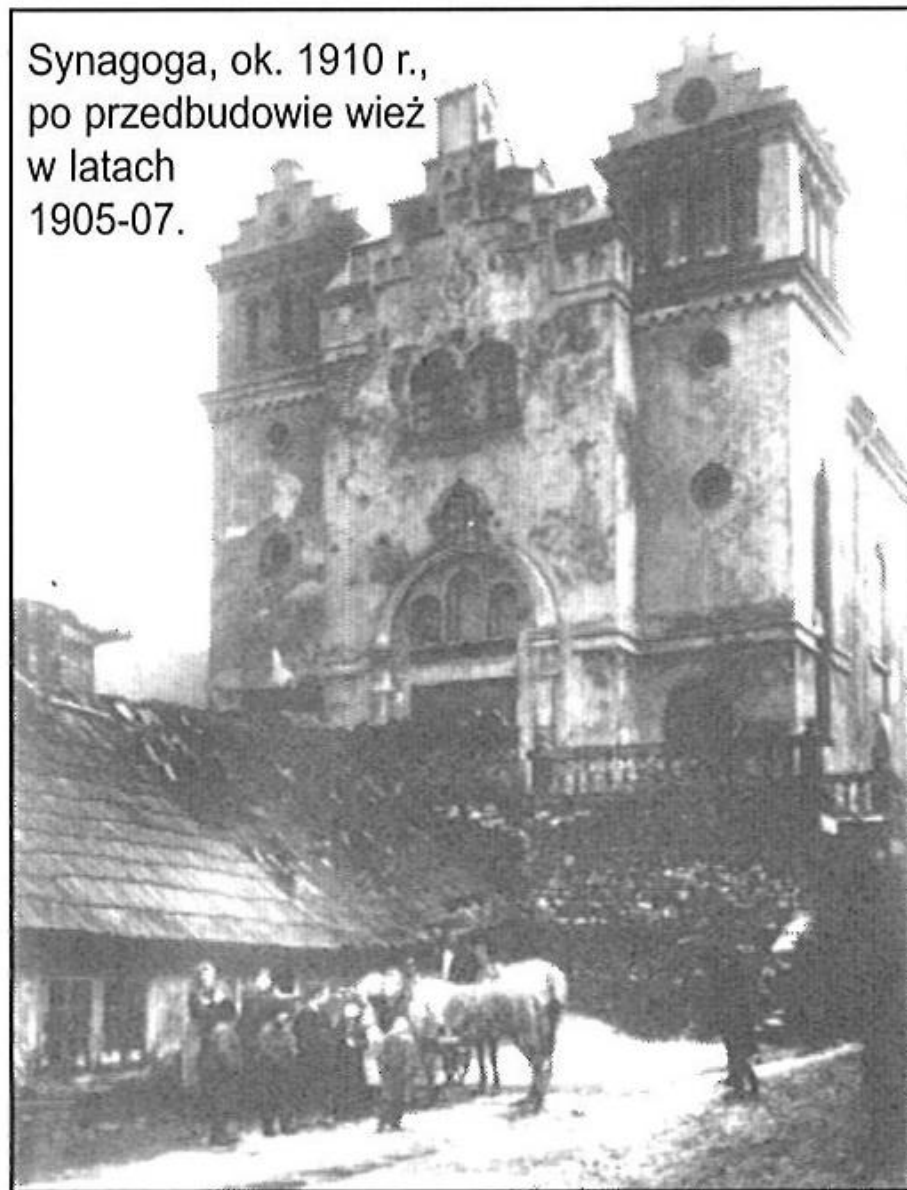
Szyjek's street, Mordzejowska Street, in Bendzin, sometime during the Nazi occupation, during World War II. Notice the armbands. These were required to be worn by Jews in order to identify them. (Photo: public domain)



The synagogue in Pinczow, showing the signs of the fire which was set by the *einsatzgruppen*, the Special Task Force, in the first days of the Nazi invasion of Poland. Their special task was to trail behind the front line of the army and to instill terror into the Jews of Poland by burning synagogues, and rounding them up and executing them by gunfire. This was the precursor to the development of the gas chambers to execute people in mass numbers, mainly Jews.

