

# NANNY ANTOINETTE

October 29, 2011

With much love on the occasion of  
her 90th birthday

## Stories of Survival

Over the last year, I have collected some of my Nanny's stories of early adulthood, her memories of WWII and her time as a new immigrant to Canada

### REFLECTIONS FROM A GRANDDAUGHTER: BLOG EXCERPTS

#### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE (AUG 16, 2010)

I was inspired to write by a recent conversation between my then four-and-a-half year old and my maternal grandmother, Nanny Antoinette: That afternoon, Nanny was trying to get Dexter's attention with silly games and questions. When I finally suggested that she tell him about her life "in the olden days", both parties became excited. Dexter went and cuddled up to her on her lawn chair.

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#### WHAT'S IN A NAME? (OCT 28, 2010)

I went to meet Nanny one morning in October last year. We had our routine breakfast and talked about my children. We then, as usual, adjourned to the living room.

Nanny had a photo album waiting for me on the coffee table. We went through it, the who, where, what, when of each photograph. I took a few with me to copy.

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*Nanny Antoinette and Buppy Michel in Nancy, France*



*Nanny Antoinette hiking with a friend*



*Nanny Antoinette in Nancy*

These pictures are among those Nanny shared with me this year, and that I had never seen before undertaking this project.

# Where It All Began: The Klein Family of Tarnopol

## PRE-WAR LIFE AND THE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION

Nanny Antoinette was the youngest of six siblings, five girls and one boy. Her mother Faige Gruen was a homemaker and her father, Fischel Klein, was a merchant selling building lumber as his primary business and coral jewelry on the side.

Nanny Antoinette lived in a spacious apartment in Tarnopol, a Polish town with a population of approximately 40,000 which is now part of the Ukraine.

Their home was a typical Polish Jewish one. Yiddish and Polish were spoken at home. Every morning Fischel would go to synagogue to be part of the Minyan. The rest of the family went to synagogue only on holidays.

On Friday nights Fischel would read Hebrew from the Torah. On the Sabbath, they had a “shabbos goy” to light their stove and warm their meals. Their home was warm and open and there were always many guests.

The family lived in a large apartment (what Nanny describes it like a row house) with three rooms plus a kitchen. They had a full-time maid and baby nurse.

Nanny’s paternal grandfather, Azriel Klein, was the mayor of a small town nearby called Mikulince.

Nanny describes herself as a tomboy as a child. She was the tallest of the girls in her family. She enjoyed

sports, bicycling, spending time with friends, reading and cooking.

### 1939 The Russian Occupation

Nanny attended school until she turned eighteen when the Russians occupied her town. New languages always came easily to her. In school she learned Ukrainian, and when the Russians arrived, someone showed her how to type Russian by dictation; her services were consequently in demand during that time.

As the Russians moved their forces into the city of Tarnopol, they moved the “bourgeois” class, to which Nanny’s family was considered to belong, out of the city. She and her parents moved into one room with clients in the small

neighboring town of Berezovitz. A truck arrived at their family home and all the business lumber was loaded onto a truck. Nanny’s father was given an I.O.U..

Nanny rode her bicycle to and from her typing job in Tarnopol. She describes her boss as looking like a Pekinese dog, with a nose like a juicy strawberry.

Over the winter, she developed pneumonia. In order to keep working in Tarnopol, she paid a relative 250 rubles a month for room and board, her entire monthly salary.

On weekends Nanny would often go visit her parents in Berezovitz,

SIBLINGS FROM OLDEST TO YOUNGEST	WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM
Sabina	left for Israel in 1936; Nanny’s closest sibling
Salka (Reine)	left for France in 1927 to become a dentist
Bernard (Dov)	left for Israel in 1936; killed as a Zionist in 1937 - book written about the story
Minsha	perished in Belsitz 1942
Laura (Lucia)	died in a dynamited bunker in Tarnopol
Tusha (Antoinette)	

# NANNY ANTOINETTE



Some of the other women from Nanny's hometown who survived the war



Nanny in forced labour on a German farm

*Continued from Page 2...* walking the five or so kilometers in waist-deep snow.

One fateful day, Nanny felt a desperate need to see her parents. She arrived to find them semi-conscious. They had been trying to keep the heat in their cold room and had inadvertently been suffocating themselves.

## 1942 - THE GERMAN OCCUPATION

When the Germans arrived, the Kleins returned to Tarnopol and tried unsuccessfully to get their apartment back.

## THE GHETTO

The Kleins moved with many of their family, friends and neighbours into the Jewish Ghetto. In the Ghetto, which was located in the poorest district of Tarnopol, they were assigned to a room and began the dehumanizing process of being moved from one "hole" to another over time so they would not become too comfortable or have time to build hiding spots or bunkers. Nanny is certain they moved at least five times in under a year.

Jews in the Ghetto were generally not able to work and survived on food stamps and some contraband black market trading.

