

The Friend – Robert Kuwalek

With a great shock and pain we received the sad announcement of Robert's death.

A dear man was taken from us.

He was a historian of the Jewish community in Lublin who investigated the origins of the community, its life and death.

He collected countless testimonies about Lublin Jews. With a lot of wisdom and sensitivity he interviewed people who survived the horror and the great tragedy.

He collected knowledge and shared knowledge.

His researches were published in books and magazines; he gave lectures and participated in international conventions.

With kindness and pleasure he answered to all questions of ours - second and third generation – related to the history of our families.

In a trice he would answer personal or general questions. He had a phenomenal memory – he remembered people, events, dates and numbers.

In our visits to Lublin he guided us around the city and the region. He took us to the places related to the Holocaust: Majdanek, Krępiec wood, Belzec.

In his heart and soul he was devoted to Lublin, many times in his own free time. He had a total inner devotion to the subjects of his researches – that was the essence of his life.

To us he was a true friend.

Some say every man is to replace. Robert Kuwalek is not. Not in knowledge, not in humaneness and not in our friendship.

The beginning of his way

Not easily he started researching the Holocaust. As a young historian he was learning about the history of the Jewish community in Lublin. Dealing with the horrors of the Holocaust was at first too much for him. But he did not have a choice – the historical timeline led him to the terrible end of the community's life, he was forced to deal with the extermination's chapter and eventually became a worldwide known expert to the history of Operation Reinhard.

My friendship with Robert

It was a long term friendship with Robert and my three sons: Yuval, Shmulik and Yaakov. Through conversations and correspondence Robert helped us to find out more about the history and fate of our family.

How did we meet?

I came to Lublin for the first time in 2001 with a group of second generation Lubliners. At the evening, during dinner at the hotel, Robert came to meet us.

I listened to the way he answered my friend's questions and decided to approach him too. I had some old letters and pictures. I showed him a letter of my uncle– Shmuel Żytomirski.

"Shmuel Żytomirski!" He immediately recognized the name. "From Poalei Zion party" he hesitated a little... "Poalei Zion Yamin!"

That was correct.

From his researches about the Zionist labor movement in Lublin he knew about my uncle, and he was happy to meet me just as if he had found a lost family member.

I showed him a picture of a six years old child standing in the street.

He recognized the place without problem: "Lublin center, the stairs to P.K.O bank, Krakowskie Przedmieście Street. I was there just an hour ago; it still looks the same just an ATM was added on the wall".

The boy in the picture was Henio – the son of Shmuel.

I told the short story of Henio's life to the good people in NN Theatre. Robert checked the private documentation and combined it with the historical facts of that time.

The director of NN Theatre, the artist Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, created from that story a moving artistic-educational project – "Letters to Henio". The story of the life and death of Jewish community in Lublin told through the eyes of one boy – Henio Żytomirski.

The last meeting

In 2013 my son, Yaakov, came to meet Robert in Lublin in order to find out more about the fate of my uncle. The conversation was long and interesting but an answer was not found.

Kol Lublin

As part of my job as an editor of the annual magazine "Kol Lublin" I published Robert's articles on matters important to our community.

- Lublin's Ghetto – a very important paper reviewing the process of extermination of Lublin Jews by the Germans in the years 1939-1944 (Issue nr. 39, 2003)
- When Robert was a young history teacher at the high school in Bychawa he sent his students to interview the old people of the town. Just few of them came back with testimonies and one of these interviews was published in our magazine (Issue nr. 41, 2005)
- An article about the camp for Jewish war prisoners in Lipowa 7. (Issue nr. 44, 2008)

The pain for his lost is massive.

May he rest in peace

Netta Żytomirski Avidar

(Translated by Tal Schwartz, Magdalena Gazda)

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