My great-great-grandfather, Mordechai Zalzman, was burned alive in this synagogue in early September, 1939. He was an observant Jew, what we would call Orthodox. As was mentioned in the caption of the photo of his daughter Zelda, his wife died when their two daughters were still young. He was an herbalist and a forager, making his living by traveling the countryside by horse and buggy, collecting wild plants to sell at market. Zelda never recovered from the shock of learning that her father was burned alive in the synagogue. (Photo: public domain)



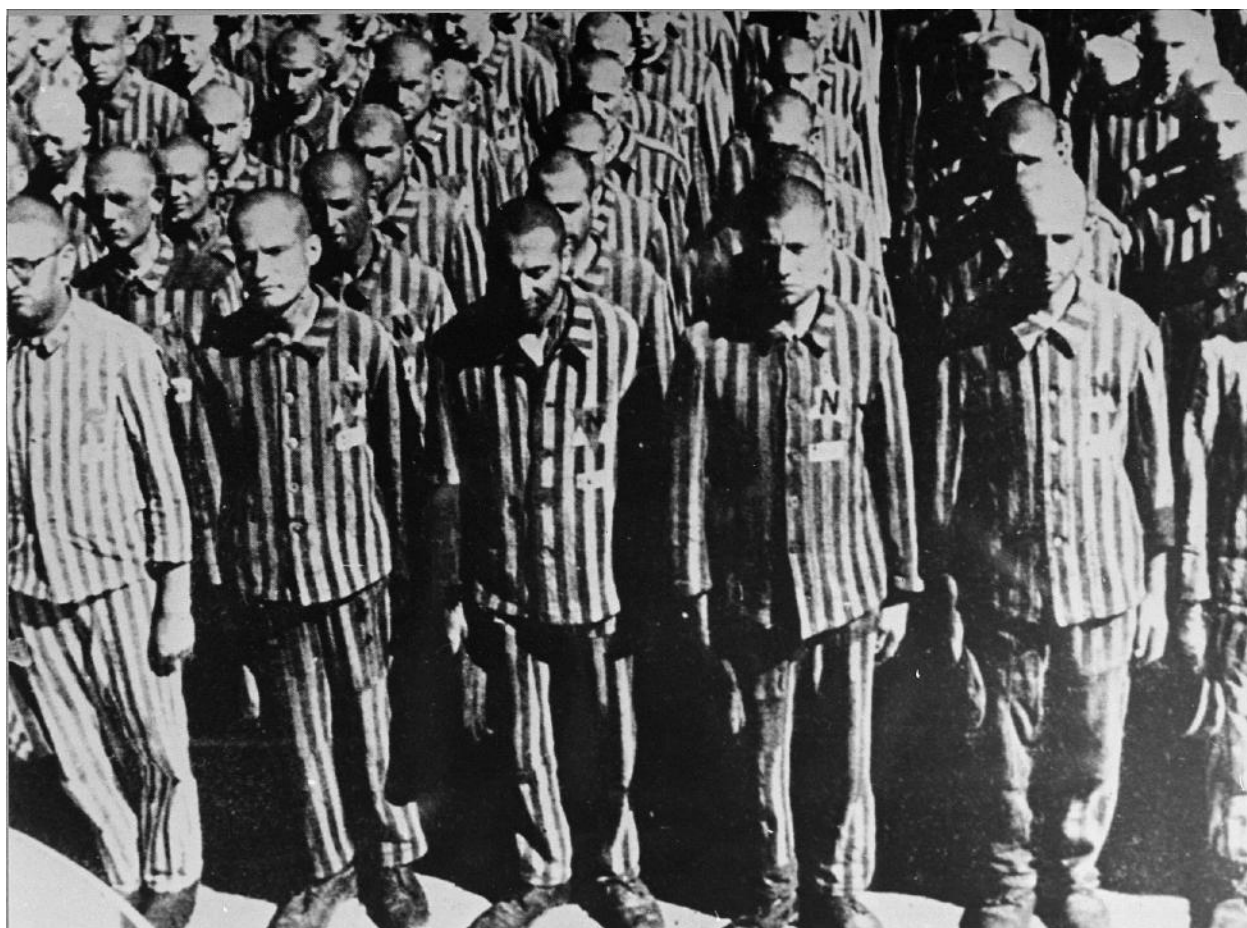


The great synagogue of Bendzin, around 1910. Most Jewish residents of Bendzin might go to synagogue only once a year on the high holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Daily and weekly Jewish worship would occur in the many neighborhood *shteibls*, or small prayer rooms. In the first days of World War II this magnificent synagogue was burned to the ground with Jewish people trapped inside. (Photo: public domain)



A typical trolley, workers at a work camp filling it with dirt, like Szyjek did in Markstadt when he was forced to bury alive the Russian prisoners of war. (Photo: public domain)





Typical concentration camp prisoners lined up for roll call. (Photo: public domain)



Heinrich Himmler, head of the *Schutzstaffel*, or SS, inspecting a camp of prisoners of war. He is in the center, facing left, with glasses, surrounded by the other big bosses. (Photo: public domain)





Flossenburg concentration camp. This was the final camp that Szyjek was at for a week, while he and the other hundreds of thousands of prisoners were being marched away from the advancing Allied forces, on what was known as the 'Death March'. He was intercepted by the U.S. Army shortly after his time at Flossenburg. (Photo: public domain)



A guard post, spiked iron fence, barbed wire and spotlights, at the Auschwitz I camp. This was taken on my 2009 trip to Poland with my grandfather, as part of the International March of the Living, an annual commemorative trip attended by high schools students and others from around the world.





