

# Traces of Jewish life in Opatów, Poland

„The Germans entered Apt on September 6, 1939, and established military rule. A few months later, in 1940, Yeshiye was forced to abandon his job in Nieklan and bring Mania and their two children back to Apt. Grandfather was dead by then and Grandmother was living alone, so they moved in with her. Their daughter Ester, who was already sixteen years old, got busy in Grandmother's store. She went to Myklekh's father's store to buy a few essentials for the business. Ester had turned out to be a beautiful and intelligent young woman, according to Maylekh, who was still in Apt after I left.

The ghetto was established in 1941. It was an open ghetto in the sense that Jews from Apt and the environs were confined there, but there was no wall. Yeshiye became the postman in the ghetto. When the Jews were expelled from Apt on October 20-22, 1942, Mania refused to be separated from her children, and the whole family was shot in front of Grandmother's house. Mania was a beautiful woman, with long blonde hair and blue eyes, like my mother and me. My grandmother was old. She was short and fat. On the march out of Apt to the labor camp in Sandomierz, she could not keep up the pace. She lagged behind, fell to the ground, and was shot on the spot. Her body was thrown onto a wagon with the corpses of other people who could not walk fast enough. Thousands of others were forced to march to the train station in Jasice and were transported to Treblinka.“

- Mayer Kirshenblatt -

(Mayer Kirshenblatt/Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, They called me Mayer July. Painted memories of a Jewish childhood in Poland before the Holocaust, London 2006, p. 169 ff.)

On 20 October 1942 in the course of Operation Reinhard, the SS with the aid of Orpo police and Trawniki rounded up 6,500 Jewish men, women and children in the centre of town at Targowica Square. They were marched some 18 kilometres (11 mi) to the railway stop in Jasice in a one-kilometer-long column. The weakest furthest in the rear were beaten and shot by the dozen. The ghetto inmates were loaded onto the Holocaust train in Jasice, with 120 people in each boxcar fitted only with a bucket latrine. The trip of less than 300 km took three days. During this time, they received no food or water. Those who managed to survive the transport to Treblinka extermination camp, died in its gas chambers shortly after arrival. After the deportation to Treblinka, about 2,000 slave labour prisoners remained as workers for Oemler GmbH. They were sent to other labour camps in 1943-44 including in Sandomierz, Starachowice and Radom, never to return. Some were sent to HASAG in Skarżysko-Kamienna (the total of 35,000 Jews perished at the HASAG camp before the war's end). Thus, the community was entirely eradicated. The German authorities in the town organized a sale of everything left behind in the abandoned ghetto. Impoverished Polish families took blankets, pillows and winter clothing to survive.

Opatów was taken over by the Red Army on 16 January 1945. Only about 300 Jews are known to have survived. Among the Jews rescued in Opatów was the fourteen-year-old Rina Szydłowska, hidden for almost two years by Maria Zaleska, the Polish Righteous among the Nations recognized by Yad Vashem in 1987; as well as Israel and Franciszka Rubinek, rescued by Zofia Bania and her family, honoured posthumously in 2011.

## MEETING WITH A HOLOCAUST WITNESS

The students of Bartosz Głowacki High School in Opatów taking part in the Erasmus+ project "Local Traces of Jewish Life in Europe" met the witness of the Holocaust – Grubowska – Chana Grynberg. Mrs Halina Grubowska is a member and co-founder of the Association of Children of the Holocaust.

