

Genealogical Gems in Rural Hungary

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By Ted Grossman Ted is the son of Nicholas (Miklos) Grossman, who was born in 1910 in what was then Csuz, a small village in northwest Hungary until 1919, when it became Dubnik, and a part of Czechoslovakia. Dubnik is now a part of Slovakia. Ted presented a paper on this subject at the 30th annual Jewish Genealogy International Conference on July 13, 2010, in Los Angeles, California.

You may ask, who or what are genealogical gems? In my opinion, they are people who live in small towns and villages and know everybody, and therefore can direct researchers to those who know about their community, both past and present, and are happy to share their information with others. I came to this conclusion because I live in such a place in the United States. It's Orcas Island, in Washington state. My own wish is to meet old-timers who are still alive and who welcome those who are eager to hear about the history of their home town. Some are family members. Others are people who once lived in a small village in Hungary, and have since moved elsewhere. The number of people in these categories is getting smaller and smaller. They need to be talked to as quickly as possible. In my own family I am down to one such ancestor, a 91-year-old cousin who lives in Baltimore, Maryland, and has an amazingly good memory. Dad and three of his brothers were in rural Hungary before coming to the United States in 1925. But only two ancestors, my uncle Simon and the 91-year-old cousin, qualify as genealogical gems. My father didn't qualify because he couldn't bring himself to talk about the horrors inflicted on his relatives who stayed in Europe. While still alive, Simon became a genealogical gem because, with the help of his daughter Kathy, talked at length about what life was like in Hungary, on two lengthy CDs covering a wide range of subjects, including religious holidays, schooling, and the economy. His stories contained memories about his life as a 12-year-old boy who rode the train to a nearby town so he could continue his education at a Jewish school. It would require him to live with a family he had never met before. Simon had no other choice if he were to continue his education because the Jewish school went only through grade six, which Simon had already completed. Simon also spoke about his bar mitzvah, which was very limited compared to celebrations in America today. He was called to the and Haftorah. That was it: No parties, no celebrations, nothing more. My 91-year-old cousin, Ernie Friedman, told of his hours growing up in the small town of Kemece shortly after the end of World War I. He recalled that there were no separated Jewish and Christian sections of the town. Rather, the families lived side by side, and their children became best of friends. Cousin Ernie also remembered that anti-Semitism was not a concern during his early life. "There were anti-Semites, he admitted, but they didn't bother us." Of course, that would change later on. Any other genealogical gems in rural Hungary? Yes, even one whose name I do not know. It was a young man in the summer of 2006 whom I met while we rode the train from Debrecen to Budapest. He had just finished an intensive Hungarian language class at the university in Debrecen, while I was coming from a nearby village, Biharszeplak, where my grandparents had lived from 1888 to 1893 and had their first two children. They moved to Csuz, in 1893, where they gave birth to another 14 children. "Where are you going?" I asked the man whom I met on the train. "I am going to a village where my family once lived," the young man answered, "and I will stay there for about a week. While there, I'll try to meet the old-timers and everyone else who likes to talk. I'll get a hair cut from the local barber, hang out and have a few drinks at the local bar, go to the elementary school and talk with teachers in English and Hungarian, and volunteer to speak to the children in English." I later learned that, while he was at the village, the word got out that an American was visiting their village, and that during his last day there, an old man came up and asked him to join in a walk. It ended by an old, empty house, where the man told him that this was where his family once lived. Today, more than four years later, the young man still didn't know if he was being told the truth or sold a line by someone trying to make a sale. I had to wait until 2008 before I could have a similar visit in what is now Dubnik. Little did I know it at the time, but it would enable me to meet some very special people, virtually all of them Christians. At the top of the list are Nora and Marta, the two archivists in Dubnik. Not only do they guard and protect all of the local archives, they also make available all the birth, marriage, and death records that have been written since 1895, the year when records throughout Hungary were transferred from churches and synagogues to the national, district, county, and town archives. Since I knew that my grandparents had 16 children, two of them born in Biharszeplak, I was searching for 14 birth certificates in what was then Csuz, and found every one of them. Of the remaining 14 children, four died at a young age. Virtually the entire family left Csuz in 1915, shortly after at the onset of World War I, and never returned. They moved to Serbia, where my grandparents operated a kosher restaurant for Hungarian and Austrian military officers. The only close family member who remained in Csuz was my great-grandmother, Etelke Braun Grossman, a member of the Braun family, which owned large farms in and around Csuz. Nora and Marta rolled out the welcome mat for those doing genealogy work, creating a warm and friendly environment in which researchers were welcomed and served free soft drinks, coffee, snacks, and cookies. They even arranged a free tour of Dubnik, and accommodations at Dubnik's little eight-room hotel. Whenever a document was discovered, the archivists would offer to make a free 11" X 17" copy for the researcher. Getting copies about the birth, marriage, and death of each ancestor was especially helpful, because each contained a great deal of information, including the ancestor's age, religion, occupation, and place where the parent was born and raised. The copies would give the researcher sufficient time to wade through the documents at his or her own pace. Uncle Simon's birth certificate affirmed that he was born in 1903, his father was Leopold Grossman, and the mother was Katalin Friedman Grossman. All stated that the family's religion was what Hungarians called "Iszraelita", and the father's occupations, at one time or another, were cantor, inspector of kosher meats, butcher, and tradesman. The record did not state, however, that Leopold Grossman also sold matzah during the days leading up to the Passover holiday. That information I found on the CD made by Simon while he was still alive. The certificates also stated that Simon's father was born in Jako,

