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FIELDS OF DREAMS

By David Suissa

I used to think that between the time of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D., and the birth of Israel in 1948, there was no such thing as an exclusively Jewish city. Sure, there were plenty of Jewish ghettos and neighborhoods scattered throughout the globe, but a city with only Jews in it? I never imagined it.

That is until I met my neighbor, Jeremy Goldscheider.

Goldscheider is a filmmaker with an obsession. He's obsessed with the story of a little town called Trochenbrod in Northwestern Ukraine that was started by Jews in the early 1800s.

Most people know the town as the fictitious Trachimbrod, from Jonathan Safran Foer's book, "Everything is Illuminated." But while Foer has said in interviews that virtually everything in his story is made up, there are a few people alive today who know better.

Goldscheider is one of them, and he knows how very real Trochenbrod is.

Goldscheider and co-producer, Avrom Bendavid-Val at the mass grave site in Trochenbrod.

He knows, for instance, that Trochenbrod was the only freestanding Jewish town ever to exist outside the biblical land of Israel, and that, in 1942, the Nazis marched all 5,000 Jewish residents to a nearby forest and had them dig their own graves before murdering and burying them.

Before the massacre, Trochenbrod had been a thriving regional commercial center that had a diversified and largely self-sufficient economy. Everyone in Trochenbrod -- shopkeepers, farmers, craftspeople, teachers, livestock traders, factory owners -- was Jewish, and they spoke Yiddish and modern Hebrew.

The town was founded in 1835 by Jews who took advantage of an edict that exempted Jewish farmers from being conscripted in the Russian army. That didn't help them, though, when the Nazis arrived.

Because all the residents were Jewish, the whole town was leveled. Today, all you can see is an empty field of trees and wildflowers with a small memorial plaque erected in 1992.

It's on that field that Goldscheider walked several months ago, with only his notebook and a video camera. And it's on that field that he kept thinking of his great-grandfather and great-grandmother, Jacob and Ethel Kessler, who left Trochenbrod and settled in Baltimore around 1910.

Goldscheider remembers his grandmother, Minnie, talking about how her parents' home in Baltimore had become a kind of way station for Trochenbrod immigrants who came to settle in America. But Goldsheider was never too interested in Baltimore; it was Trochenbrod he wanted to know more about.

And, in particular, the Jews who survived the massacre.

Evidently, a small group of maybe 30 Jews managed to escape and survive in the forest for years. Some of the young ones became partisans who banded together and fought the Nazis, stealing guns and ammunition, blowing up trains and taking care of other Jews with stolen food and makeshift shelters.

Goldscheider has already met and interviewed a few of the survivors in Ukraine and in Israel, and next month he plans to meet another survivor in Brazil.

When I first met him last spring at a neighborhood cafe, he hadn't yet made the trip to the empty fields of Trochenbrod. He was going there "blind," he said, with a sort of primitive desire just to walk the fields where his ancestors had once lived, and where so many Jews had perished.

I met him at the same cafe when he returned a couple months later, and it was clear that by then he was immersed in a labor of love that was consuming a lot of his time.

Our conversation then took an unexpected turn.

Since he hadn't yet secured financing for his film project, I asked him how he paid the bills. Well, it turns out that Goldsheider does promotional films for all kinds of Jewish organizations around town, and that one of his biggest clients is Camp Ramah.

Now, you should know that when I hear the words "Camp Ramah," my heart goes aflutter. My kids are pretty much addicted to the place. So, naturally, when Goldsheider informed me that he was driving up to Ojai the following day to film the camp, which was in session at the time, it took me one or two nanoseconds to invite myself along.

Officially, I was going to accompany him on the film shoot, and maybe do a story. (Unofficially, I was dying to see my kids.)

It was a hot day, and we covered pretty much the whole camp. Camp Ramah is big and small at the same time. No matter where you venture, you always seem to return to a familiar place. Kids were everywhere, playing in this grand game of organized spontaneity. Some were davening in an outdoor amphitheater, others cheering at a basketball game, still others shooting down waterslides decorated with a map of Israel. The place was teeming with life.

As we walked through the camp's main field, I couldn't help thinking about Goldscheider's recent experience. A week or two earlier, he had been walking through an empty field in Ukraine that once also teemed with Jewish life. A field where Jews also davened, worked and played -- but a field where Jews were no more.

From one week to the next, Goldscheider had traveled from a field of death to a field of life. It must have had some effect on him.

In truth, he hadn't thought of the contrast until I brought it up. But then, he did notice that there was a similar tree formation and land elevation in the fields of Trochenbrod and Camp Ramah.

Two fields with similar landscaping -- and with a similar connection to the Jewish ideal of life and community. But one field, in one century, witnessing a nightmare; while the other, in the next century, witnessing an ongoing summer dream.

If Goldscheider has his way, if he can get the real Trochenbrod story out to the world, that same field of nightmares might one day become the realization of his own field of dreams.

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