JEWISH HISTORY

by Rafael Hoffman

NO ONE TO ANSWER 'AMEIN'

A group of around 100 Jews (this author included) with faint connection to each other gathered this past April at New York’s Center for Jewish History. The glue that bound the varied group together was that they were all in one way or another sons and daughters of a shtetl known as Felshtin, in what is today western Ukraine.

Sadly, this unique gathering was not simply a distinctive reunion of cousins many times removed and a day of lectures and commemorative events focused around life in their shared “alter heim.” Rather, it was a commemoration of the centennial of the pogrom that saw the brutal murder of some 600 of the town’s Jews, roughly one-third of Felshtin’s population.

The tragedy in Felshtin was hardly an isolated one. More than 1,000 such attacks struck Jewish communities throughout what was then briefly, and is now again, an independent Ukraine, in the year 1919, claiming what is estimated to be more than 100,000 lives, and leaving countless others severely wounded.

Yet, a century on, this catastrophic event in Jewish history has been largely forgotten, presumably overwhelmed by the unfathomable tragedy of the Holocaust, which would claim 60 times more victims only two decades later.
Jeffrey Veidlinger, Professor of History and Judaic Studies and Director of the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan, is currently working on a book about the pogroms of 1919, and was one of those who addressed the Felshtin centennial. He contends that, although largely ignored in collective Jewish memory, the slaughter of Jews in Ukraine was not only an ominous precursor, it “made the inconceivable conceivable, because now there was a fresh precedent of soldiers rounding up Jews and murdering them.”

**FELSHTIN’S POGROM.**

While tragically not unique, what befell Felshtin on 17 and 18 Adar I, 5679, February 17 and 18, 1919, paints a horrifically vivid picture of the wanton slaughter that Ukraine’s Jews endured that year.

In the chaos that ensued following the various stages of the Russian Revolution and the conclusion of the First World War, three groups were left vying for power in Ukraine: the coalition of liberals and monarchists that made up the anti-communist White movement, the Bolshevik Reds, and Ukrainian nationalists.

Jews quickly felt their situation becoming increasingly precarious. In the weeks before the pogrom, a group of members of one of several warring factions came to torment Harav Dovid Shlomo Novoseller, z”l, who served as Felshtin’s Rav at the time.

“A group of Cossacks or Petluranicks (Ukrainian nationalists) came and said that they want the Rav to come out so they can ride around him with their horses and whip him,” Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Novoseller, a son of the elder Rav Novoseller, told Hamodia. “[The townpeople] said they wouldn’t give him over, but my father said that the *halachah* is that if [non-Jews threatening harm] ask for one person, then you can’t give them over, but if they designate a specific person he should go [rather than put others at risk]. So my father took his tallis and tefillin and went outside. But before they could do too much to him, another band of soldiers came and attacked this group, and chased them away.”

That salvation did not last long. Days before the pogromers reached Felshtin, they began their work in the nearby city of Proskurov. There, troops that were part of the army of Ukraine’s short-lived national leader Simon Petlura were told by their commander, Ivan Samosenko, of an imminent plot by the Jews of the city to incite an uprising to wrest control of the area from
independent Ukraine and deliver it to the hands of the Bolsheviks.

While tomes of information on the pogroms have been gathered by Yiddishist historians Eliyahu Tcherikower and Eliyahu Heifetz, who both wrote massive works based on interviews and records they had gathered, Felshtin’s own “Yiskor book” gives dozens of firsthand accounts written by survivors themselves.

One entry, written by Shmuel Landau, dramatically tells of how Samosenko’s men cagily framed a group of young Jewish Communists into acting the part of conspirators. Only too eager to slaughter Jews in the name of Ukraine, the pogromers set out on what was an especially bloody and brutal assault.

Heifetz’s work says that in the past such attacks were chiefly focused on robbery and property destruction, but that the attacks in Proskurov marked a genocidal turn.

“Beginning with Proskurov, the basic purpose of the pogroms in Ukraine appears [to have become] the total destruction of the Jewish population. Looting was also widely practiced, but it took second place,” writes A.I. Hillerson, the section’s author.

Reports about the massacre in Proskurov rapidly reached the Jews of Felshtin, who were told that that same murderous band was headed for their town, with some of Samosenko’s troops moving to block the roads. Rav Novoseller declared a day of taanis and tefillah, and as pogromers drew closer, the town’s Jews sought out attics, cellars, closets or any other place they could think of to hide.

According to accounts in the Yiskor book, Samosenko picked up additional locals to aid in his attack on Felshtin, and rallied them with a speech similar to the one he had delivered in Proskurov — that no bribes should be accepted that would deter any member of the gang from slaughtering as many Jews as possible.