The Germans would come periodically to round up individuals who were usually never seen again.

Though the constant moving made building bunkers difficult, it was still done.

## A SCENE NANNY CANNOT FORGET

Nanny remembers being in an apartment when the Germans arrived looking for fugitives. There were eighteen people in the attic. The Germans and their dog went up the steps. They did not find the hideout, but it was still a tragic ending. A three-year-old child was suffocated by a relative who was trying to keep her quiet as the house was searched.

Nanny can vividly recall an old religious man mounting the steps alone and then descending them with a small bundle covered in a white sheet.

## ONE SUNDAY MORNING...

Nanny's father went off to the barber shop. He was taken and put on a train. Two and half weeks later he reappeared. He had jumped off the train and someone had helped him to find his way back.

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**If I didn't have a sense of humour, I wouldn't be alive.**

*Nanny Antoinette, 2010*





*Mus omnia voluar sagittis enim.*



*More post-war photos*

*Continued from Page 3*

## OUTSIDE THE GHETTO

Nanny was one of the lucky Jewish women who had a special pass to work outside the Ghetto. She worked at the Hotel Podolsky which had been converted to a dormitory for German soldiers.

Every day she would leave through the gate in the fence, showing her papers to the Jewish militia man or Ukrainian police officer guarding the gate. She was employed in the basement of the hotel doing laundry by hand with a washboard for the German soldiers. The Red Cross Sisters were demanding supervisors and Nanny referred to them as the “Red Cross Bitches” because of their cruelty. They would often take a hat or piece of clothing that was not adequately starched and throw it back in the water for the endless process to be repeated.

Often Nanny would also be required to wash floors and clean rooms. Cleaning rooms was a coveted job as the chambermaids would often find a crust of uneaten bread for themselves or to bring home to their families.

But smuggling bread into the Ghetto was not simple. When they returned to the gate, the guard would lift the women’s skirts to check for contraband.

## A POUND OF BUTTER

One workday at the hotel, it was discovered that someone had been taking a pound of butter each day from the reserve room. The supervisor, Herr Schreier, began asking who had taken the butter. All fourteen workers denied taking the butter and would not or could not identify the culprit.

Nanny was told to report to her boss, but instead ran to the adjacent movie theatre and was hidden by the girl who worked there in the coal storage area. Eventually Herr Schreier found her and pulled her by the ear to join the rest of the group. She and her thirteen coworkers were loaded onto a truck.

Nanny was certain they were being taken to the area of town “where the ground moved”, Petrykow - where people were shot and buried, dead or alive.

As the truck drove off from the hotel, Nanny asked her coworkers, “My friends, I have a favour to ask; I want to be first”.

## A good use for a pound of butter: Nanny’s Quatre Quarts (Four Quarters) Cake

1 lb eggs  
1 lb butter  
1 lb self-rising flour  
1 lb sugar

Cream butter and sugar  
Beat in eggs one at a time  
Gradually mix in flour

Bake in a greased regular-sized bundt pan at 375 F for about an hour or until the cake tests done with a toothpick.

Flavour at will with vanilla, lemon or orange zest, cinnamon and raisins...



# GETTING OUT OF POLAND

## PRISON, A TRAIN, WORK CAMPS, AND LIFE AS A FARM HAND

*Continued from Page 4*

Instead of being taken to be shot, the fourteen workers were taken to prison. They were put in a single cell with a few other people. They lay on the bare floor and listened to the periodic gunshots coming from the prison courtyard.

Unbenounced to her, Nanny's brother-in-law had arrived at the police station and paid off the officer with a silver candelabra that her mother had managed to keep in the Ghetto.

A couple of days later, Nanny was brought outside and told to go home. She did not know where to go. The trauma and shock of the prison experience combined with the constant moving from apartment to apartment had left her with no sense of direction in that moment.

A passing Jewish militia man who had been a neighbour before the war helped her to get home. Nanny does not know what happened to the other girls.

### TIME TO MAKE A MOVE, BUT WHAT TO DO?

As the Ghetto got smaller and the round ups got more frequent, the pressure was on to make a move or die trying. Nanny's parents somehow went to live with some farmers. At some point, the timeline is not clear, they were told to get out by their landlords.

They were picked up in a truck by either Germans, Ukrainian or Jewish militia. They were never seen

again. Nanny's sister Minsha was picked up and taken to Belzitz, the closest concentration camp.

Her sister closest in age, Laura, told Nanny about a bunker that was being built and that "la creme de la creme" of the Jewish community were being invited to go. She promised Nanny that they would accept her.

Nanny didn't want them to both end up with the same fate if something went wrong so she suggested, "You try your way, and I'll try mine."

The bunker was dynamited.

### THE TRAIN

Nanny heard that a train with prisoners from the Caucasus was going to be stopping in Tarnopol to refuel and resupply. Nanny went to her janitor's daughter and traded her tailored suit for a piece of lard, some bread, men's shoes that were much too big for her, and peasant clothing.

