

At the end of last month my son Max and I went to visit my parents in London. Our family like most Jews in England came originally from Poland, My father had my great grandfather's English naturalization papers, Solomon Kleinbaum was born in Zwolen in Poland in 1880. He was naturalized in 1911, and the document had been signed by the then Secretary of the Home Office Winston Churchill.

My great grandfather fled to England in order to escape being drafted into the Army. At that time they took the eldest son for 25 years. My father had always wondered what had happened to the rest of the family, and so we had decided to travel to Poland to look for our roots!

Zwolen is about 4 hours drive from Krakow, and although staying in Warsaw would have been closer we also wanted to visit the Oskar Schindler Museum in Krakow, and go to Auschwitz, which is only an hour or so from Krakow. We arrived in Krakow, and stayed in an apartment booked through Airbnb, close to the old city. The Apartment was in an old building that had been built around the mid 1800's. Unfortunately it was more neglected than historic, but very authentic. As we entered through the apartment door on the second floor, we saw on the side of the door frame two nail holes where a Mezuzah had once been fixed, and even though painted over we could see the outline of where it had once been. Although extremely bare, it was very comforting to be staying in an apartment that had once belonged to Jewish people.

The next morning our guide came to pick us up to take us to Zwolen. Originally we thought of renting a car and driving ourselves, but going with our Polish guide Marta, turned out to be the perfect solution. Not many people in Poland speak English, and no one in Zwolen did, but Marta was able to talk to the town registrar and ask about our family. The records in Zwolen only went back to 1929, previous to that they had been archived in the County capital Radom. We did manage to stumble on the Town Historian, Pawel, who was very interested to meet us and took us to the town library to look at old photographs and records. Sadly we did not find any records of Kleinbaum.

Zwolen just before the war had had a population of about 8000 people, 3800 of whom were Jews. Most of the Jews lived in the town around the main square at that time. The town was heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe at the beginning of the war. When the Germans arrived the Jews from the town and the surrounding countryside were gathered into a Ghetto. It was a street on the SE corner of the square, and had no walls. Pawel took us on a walking tour around the town, pointing out where the Ghetto, Synagogue and Mikveh had been, A lot of the old Jewish streets around the square that were destroyed during the war and were never rebuilt, just built over, and the map of the town has changed. There are only 2 original buildings on the square that were from before the war.

In 1942 the Jews from the Ghetto were marched to the nearby Railway station at Garbatka, and sent to their deaths in Treblinka. About 5000 in all. Those who could not make the march to the station were taken to the Jewish cemetery and shot up against a wall. Pawel showed us the wall. The gravestones had all been removed by the Germans and used to repair the roads. There were no signs of any graves and the whole place has become wooded. There were thousands of crows in the trees, unhappy to be disturbed by us. Pawel remembers playing in the cemetery as a kid. He said he remembered a wooden building in the center and used to find pieces of broken head stones.

It was a long day and a long drive back to Krakow but so worth the trip. We were lucky to be able to visit Zwolen, three generations of my family, and still get some sense of how my family had lived there and to see where we had come from.