The twenty-seven accounts of Felshtiner survivors collected in the Yiskor book tell stories of the most savage and cruel murder of men, women and children imaginable.

“One of the murderers introduced a new slogan which I heard standing frozen in my chimney, ‘khilposti, birimsi za rabotu — children, let us go to work,”’ wrote Moshe Zilberman. “As soon as those words were spoken, they were ... like wild animals pouncing on their prey. They used every weapon imaginable to slaughter any Jew found in the street. They searched every attic, closet, and cellar, pulling out anyone in hiding.”

Rabbi Moshe Novoseller said that he recalled his father relating how his first wife and daughters were ordered by pogromers to kiss a crucifix, and upon their refusal were beaten to death. Rav Novoseller himself would survive, with many broken bones and other severe wounds that kept him
bedridden for months. His son, Sholom, was also brutally beaten and presumed dead, left at the bottom of a pile of bodies. Yet the boy was heard groaning the next day and was rescued and nursed back to health.

After the two days of terror, Samosanko’s band moved on, but only months later, on the second day of Shavuos, the town would be hit by a second pogrom that would claim some 30 more Jewish lives.

From his hospital bed, Rav Novoseller decided many of the heart- and gut-wrenching shiviel s that came to him. The last of 13 recorded in the Yiskor book says that at all of Felshtin’s seven shuls and batei medrash, everyone present is reciting Kaddish, but that there is no one to answer “amein.”

As in other towns that faced similar fates, make-shift hospitals were set up for the many wounded, and later, an orphanage was established for some 150 children, first locally and later in Lemberg (today known as Lviv).

The many Felshtiners already in America at the time of the pogrom organized fundraising efforts to aid their suffering landsleit. Rav Novoseller used his status as an official government Rabbi to issue papers that allowed many of the orphans to emigrate to the United States and to South America. The Rav himself, a scion of the Chernobyl dynasty, would eventually recover and emigrate to Philadelphia, where he rebuilt his family and served as the Rav of a congregation and communal leader until his passing in 1966.

**A SHTETL, ITS BOOK, AND A PIECE OF HISTORY**

Felshtin’s Yiskor book was originally published in 1937 by the Felshtiner Faragyn, or Benevolent Organization. It was one, if not the first, of its kind to serve as a means of collecting memories of a town and of the misfortunes that ended its Jewish life. The genre would become increasingly popular in the wake of the Second World War.

Like many other such works, the book contains a far lighter section as well, which details day-to-day Jewish life in Felshtin before its destruction.

Attorney Sidney Shaievitz, a Felshtin descendant, has spent over 20 years working to perfect a translation of the book’s original Yiddish.

“It’s a wonderful book written by a very dedicated group of authors that memorialized the pogrom and painted a vivid picture of life in the old country,” he told Hamodia. “My mother never spoke about the pogrom, but she had the book on the shelf. I knew her father was stabbed to death, but not much more than that. After she died, I started to read the book and developed a serious interest.”

**A SHTETL LIKE MANY OTHERS**

Located on the Russian side of what was the border between Tsarist territory and Hapsburg Galicia, Felshtin seems everything that one would expect of the shtetl of yore. An entry about the town’s central shul breaks attendees into three groups—one that davened, another that davened a little but mostly came to hear the chazzan, and a third that stood in the hallway and told jokes. Other options to daven in the town were the “beis medrash” where the lomdim congregated, a large kbias of Zinkover Chassidim, and a smaller one for Husyatiner Chassidim.

An article about Harav Yisrael Kittover, z”l, Felshtin’s Rav from 1880–1910, tells how, despite being a widely respected talmid chacham who could have secured a far more lucrative post, as a son of Felshtin he returned to the town of his birth, accepting the poverty it entailed. Several other tales paint what seems like an at times difficult and poor but charmed provincial life, filled with colorful characters.

The book also tells of what was largely a generational struggle between those driven to maintain the
community’s loyalty to Torah and those with other goals. A story about the fight over those advocating for the establishment of a library for Yiddishist and Hebraist literature and those who warned it would “lure” youth from the beis medrash and introduce them to hereti-
cal ideas, is one of the clearest examples. The photo of the library’s eventual inauguration shows several dozen townspeople with a decidedly more modern mode of dress than those in other images of people with beards, peyos, and kapotes.

As was widely the case with pre-World War II Jewish immigration, this trend only became more exacerbated once Felshtinians reached American shores. Despite filling pages with warm memories of the beis medrash and of the town’s melamdim, nearly no writers who were pictured in the Yiskor book covered their heads. One entry in the book’s last section entitled “der neier heim” tells of a split in the Felshtiner organization between older members who wished to preserve its religious nature and those who wished to take it in a more “progressive” direction.

