

It was remarkable how quickly things seemed to return to normal in Kierscen. The war had been over hardly forty eight hours before the butcher Sleider re-installed his famous ornamental shopfront beneath the free Polish flags which grew from every building on the main street. Although everyone joked that his meat was pre-war, there wasn't a dry eye in the village. The next day, the old stamps appeared in the Post Office. The '39 face of President Moscicki beamed confidently in a range of colours despite the fact that he was dying in Switzerland. They were quickly replaced by drab yellowish ones issued by the mysterious Provisional Government. It was said that the glue tasted of vodka.

The occasional shot could still be heard in the surrounding areas which ensured that people didn't venture too far in those first weeks. Partisans were still coming in from the forests. Some couldn't believe it wouldn't all just come rolling back as suddenly as it had rolled away.

The Russians by and large stayed away from our village. Except when they lured Wojciech's cow onto the road and it ended up making the supreme sacrifice to the Great Liberators. They preferred the town of Liebling with its three pubs. All the pubs were owned by one man, Kasprzycki, who was said to be the first millionaire in post-war Poland.

Someone picked up the word "reconstruction" from the radio and it clunked round the village as if saying the word was half the task. No one was sure exactly what needed reconstructed. Certainly, there was the Church. All sorts of unlikely people were terrified at the thought that there wasn't a place to avoid going to on a Sunday. Only two of the five walls had survived the direct hit by stray Russian shells and it became a source of pride that rebuilding began almost straight away. The Cathedral at Cracow had been used to hide most of the silverware and iconography which were speedily returned, remaining in the town hall for the next two years.

People revelled in the rediscovered delights, soon to be lost again, of uninhibited conversation. In the absence of any form of distracting entertainment, gossip became a favoured pastime. Of course there were the war heroes whose exploits were loudly proclaimed. Like Fleveritz's son Miklos who'd escaped to the East and came back a tank commander in the Russian army. But there were the other kind of stories, told in whispers and nods. You would think that some people would never venture into the street again. Yet everyone did, the brave and the foolish, the virtuous and the corrupt, the saviours and the sinners. Another word soon became fashionable "reconciliation".

Somehow we wouldn't spend too long on who did what in the war. It was as if the act of survival itself justified absolution. The war years became almost a taboo subject.

The optimists talked about the future and the pessimists about the Russians.

Then one day something happened that broke the mirage. Something happened that no one expected. Jews got off the bus.

Before the war many Jews lived in Kierscen. The Great Synagogue dominated the southern neighbourhoods where they lived. One day they were gathered together and marched out. Sometime in '43 and that was that. Soon their homes had been moved into, their businesses taken over. There wasn't a villager who hadn't benefited in some way from the discreet looting that went on after they'd gone. Furniture, cutlery, chickens, farm machinery. Everyone became richer.

No one talked about the roundup of the Jews to this day. Yet it hung over the place like a dread. Dread of the day now arrived. When some would come back.

Gershon Steinhart and his son Yozef got off the bus from Warsaw. It was the bizarrest sight. They looked normal. As if they'd been on a three year shopping trip to the capital. Steinhart was dressed in a sombre black suit that appeared well worn. He could have been a tax inspector, or an undertaker. Yozef was also in plain attire, blue trousers and a lighter blue shirt, his hair in neat waves across his forehead.

From the beginning, we had all understood the arrangements for the Jews. More so than the Jews themselves. The camp being built for them in Platow was well known.

You couldn't miss it. A huge ugly factory on the edge of the town. Some had family who had helped with the construction. They knew its purpose from the start. Everyone did.

It was just a matter of when they would be taken. The restrictions against them began with the occupation. What type of work they could do. Where they could live. They had to wear badges to identify themselves. Then one day a third of the village disappeared

# THE NEIGHBOURS RETURN

## a short story by Michael Mail



into the night. We all heard the commotion, shouting, crying, many came out onto the streets to watch the spectacle. Some stayed at home and locked their doors.

Those who risked sneaking into the emptied neighbourhood just after the Germans got the richest pickings. By the next morning it was like Christmas. The streets filled with families looking as if they'd just come back from tea with their favourite Auntie who'd decided to give them all her possessions. It was like a big jumble sale.