short for Nyirjako, in Szabolc County, eastern Hungary, and was 43 years old when Simon was born. Grandmother Katalin's record stated that she was born in Petnehaza, also in Szabolc county, and was 36 years old when Simon was born. But many of the records were filled with discrepancies. One listed my grandparents' ages as eight years apart, while another had them six years apart, and still another 10 years apart. By having access to all these records, not just those about my family, I was able to come across still more information about my ancestors. For example, the documents revealed that large numbers of infants and young children in Csuz., both Jews and Christians, died at a very young age in the late 19th century, quite likely in cholera epidemics. Much of the credit for finding this information goes to Nora and Marta. It's a shame that these hard-working archivists in rural areas are paid so poorly. An expert on genealogy advises researchers to take each a gift as a token of appreciation. It's great advice, and explains why I brought each of them a large box of candy. The Dubnik archivists weren't the only ones deserving to be called genealogical gems. At Petnehaza, in eastern Hungary a few kilometers south of Kisvarda, and in Szabolc County, the mayor and his staff greeted and welcomed researcher. This was good news for me, because Petnehaza was where my internal grandmother was born, and where she and my grandfather were married. It was also where I received a gift that I will treasure all my life -- a large beautiful, colorful map of pre-Trianon Hungary, which now hangs in my den. I asked the town clerk if she knew where in Petnehaza the Friedman family once lived. Being a genealogical gem, she passed the question on to an old-timer who said the family lived at the site where the public school now stands. I now look forward to going back to Petnehaza and volunteering to teach the kids English. Still other genealogical gems in the area in and around Dubnik included Ferenc Oravetz, an elderly resident who has written a book about local Jews who were killed in the Holocaust. Ferenc is a Christian, but that didn't lessen his determination to tell the story about what happened to his friends and neighbors. He also alerted me about an archive in nearby Nitre, contending that it had the most information about what happened to the Dubnik Jews during World War II. I intend to go that archive later this year.

Ferenc also told me about a Jewish woman, Karla Kovacs, who was born in the area and deported to Auschwitz, but returned after the war. She now lives in Nove Zamky, about 15 kilometers from Dubnik. Ferenc arranged for me to interview her, but Klara consented on one condition: that I plead with Dubnik mayor Robert Oravesz to clean up the Jewish cemetery, which hadn't been touched for decades. I agreed to undertake what seemed to be a helpless cause, only to learn this spring, much to my delight, that the mayor had agreed to clean it up. It was carried out this past spring by mayor Robert Oravesz. In return for my willingness to make my pitch, I heard Ms. Kovacs recall her memories of Jews and Christians during the years leading up to World War II. Among the things she mentioned was that there were two doctors in Dubnik, one Jewish and the other Christian, and that both served everybody, not just those their of own religion. Ms. Kovacs also said that the general store was owned by a Jew, but overseen during the Sabbath by the Christian manager, and closed on Sunday. Finally, there was the hotel manager, another Oravesz, who drove me to several nearby archives, and waited for me while I inquired about relevant documents. Ondrej Oravez became a friend, and we now keep in touch by Facebook. His hotel is special to the community. It's where people gather late afternoons for Happy Hour. I would be fooling you if I stated that there was no anti-Semitism in Dubnik, despite the words of Klara Kovacs. It took a story from a local woman named Magda that gave me a more realistic analysis of the situation. It was the story about a man who, at the end of World War II, bought the synagogue and property, and turned it all into a pig sty. But his plan didn't last long. That's because his son was killed when the tractor he was driving flipped over and killed him. That prompted the man to twice put the property up for sale, and each time the new owner died at a young age. The synagogue has long since been demolished, but the property continues to be without a buyer, and with empty space. "People believe that the anti-Semite cursed the property," Dubnik resident Magda said, then added. "He got what he deserved." Magda and her husband were among those who helped clean up of the Jewish cemetery. She is also the one who gave my wife and me a tour of Dubnik.