Like many Landsmanschaft organizations, Felshtin’s was active for decades in both New York and Philadelphia, serving both as a social club and as a charitable organization. In the early 1900s, it boasted its own shul on the Lower East Side and played an active role in relief efforts following the pogroms. In the 1860s it sponsored a youth center in the Israeli city of Dimona and did not fizzle out until the 1970s.

In the 1990s, Mr. Shaievitz’s efforts to fundraise for his quest to make the Yiskor book more widely available blossomed into a rebirth of sorts of the organization, most recently culminating in the well-attended centennial event.

A FORGOTTEN AND TRAGIC PAGE OF HISTORY

While Ukrainian nationalists were responsible for pogroms in Proskurov, Felshtin and many other locations, they were not the only ones who took part in the mass slaughter of Jews that occurred in 1919, as records clearly show similar massacres being carried out by
their rivals the Whites, as well as by their archenemies, the Reds.

For a combination of survivalist and ideological reasons, some Jews aligned themselves with all three camps. The result was, ultimately, as Professor Veidlinger put it, “No matter whose side you were on, there was a Jew to blame.”

Dr. Moshe Yosef Karlip, Herbert S. and Naomi Denenberg Chair in Jewish Studies at Yeshiva University, told Hamodia that anti-Semitism was one dynamic that all the warring groups shared.

“Rank and file soldiers from all three armies were the same Ukrainian peasants, many of whom were raised on the same anti-Semitic poison,” he said.

Ironically, 1918 was a year that many Jews in Ukraine thought would bring freedom and upward mobility. After centuries of living under openly anti-Semitic Tsarist regimes, a newly independent Ukraine initially prided itself on being a multi-ethnic state and promised Jews both tolerance and a tremendous amount of autonomy.

Yet the promise of this golden age was short-lived. As Ukrainian forces suffered setbacks, rhetoric increased linking Jews to Bolshevism and accusing Jews of undermining their cause of independence. In January 1919, the town of Avrukh was hit by one of the first recorded pogroms, a trend that would continue for most of the year.

One highly contested point in the pogroms is the role of Simon Petlura, who led Ukraine from 1918 until 1921. As the Yizkor book clearly testifies, Jews of the time held him as the villain responsible for the mass slaughters that occurred at the hands of his troops, often comparing him to a modern-day Bohdan Chmielnicki. Moshe Zilberman’s account says that Petlura himself visited Felshtin in the wake of the pogrom and rejected a plea for mercy with the words, “Jews, what you have earned, thus shall you eat.”

A New York Times article, published in September 1919, discusses a proclamation jointly signed by Petlura and another leader written in January of that year, which calls for an end to the pogroms. However, the article also points out that the last clause of the proclamation called on Jewish Democrats to “crush the individual Anarchist-Bolshevist Jews who are antagonistic to the Ukrainian working people and the Ukrainian government.” The Times notes that such an ending essentially gave license for any commander to brand a given Jewish population as “Bolshevik” and mark them for destruction.

This view was reinforced by Petlura’s end in 1926, when he was shot dead on a street in Paris, where he lived in exile, by Shalom Schwartzbard, who killed him as an act of vengeance for his family and others who had been murdered in the pogroms. His trial brought wide publicity to the pogroms and Petlura’s killing was celebrated by many survivors as a fitting act of revenge. Ukrainians and others accused Schwartzbard of acting as a Soviet agent, pointing to his prior service in the Red Army during the Russian Civil War. While a study on the subject by scholar David Engel said that the evidence in either direction was inconclusive, an article by Harvard Professor Jolanta Mickut pointed to released Soviet records that said Schwartzbard was indeed a member of the nation’s secret police from 1923-1934.

Engel’s study was similarly inconclusive on the question of Petlura’s level of guilt. In addition to its value to the historical record, this matter remains relevant, as the first leader of an independent Ukraine remains a hero in his homeland, and several statues bear his likeness and streets his name.

Professor Veidlinger said that irrespective of Petlura’s feelings about the Jews, disorganization among Ukrainian forces and the independence of the virtual warlords that commanded them make it unlikely that pogroms were centrally directed.

“It’s unknown what he thought [about the pogroms],” he said. “He did try to stop them, but did so too late, and even if he wanted to, there was probably not much he could have done. We know that he couldn’t control his own men, and the telegraph lines were not good. It was a very chaotic situation, where rogue units basically did as they pleased.”

The group that ultimately did put an end to pogroms was the Red Army. In the early months of 1919, that same force had been perpetrators of several of the mass attacks on Jews in Ukraine, using as justification the excuse that Jews represented the capitalist bourgeoisie.

