

# Genealogical Research in Rural Hungarian Villages

by Rony Golan

Before the Holocaust, members of my family lived in small rural Hungarian villages which my extended family and I visited in 2007 along with my Holocaust-survivor father. This is a report on our experiences and the genealogical research we undertook.

As is well-known, Hungary lost more than two-thirds of its territory in the Treaty of Trianon after World War I, the consequence of allying itself with Germany. Although genealogists may visit those former Hungarian regions today in Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine and elsewhere, the villages we visited all lie within contemporary Hungary, and the information below applies specifically to that country. In addition to the pleasure we experienced walking in the places our ancestors lived, we also gleaned considerable genealogical information. Our basic sources were well-tended, intact cemeteries, vital records held in local municipal buildings, and informative conversations with friendly villagers.

We were just tourists on our first day in Hungary. We drove from the airport to the Hortobágy national park, [www.national-park.hungaryguide.info/hortobagy-puszt.html](http://www.national-park.hungaryguide.info/hortobagy-puszt.html), and from there on to Debrecen where we stayed in the Aranybika Hotel, [www.hoteltelnet.hu/en/civis-grand-hotel-aranybika-debrecen](http://www.hoteltelnet.hu/en/civis-grand-hotel-aranybika-debrecen), an ornate, grand hotel on the square whose original splendor has faded. We used the hotel as our base, driving each day to visit our villages. We decided to stay there instead of closer to the villages to give my father an opportunity to “disconnect” from the emotions associated with the visit. Our first day, everyone was relaxed and enjoying the tour, with no upsetting emotions.

The next day was the visit to Nyírbátor, the grave of my father’s great-grandfather, whom he had never met. Although I had information about the cemetery, I did not have the exact location of the grave. So, again not much was emotional, but we were warming up, as we managed to locate the grave of my great-great-grandfather. From there we paid a visit to Mariapoch, which my wife found as a tourist site on the way from Nyírbátor to my father’s village ([www.mariapoch.org](http://www.mariapoch.org)). My father had never been to Mariapoch, but had heard about it. At this site, The Miracle of Mariapoch is believed to have happened in 1696, when the icon of the mother of Christ started to weep. Ever since then, this site was the target of pilgrimages by the villagers, as it still is today. On the site, Mariapoch has a large church and grounds. My father remembered Gentiles parading with banners as they made their pilgrimages from their villages to Mariapoch. Jews were not safe outside at such times, and they would lock themselves in their homes. Although my father had never experienced these events personally, he remembered hearing about them. One should remember also that this area was the scene of a Tisza Eszlar blood libel in 1882.

From Mariapoch we drove to Petnehaza where my father grew up, to a pre-arranged meeting with the mayor, a very

nice lady. We toured the small village. My father’s old home no longer stands; a new house is on the site. I insisted on visiting the cemetery although my father said it was not necessary “since we don’t have anybody there.” Although the mayor assured us that the cemetery was open, the gate was locked. The “old guy with the key” (my father’s words, although he was my father’s age) asked for my father’s surname and then spontaneously cried, “Mendu, you are Mendu!” (He was right.) We also drove one kilometer away to an even smaller town (only 5 sq. miles)—Laskod, the village where my father was born.

At the end of this visit, we picnicked in the cornfield between these two villages. My father had not known how he was going to manage all of the intense feelings that these visits would generate and was much relieved afterwards.

We proceeded to Kisvarda to stroll around. This is where the Nazis established the ghetto. The synagogue was closed, so we stopped to enjoy coffee and cake. At the end of that day we returned to Debrecen to an evening in the square.

The next day was planned to be the highlight of the visit. We explored the cemeteries in Nyírbogdány and Demečser, [www.demecser.hu](http://www.demecser.hu), looking unsuccessfully for the grave of my great-grandmother, Esther Amalia Eisdorfer. In Nyírbogdány, a clerk from the city hall accompanied us to a private home in whose back yard (next to the tomatoes) lay the old, unattended Jewish cemetery. We turned every stone, but failed to find Esther Eisdorfer’s grave. Then came the climax: We drove to Kemečse, where my grandmother is buried. She died when my father was only six years old. My father had visited there before, so had my wife and I, but this time we were all together and that made the visit more emotional. My father could not finish saying the kaddish so we helped him. We also met with the lady who tends the cemetery. We have known her and her late husband for years now. As they were tending the Jewish cemetery, they kept a record of the visitors, with contact information, and were most willing to give this information to other visitors, thus enabling me to contact other researchers of the community. After that, we left the area for the spa city of Eger where we stayed overnight, and then on to Budapest.