Szyjek and me in April of 2009, during the March of the Living, at the former Majdanek (pronounced my-DON-ik) death camp, where an estimated 80,000 people were murdered, mostly Jews. Looking at this photo, I never realized how short he was, and although some of that is due to old age, it also dawned on me that he was starved during his teenage years, and thus probably stopped growing tall when he was 14.



The perimeter of Auschwitz.





Barracks behind barbed wire at Auschwitz.



Bunks in a barrack at Auschwitz.





Latrines at Auschwitz.



Remaining canisters of Zyklon B cyanide poison pellets, the kind used in the gas chambers, preserved at Majdanek, which, like the many remaining camps, is now a museum to show the world what happened there during World War II. The pellets were stored in sealed metal containers, and when exposed to air they released cyanide poison gas. Zyklon B was first used as an insecticide before World War II.





Stains on the wall of a gas chamber, the blue color from the Zyklon B cyanide poison gas. The word "cyanide" is derived from the word "cyan", which is a green-blue color.



A door at the entrance of a gas chamber.





Hole in the ceiling of a gas chamber, through which the Zyklon B pellets were dropped.



The ovens used to burn the corpses of people gassed to death. This was known as a crematorium.





A crematorium at Majdanek death camp.



Countless pairs of shoes, at the Auschwitz camp museum, each one belonging to a person who was murdered there. In order to reassure prisoners on their way to the gas chambers, the method was to create the illusion that they were going to be sanitized with showers on their way into the camp, as a matter of health procedure. Many gas chambers were outfitted with fake shower heads. Guards would tell the prisoners to tie their shoes together before the shower, so that they could find them afterwards. This lent to the illusion that they would be coming out from the chamber. The illusion was necessary in order to help keep the crowds of people calm on the way in.





The iconic guard tower at the entrance of Auschwitz II camp, also known as Birkenau (named for the birch trees there). This was the death camp known as Auschwitz, where an estimated 900,000 people were murdered upon arrival in gas chambers. This includes the tens of thousands of residents of Bendzin, and my great-grandparents, Zelda Zalzman and Yosef Magier. Szyjek's two oldest brothers, Motek and Monjek, were both imprisoned here, and survived. This photo is from my 2009 trip with Szyjek, and others, on the March of the Living.



Szyjek at a memorial wall in Warsaw, Poland, engraved with typical first names of victims of the Nazi atrocities. Here he is pointing to his name, Jechoszua, which is the Polish spelling of the Hebrew Biblical name Yehoshua, commonly known to us as Joshua. The “Shua” part of his name led him to be called “Sheeya” in Polish, which became the diminutive “Sheeyik”, spelled “SZYJEK”.





Me with my Grandpa Steve (as I called Szyjek) at a summer family beach get together in Rhode Island, 2009. That was the summer after we went to Poland on the March of Living, and I decided that I would make it my mission to keep his story alive using music. While we were together that week I interviewed him, and recorded 5 hours of us talking which formed much of the basis of the story I presented. In my mind as this photo was taken, I was making a deal with him, that I would tell his story to the world.



In 2018, I went to Bendzin on a trip commemorating the 75th anniversary of August 1, 1943, the day that all of the Jews of the surrounding area were rounded up and sent to Auschwitz. This is my photo of the castle at the center of Bendzin. My grandfather used to talk about the castle as if it was there center of the world, and to his young self, it probably seemed like it was. It was completed in 1348, during the rule of the king Kazimierz The Great, known for establishing laws which protected Jews, and which led to the overwhelming numbers of Jews coming to settle in Poland.





While the buildings likely have changed since my grandfather's day, this is a view from a courtyard near where his family once lived, looking up to the back windows, like he did when he saw his mother and father with serious expressions on their faces, signaling their grave concern with events that were about to unfold.



A central part of our 2018 trip was to set up monuments and have dedication ceremonies for them attended by local authorities such as mayors, press and other town officials. This was an effort to memorialize some of the significant locations of events of the expulsion and murder of the Jewish people of Bendzin and the surrounding region. On August 1, 1943, when the nearly 30,000 Jews of Bendzin were sent to Auschwitz for extermination, or forced labor before extermination, they were gathered at the soccer field in the neighboring town of Sosnowiec. Here we are dedicating a memorial to that event.





On our 2018 trip to Bendzin, we were shown the very few preserved *shteibls* in Bendzin. A *shteibl* is a small prayer room used for everyday Jewish gathering and customary worship. They were built in ordinary rooms in apartments, homes and buildings, and after the cleansing of Jews from towns like Bendzin, they returned to become ordinary rooms again. However, a few have been uncovered and preserved by present-day residents of Bendzin who are interested in paying tribute to the Jewish history of the region. You see here depicted on the wall the remnants of images of Jerusalem, the ancestral original home of the Jewish people dating back to around 1000 BCE.