Yet, the official Bolshevik position changed relatively early on, and Vladimir Lenin himself delivered a speech con-
"RANK AND FILE SOLDIERS FROM ALL THREE ARMIES WERE THE SAME UKRAINIAN PEASANTS, MANY OF WHOM WERE RAISED ON THE SAME ANTI-SEMITIC POISON."

denning anti-Semitism as a remnant of tsarist imperialism, at least in his terms.

“It is not the Jews who are the enemies of the working people. The enemies of the workers are the capitalists of all countries. Among the Jews there are working people, and they form the majority,” he said. “Among the Jews there are kulaks, exploiters and capitalists, just as there are among the Russians, and among people of all nations... Rich Jews, like rich Russians, and the rich in all countries, are in alliance to oppress, crush, rob and disunite the workers.”

Not only did the Red Army cease to carry out pogroms, they began to actively hunt down and punish those who perpetrated them. Presumably the fact that this was yet another reason to execute forces with which they were already at war did not hurt.

Yet, the stance the Bolsheviks took against pogromers won them a great deal of support from Ukraine’s Jews.

“There were even Chassidische bachurim who joined the Reds, not because they believed in Communism, but because they wanted to take nekamah for the death of their parents. This was a brief time when in some units there were Red soldiers who were able to keep their beards and peyos,” said Professor Karlip. “The fact is that in the areas under the Reds, the Jews survived. Now, that survival meant life with an extreme suppression of Yiddishkeit — but faced with a choice of death at the hands of the White or Ukrainian armies or severe economic and religious persecution by the Bolsheviks, it’s only natural that most Jews came to grudgingly prefer the Reds.”

In 1919, the terrifyingly unique nature and scale of the pogroms was widely recognized.

While pogroms had occurred in the past in Russia, the numbers of victims are dwarfed in comparison. Those in the early 1880s killed 35 people, and the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 took 47 lives. Following the failed uprising in 1905, some 3,100 Jews were killed in various pogroms. Yet the rough figure of well over 100,000 Jews killed opened a new and horrifying era for those set on murdering Jews.

“Safely, the pogroms ended up being a dress rehearsal for the Holocaust,” said Professor Karlip. “[The pogroms of 1919] have sort of slipped under the carpet since compared to the Holocaust they seem minor, but once this violence was unleashed, it demonstrated how physically vulnerable the Jews of Eastern Europe were and at the next opportunity, in a lot of cases, the very same people picked up where they had left off in 1919.”

My Dear Brother:

I never thought a day would come when I would actually try to communicate with you via a newspaper. But after trying to get across my message through more private methods, I am trying this approach as a last, desperate, resort.

Our relationship has always been a most unique one. Even at times and circumstances when sibling rivalry should have driven us apart, we remained so very close. You were always much more than a beloved older brother. You were my role model, my hero, the person I admired most in life.

From teaching me how to drive a bike, to learning with me whenever Taty was away traveling on business, to after my chasunah, helping me find a kollel and eventually a job, you were always there for me. You helped buy my house, and when you purchased a bungalow in the Catskills, you encouraged me to purchase one right next door to yours.

This is why what happened to our relationship during the last few years is so devastating to me.

Indeed, we haven’t fought, though frankly I sometimes wish we did. Because at least when two people fight than there is an exhibition of emotion, a recognition that both parties are real, live human beings with hearts and feelings.

This dramatic change is painfully apparent the entire year but especially so in these summer months. How I long for those summer nights when we sat on the porch, spending hour after hour in meaningful conversation. Sometimes we reminisced about the past but mostly we shared our dreams and hopes for the future.

We sit there, but we might as well be miles apart. It isn’t only that your eyes rarely rise from the little screen on your handheld device, although that is bad enough. Your entire personality has changed. Something within you has become extinguished. That wonderful, warm engaging personality is gone, replaced with an unrecognizable, lacklustre stranger. Your passion and drive has vanished, replaced by a form of emotional hibernation.

Yes, I know that you got approval from your children’s mothers. I know that you told them that you have a legitimate Parnassah reason to own such a device. Yes, I know you have a filter. But what I also know — and see — is how everything that once was most important to you, now barely matters. Nowadays, the only thing that counts to you is what’s on that little screen.

I watch how you barely interact with your children, and how they long in vain for your affection. They once were your pride and joy, now you barely notice them.

I watch how your warmth for mitzvos has all but evaporated, and while you still attend the nightly shir, your interest in learning has waned as well.

I tired talking to you about it, at first tactfully, then bluntly. But my words didn’t penetrate. So I am using this forum to issue a desperate plea to you. Please don’t deceive yourself any longer. It isn’t that we don’t want to share you with a smartphone. It is that the smartphone usage leaves no room for us. Please don’t let this little device steal you from your adoring family. We implore you, get rid of the device and come back home to those who really love you.

Your brother.