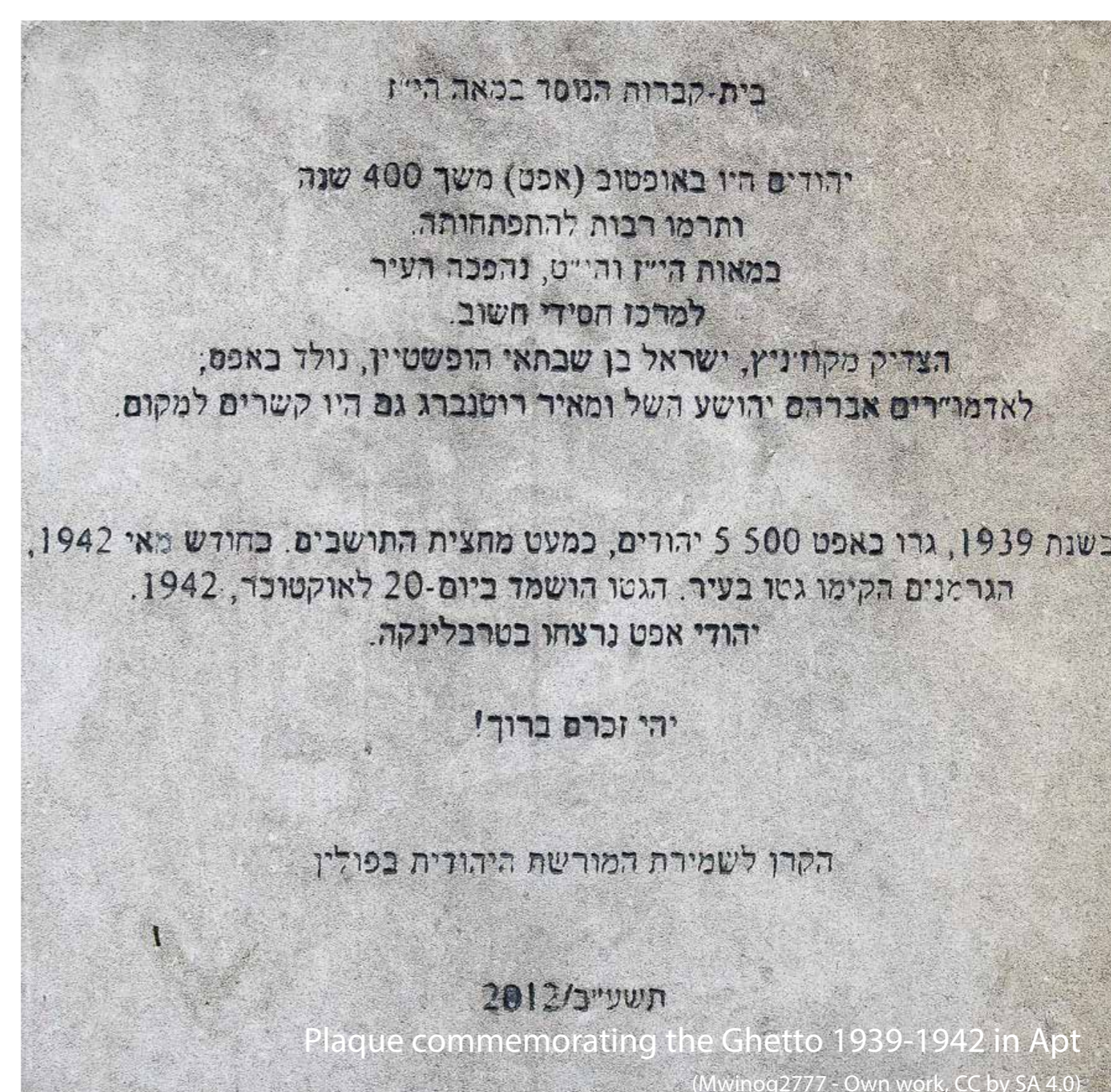
She willingly shares her experiences of what she suffered during the war due to her Jewish origin. She also talks about the Holocaust – the mass murder of European Jews during the Second World War. Mrs Halina Grubowska – Chana Grynberg has survived Shoa. She was born in Warsaw in 1933 and remained there until the autumn of 1939. After that the Grynbergs moved to Białystok but the Jews were persecuted there, too. A ghetto was created there as well and this was where little Chana and her family got in 1941. She lost her mother at that time and her father tried to rescue her. He managed to get Chana out of the Ghetto and put her into the Skalski family. Then she found her way to the Leszczyński family who lived in the village of Suraz.

In order not to arouse suspicions, she was baptized and taught Christian prayers and observance. And that is why she survived the Holocaust. She is grateful to the families who took care of her during the war and is aware of the fact that as they helped her they exposed themselves to death.

Thanks to her efforts, both families received the medals of "Righteous among the Nations".



Jews in the Ghetto before deportation



Meeting the holocaust witness Halina Grubowska

