Visiting a Shtetl via Google

by Robinn Magid

Until now, the idea of visiting a shtetl has connoted an expensive trip to the scarred remnants of Jewish places in post-Holocaust Europe or visiting an online "virtual shtetl" and paging through paragraphs and still photographs on the website. With the advent of Google Earth plug-ins, a new wave of visual modeling tools, genealogists can tour or "fly around" the streets of a town, created from surviving pre-war photographs. Google Earth technology and software, available to all, allows for the website creation of three-dimensional buildings capable of transporting the researcher to the city center of his or her shtetl as seen in a bygone era.

To sample this new feature, download "Google Earth 6," the latest version of Google's plug-in software. The plug-in can be found on the Google Earth homepage at www.google.com/earth/index.html. After downloading the plug-in, visit Google Maps at www.google.com. Click on "Maps" and search for a town in any part of the world. As you zoom in for a close-up view, you will be prompted to view it using Google Earth and any available three-dimensional (3-D) images will pop-up into view. These are the models and images of contemporary buildings submitted by volunteers around the world.

Google Earth has adopted the goal of creating a "global map" and is soliciting volunteers to help them reach their goal of representing every building on the planet in three dimensions. Two Google modeling products, called SketchUp and Building Maker, are available to the general public free of charge. The resulting models can be submitted to Google Earth for inclusion. Approximately 2,000 geo-modeled buildings already appear online, many of them from California. (See the *San Francisco Chronicle* article published on March 26, 2011, "Volunteers Enhance Dimensions of Google Earth 3D" at http://tinyurl.com/44cpxmr.

Flying around the maps for Berkeley, California, one notices that a 3-D view is available for many local buildings. A search for the author's synagogue revealed that it is still "flat," but many of the nearby University of California buildings stick up out of the flat terrain. Most of the commercial buildings on main streets also are roughly represented in 3-D, but the photographs include a piece of sky and often chop off the tops of trees or present only one of the building's facades. Clearly, much more work needs to be done, but the street view is highly recognizable and easy to maneuver around. This is good news for those wishing to see a town in its current condition.

How about visiting the past? A corollary project to the contemporary global map is a Google Earth collection of 3-D galleries reachable from the Google Earth homepage www.google.com/earth/index.html. These projects also are submitted by volunteers and cover a variety of specialty topics from Ancient Rome to a California redwood forest. Currently about 40 such projects are online, and

Panoramic View of The City of Lublin circa 1930's as a 3-D GoogleEarth Model

most are still only two dimensional, including the showcases for the cities of Berlin, London and Warsaw. It is easy to see how the general public's acceptance of this amazing technology will spark new and interesting projects that eventually will lead to genealogically interesting showcases.

Virtual Visit to the Past in 3-D

The excitement of the Google Earth technology for the Jewish genealogist lies in its promise for visualizing the historic past. No 3-D showcases in Google Earth's gallery of a shtetl may appear yet, but in fact, the very first 3-D "shtetl" already is available online. Developed using the Google Earth 6 plug-in as its engine, TeatrNN, a non-governmental, visual and performing arts center whose mission is to preserve the memory of Jewish culture in Lublin, Poland, found the Google Earth set-up too flat and restrictive to display the hills and valleys of Lublin the way they wanted, so they imported the features to their own server and created an overlay. The modelers covered the two-dimensional Google map with a "flying carpet," a representation of Lublin that visually "hovers" over the matching geographic coordinates, to line up current and historic roads and buildings.

A visitor to TeatrNN's homepage, www.teatrnn.pl, can tour a 1930's model of the city of Lublin, seeing it from both a bird's eye view and as a walk at street level while exploring pre-war Lublin from almost every angle or vantage point. Using SketchUp software and pre-war photographs, the modelers have faithfully reproduced more than 630 Lublin buildings in careful detail, and this is just the beginning. TeatrNN has plans to add at least four other notable time periods in Lublin's long history, from the 1100s to the 19th century.

From the TeatrNN homepage, if one clicks on the photograph of the 3-D model, the view automatically "flies in" using the Google Earth interactive virtual globe. Entering Lublin, the flat Google street map rapidly changes to 3-D "pop-ups" of the old city that take only a minute or two to load. The resulting 3-D panoramic view is centered on the Old Rynek, the ancient market square of Lublin. Low, in front in the right corner of the panorama, sits the 16th-century St. Jana's Cathedral, where most Jewish Lubliners registered their life cycle events between the years 1810 and 1825.

A click on the button at the top left of the screen labeled "*Pokaz informacje o budynkach*" reveals place-mark balloons showing street addresses. Eventually, these balloons will describe the Jewish inhabitants and shops located at the addresses and provide links to back-up pages describing each building in detail. A second click on that button makes the balloons disappear. The right-hand button labeled "*O makiecie"* reveals Polish-language instructions for using the site. The brand new site soon will include English-language instructions as well.

Like Google Earth, the tools to the right of the screen enable the viewer to select views, zoom in, and maneuver around selected neighborhoods. This author has explored most aspects of the available map, locating the house where her grandmother grew up at #2 Lubartowska, the family's cork factory on the Rynek, and even identified the exact location of a building owned by her family from at least 1813, destroyed by the Germans in 1939.

Geo-modeling is just arriving onto the scene for contemporary mapping on Google Earth, but its creators already envision its usefulness to showcase historical imagery. Innovators like Lublin's TeatrNN are already piecing together virtual shtetls that enable us to explore the ordinary buildings and back-street alleyways of our ancestral towns in a more life-like way.

Jewish genealogists can join the volunteer corps of individuals who are adding to the contemporary, virtual global map and can develop the skills needed to reproduce whole towns from old photographs. Using Google Earth technology, we can shift the idea of visiting a virtual shtetl from reading a page of text to flying through an interactive 3-D map of our ancestral hometowns. Each future technological advancement by Google Earth promises to help us visit our ancestral homes and better understand that by-gone era.

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