And then the arguments started. Some just moved straight into the vacant houses. You could see fires lit the very next night. It was eerie to witness, as if their ghostly owners had returned. A huge fight broke out over the engineer Levy's property with its prime setting at the end of main street. It was famous for being the first house with a balcony and the Mayor was determined no one else would get their hands on it. It was quickly realised that there would have to be a secret meeting to sort out the various claims being made. In a few weeks it was all resolved and the once Jewish neighbourhood was smoothly occupied. The Mayor got the Levy house.

There were also lots of stories about Jews hiding away treasures. Dontiech got a whole field ploughed up ready for planting on the basis of one rumour everyone became convinced he'd started.

No one really thought about the end of the war. It was hard to at the time. And of course no one thought that any Jews would survive. Then that bus arrived from Warsaw.

Steinhart had been a grocer in the town. He wasn't someone people knew much about.

The Jews by and large kept themselves to themselves. There was an understanding about the extent to which the two communities could or could not mix. It had been like that for centuries. Of course there was a lot more mixing going on than people would have you believe. Especially among the young. Politics got everyone talking to each other. And there was the gambling - an indiscriminate passion. If you visited Tinzer Lake in the summer it was clear which part of the lakeshore was taken up by which community. But the island in the middle was a no-man's land, common ground. It was like a free zone where all sorts of things that would never be countenanced in the village went on, and not a few secret romances were begun under the cover of its leafy terrain and permissive ambience. Both sides knew each other well. It wasn't like there was a lot of tension. People just got on with their lives. Everyone bought their bread from old Mama Greenstein's. She was the mother of the town not just the Jewish quarter.

What shocked everyone was how well Steinhart appeared. Initially no one knew who he was. It was only when he went into the Post Office and asked if any letters had been kept for him that the story of his return got out. It chased round the town like a storm.

Was he the first of many? Were they all coming back? Maybe the Jews of Kierscen had been treated differently. Maybe they were used as slave labour and had survived.

What did Steinhart know?

And what about his home, all the homes, everything that had been owned by the Jews parcelled out to their grateful neighbours. There wasn't a family that hadn't benefited in some way from the bonanza. Even the priest, Father Lubomirski, suddenly procured an

ornate rug for his chambers which it was said somewhat mischievously had been taken from Rabbi Wilmeier's place. Would it all have to be returned?

Steinhart was now heading slowly down the main street. The way he walked suggested he wasn't trying particularly to recognise or be recognised. His face was set rigidly forward and he was holding his son Yozef's hand tightly. Yozef's look contrasted with his father's. He was smiling at people. But it wasn't a happy smile. It was more like a plea. For a moment I thought about the huge welcome home party they had given

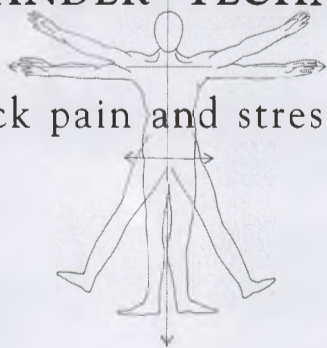
Miklos, Fleveritz's son, decked out in his splendid Russian uniform, beaming like he'd won the war by himself. The whole village turned out as if Miklos was everyone's son, a bit of all of us. And you felt this strange sense that he had somehow actually saved the town.

They were heading towards the old Jewish district. It would just be a matter of time before Steinhart would arrive at the door of what was once his home and was now lived in by the butcher Sleider. Sleider had left his former flat above his shop and had been in that house now for over two years. The assumed permanence of his occupancy was further underlined by the slaughterhouse he had built out the back.

Steinhart's journey was being discreetly monitored by all the townspeople. It was like watching a lit fuse meander towards its end. Someone said that he should be spoken to. Reasoned with. We should find out what happened to all the Jews. But no one would volunteer. Someone else said he should be arrested but no one could think why.

### ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

for back pain and stress relief



Individual sessions or small groups held in the Suburb.  
Alexander Technique Holidays in stunning locations:  
South Devon: 17 - 24 April ; Crete: 28 May - 3 June

Contact

Alex Maunder BSc MSTAT

The Alexander Centre, Brookland Rise, NW11

tel: 020 8455 1878 www.alexandry.dircon.co.uk

### Courses in ENGLISH as a FOREIGN LANGUAGE in the centre of the Suburb

Classes at all levels  
Cambridge and  
London Chamber of Commerce examinations  
Flexible timetable  
Accredited by the British Council

English Centre for  
International Students

Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute

Central Square NW11

Tel.0181 455-8176