## Meeting with Local Residents

One of the major pleasures of visiting our ancestral villages was the friendly and helpful reception of both the officials and the local townspeople. It was not as if we were going to Budapest or some other big city. Visitors from overseas are rare in the villages, and the fact that my father, who speaks Hungarian, accompanied us was a definite plus. We telephoned ahead (my father speaking in Hungarian) to arrange for keys to cemeteries and to meet with town officials.

## Cemeteries

The major source of information about Jewish cemeter-

*The Jewish cemetery in Kemece, a town in the Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg county, in the Northern Great Plain region of eastern Hungary. The non-Jewish local person, now deceased, who kept the cemetery, painted the given names on the tombstones in black.*



ies in Hungary is the English-language website of the Foundation for Jewish Cemeteries in Hungary, [www.mazsit.org/index.phtml?owpn=28](http://www.mazsit.org/index.phtml?owpn=28). Information is organized by *megye* (county). According to the website, the foundation was established “to save and preserve neglected Jewish cemeteries” and “approximately 1,600 Jewish cemeteries are accounted for in Hungary. Save for a few hundred under the care of a local congregation or a local government, most are losing the battle against nature. Most of the cemeteries are nearly impossible to locate due to concealment by weeds and other vegetation. The Foundation aims to create a map of cemeteries, tidy up the gravesites, and build fences around the cemeteries.”

We did not find the conditions described above. All but one were in good condition, fenced, locked and guarded—requiring us to make advance arrangements with the caretakers for a visit—perhaps because survivors and their families have left money with locals for the care of the cemeteries. In most places, visitors probably can make reliable arrangements with village officials or local caretakers to replace broken stones if needed and to maintain cemeteries that do not yet have such arrangements. I took photographs (and some rubbings) of the stones in Demecser, Kemece and Nyírbogdány although I have not yet posted these on JewishGen’s Jewish Online Worldwide Burial Registry (JOWBR), [www.jewishgen.org/databases/Cemetery](http://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Cemetery). As expected, the condition of the stones was variable. Some are in good condition and easy to read; others are broken and/or hard to read. Generally, the stones are soft. I prepared ahead and brought with me my “cemetery kit” which I have written about on my blog (with two others) see <http://mishpachtablogia.co.il/?p=1614>.

### Vital Records

Vital statistics records still are kept in local town halls. We asked for and obtained copies of several birth and death certificates—free of charge. In Hungary, duplicate copies were made long after the original record books were completed and the duplicates deposited in the archives. Original record books are held in local registry offices. Since 1980,

duplicate copies are not made; instead, all details are recorded electronically.

### Planning the Trip

Advance planning—but also flexibility—is key to a successful roots trip. Here are some recommendations:

1. Decide exactly what villages to visit. Plan the order in which you will visit them, and allow some time to return there the next day, if needed.
2. Unless you speak and read Hungarian well, hire a translator/guide to help you plan and execute the details of your trip.
3. Post your plans on JewishGen’s H-SIG (Hungarian Special Interest Group), [www.jewishgen.org/Hungary](http://www.jewishgen.org/Hungary), and ask for advice and recommendations.
4. Plan your itinerary, day by day, from Budapest. Unless your translator/guide supplies his/her own car, you will need to rent one in Budapest.
5. Decide where you will stay overnight once leaving Budapest.
6. Use the Foundation for Jewish Cemeteries in Hungary to determine what cemeteries still exist—and sometimes, the names of contact information. If you don’t find the information, locate the nearest city hall, and contact them in advance.
7. Ask your translator to write in advance to the mayors of all the villages you plan to visit, giving the exact dates when you will arrive there. Ask about the cemeteries and make plans to visit—on a specified date and time. Also list the names and vital statistics information you hope to acquire.

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