

Obituary

by Tanja Cummings

Natan Grossmann Z"l (27 September 1927 – 2 May 2024)

Natan and I met for the first time on July 4, 2010 at Jakobsplatz in Munich and sat in the café outside the museum there, which was like his second living room. It was there in this café that we both came up with the idea of traveling to Łódź, Poland, together. It was on that day and in that place that our friendship began, which over the years has taken us to many other places together, in Germany and also in Poland, to small towns and larger ones, and two documentaries were created over the course of years with Natan as protagonist ("[Line 41](#)", 2015; and "[Café Zelig](#)" (Das Zelig, 2020).

Natan had a very warm heart. He approached other people. He particularly enjoyed meeting children and young people. He did this not only to teach them something, but also to learn from them.

Many will also have gotten to know Natan as a fighter, with a firm opinion backed up by strong arguments and moments that he had experienced himself. And he often accompanied his arguments with a joke or a song. It was Natan's great gift to radiate warmth, toughness and openness at the same time.

Meetings with Natan were always memorable events, because he presented everything with great force and charm. Some meetings also led to disputes (with me for sure, and possible thousands of people over the years), which he was quite happy to seek, provoke and enjoyed, on political and historical topics, and so I learned so much from him over the years.

We have traveled a lot together over the years.

One example of so many.

And I mention it here because it made the deepest impression on Natan in recent years, I believe.



Izbica Kujawska, Poland

In 2017, we came to a town called Izbica Kujawska in Poland, about 100 km northwest of Łódź, not far from the shtetl in Zgierz where Natan was born. Natan had no relatives or ancestors in Izbica Kujawska itself, but this is a place like many other hundreds, thousands of other places in Poland where there

once was Jewish life. Izbica Kujawska stands for many other places in Europe where Jewish life was extinguished.

We spent a few days in Izbica Kujawska and met students of Izbica Kujawska and traveled with them to Zgierz, where Natan was born in 1927, to Łódź (where he had been in the ghetto). Natan took the Polish teenagers to streets, courtyards and buildings that were important to him.

To Zgierz, to the house and courtyard where he had grown up and once had experienced happy times. To places in the area of the former Lodz ghetto, where he suffered so much for four years, where his father Abram was murdered by the German police, where his mother Bluma starved to death in his arms and where his older brother Berl disappeared.

But Natan always combined such "excursions" with cheerfulness, sang songs and made jokes. On the last evening of this trip, the Polish youngsters called Natan *Nasz dziadek* (our grandfather), and they sang Polish songs together on the bus that night on the way back and celebrated Natan, and Natan celebrated the youngsters...

This trip marked the beginning of the friendship between the school, students and teachers. The young people collected money and had a memorial plaque for Natan's brother Berl, his mother Bluma and his father Abram placed on the wall of the Jewish cemetery in Łódź. This touched Natan so very deeply that we returned to Izbica Kujawska several times in the years that followed; Natan donated a Torah scroll from Israel over 100 years old to the school, and almost every year Natan made sure that the school principal took the Torah scroll out around Simchat Torah, showed it to the pupils and told them about its significance. But Natan didn't stop there, because for Natan, happiness also had to do with other things.

Natan organized a thank-you letter for the children of Izbica Kujawska for their commitment and an autograph from the world-famous Polish footballer Robert Lewandowski of Bayern Munich. Natan managed to do this after a lot of "drilling" and a lot of energy through his contacts at Maccabi of Munich. Today, this letter with Lewandowski's signature hangs in the main corridor of the school, and the Torah scroll is safe in the principal's cupboard.

There are so many more such and similar stories involving Natan from the past 15 years and more, including stories that happened in Germany.

Over the years, Natan has made a deep impression on many children and young people, not just on adults -- also the audience of our documentary films "Linie 41" or "Das Zelig".

Kulmhof / Chełmno

Over the years, Natan and I travelled to Kulmhof/Chełmno several times, the extermination camp where Natan's brother Berl was murdered, a place where many thousands of children and parents... of Lodz ghetto and smaller towns such as Izbica Kujawska were murdered; a place where language, where speaking fails you, Kulmhof, a place where you learn what terrible things humans can do to other humans.

But Natan still found words here. Here he spoke of revenge against the Germans; and in almost the next moment Natan said that he was glad that this had not happened, as "innocent people would have been hurt".



Natan was able to speak like this because, as a young man, he had seen and experienced first-hand what humans can do to other humans.

Natan in his life chose to reach out to people. And the greatest act of reaching out was probably coming to Germany and staying here, getting to know Ute, his German wife, whom he often called his "Wiedergutmachung".

On January 27, 2015, Natan was invited by World Jewish Congress to come to Auschwitz for the 70th anniversary of the liberation. Natan insisted that he would only travel on the condition that Jens-Jürgen Ventzki, son of a German Nazi perpetrator, the former mayor of Łódź (then called "Litzmannstadt"), who had also been responsible for the ghetto there, would be allowed to accompany him. Jens-Jürgen Ventzki had gotten to know Natan during the production of our documentary film "Line 41" and the two became close friends over the years. -- And so it happened. Jens-Jürgen Ventzki traveled to Auschwitz with Natan in 2015. And this is another example of Natan reaching out, of so many others.....

Natan gave people the opportunity to reach out to each other, to meet each other, listen to each other and learn from each other.

„Ich bin nicht fromm, so wahr mir Gott helfe“ ... "I am not pious, so help me God" ...

Natan often called himself an atheist, but Natan may have been more pious than many people who call themselves pious nowadays, as he grew up in Zgierz, Poland, and went to cheder there as a young boy. Natan was very well versed in religious matters, even if he had many doubts....

His time in the Lodz ghetto as a teenager also left many marks on him, the terrible times he had to experience there. I just mention his often uttered phrase that it is better "to die with a weapon in your hand" and his many stories about Lodz ghetto, where people resisted without having any weapons. The greatest form of resistance was to survive at all, the hunger, the diseases and the round-ups.....



May 2

Natan died in the early morning of May 2.

The day of May 2 was always a very special day for Natan, because on May 2, 1945, Natan was liberated by American soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division in Wöbbelin near Ludwigslust, Northern Germany.

This was a day of liberation and "rebirth" for Natan, as he often said. There is something comforting about the fact that Natan died on this day of his liberation and rebirth, and I hope that Natan is now with his brother Berl, his parents Abram and Bluma and all his many friends.....

Natan*, I will never forget you

Tanja

** And you have given me so many questions and tasks for the future that, come what may, it will continue, dear Natan.*

About the Portugal-Zgierz connection (the name "Grand" of your mother's family);

Lochamej ha-Geta'ot;

The Bundists - and you so much wanted to talk to Abram Goldberg (Melbourne, Australia) again, and both had a date;

and so much more...