During my 2018 trip to Bendzin, I visited Cafe Jerusalem, a small cafe located on the street where my grandfather and his family once lived, Mordzejowska Street. Some present day residents of Bendzin have taken interest in rediscovering, preserving and celebrating the once thriving Jewish life that was essential to their town for centuries prior to World War II. The cafe is a tribute to the Jewish life of Bendzin, filled with artifacts and memorabilia reflecting the town's strong Jewish heritage.





Elsa and Szyjek, 1949, Israel.

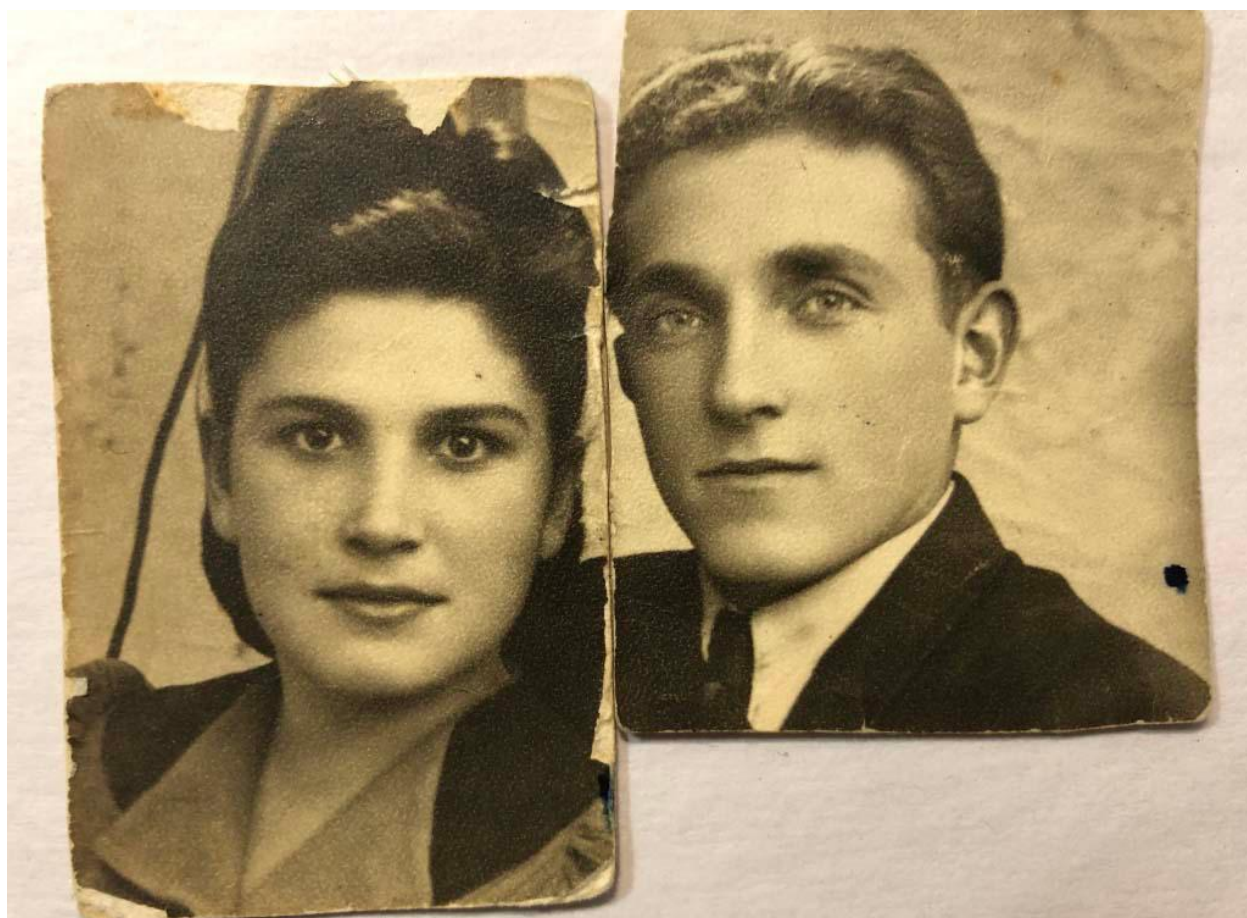


Grandpa Steve and Grandma Elsa, more or less as I knew them, when I was a young man, probably sometime in the later 1990s.





A later photo of my mother, Guta, (she changed her name to Jean during her teens) and Szyjek (who went by Steve after he immigrated to Canada).



A montage of two photos of Elsa and Szyjek, in their early days of courtship.