Using her expert Russian, Nanny managed to mingle in with the prisoners on the train platform. She became Tatiana Bekadorova.

Other Jews tried the same and were not successful. Nanny remembers watching the Ukrainians identifying their former neighbours and shooting them as they scrambled to board the train.

As the train left the station, Nanny stood by a window and a small boy put his arm around her neck, inadvertently helping Nanny to blend in. They

stopped along the way for water and soup. Public latrine holes in the middle of the box cars were used as bathrooms.

### "SHE'S CRAZY"

Soon after Nanny got on the train she saw the aunt of one of her friends (they are friends to this day). This lady spoke Russian with a strong Yiddish accent, and Nanny quickly intervened in her conversation by pushing her down on the floor and telling the others, "Don't talk to her; she's crazy".

Next, Nanny took off her Star of David pendant and stuffed it in her bra.

### SONJA

After about twenty-four hours on the train, they came to the German border and were let off the train for delousing and to go the bathroom in big open pits. Nanny spotted someone she knew from the Jewish community. Her acquaintance, Sonja, was going to the bathroom and Nanny noticed her. She said to Sonja in Polish, "How can you come here with underwear like that? (They were made of silk, and the Russians didn't have these).

She continued, "I don't want to know you", meaning they had to pretend to be strangers.

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## Stops Along the Railroad

*Continued from Page 5*

At one point along the journey, two German physicians boarded the train. They were examining the prisoners for obvious signs of sexually transmitted diseases. Speaking in German, unaware that Nanny's Yiddish made it easy for her to understand them, one of the doctors slapped Nanny on the rear and exclaimed, "A real young girl from the Caucasus!"

How wrong he was.

The first stop after the two day ride was Ibbenbühren, a coal mining town in eastern Germany. For a few weeks, the prisoners in a camp surrounded by barbed wire were taken daily to work in the coal mines.

Eventually, a horse and buggy arrived to take Nanny to her next assignment as a farm hand.

### LIFE ON THE FARM

The farmer, Leschulte, was away in the army so his girlfriend was running the farm in his absence. Nanny was asked if she knew how to milk a cow. Since she was supposed to be from the country, Nanny told her mistress that she knew.

The two Polish guys working as farmhands showed Nanny how to do it and for the next months, Nanny would milk six cows three times a day, developing her own technique of tying the tail to a leg to prevent being swatted by a tail covered in cow dung.

At 5 a.m. Nanny would wake, milk the cows, eat breakfast, feed the pigs, prepare the horse feed and then head out to the fields. Lunch of bread and pork was brought out to the fields. Then she would head back for the midday milking and proceed to do the laundry in the river. In the winter, this required breaking the ice to rinse the laundry.

Dinner consisted of meat and potatoes. Afterwards, Nanny would milk the cows and help tidy up the kitchen.

During her stay in this area, a Ukrainian girl, Nina Tolenko, who had somehow been on the train, told the police that Nanny was not who she said she was, Tatiana Begadorova of Pyatigorsk in the Russian Caucasus. Weekly or biweekly, Nanny was taken for questioning by the "criminal politzei". She continued to stick to her story and managed to convince them of her adopted persona.

### THE WORK CAMP

Some months later, Nanny was taken to a work camp. During the day, and sometimes overnight, the workers were taken to work in a cement factory. The cement was loaded into bags made of a thick material which Nanny and the others found made a somewhat comfortable sleeping surface on the night shift.

The camp was surrounded by barbed wire. The prisoners were assigned two per room with no running water and an outhouse.

In this camp, Nanny became close friends with her roommate Zoya, and I have written more about her in later pages. Nanny is convinced that Zoya's father was Jewish.

One evening the prisoners were taken dancing at another work camp. Sonja went. A Ukrainian man from Tarnopol asked her

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*Nanny outside the sleeping quarters at the work camp*



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to dance. She shook as they danced, but he whispered to her, “don’t worry”.

On another occasion, Nanny received a message that “Szmigielski wants to see you”.

He was the director of the camp. Nanny did not go, but Zoya reported that someone from Pietegorsk (her assumed hometown) wanted to see Nanny. She never went.

On another occasion a young Ukrainian man took Nanny on a date. They walked and talked for hours in Ukrainian and Russian, and Nanny kept her composure and her identity intact.

## ANOTHER FARM

Nanny was eventually assigned to another farm. There, Zoya would visit and Nanny, seeing how hungry she was, would take her to the cellar and steal potatoes for her.

Nanny slept in the barn. There were two Polish peasants working there and they called her obscene names in Polish, all of which Nanny understood. She would have to stare blankly and respond in Russian, “I don’t understand”.

Every Sunday on the farm, important people would gather for drinks and snacks. In addition to her milking/feeding duties, Sundays were Nanny’s day to do the mending.

Nanny was introduced to Mr. Krotzer, the mayor of a nearby small German town. He asked Nanny’s mistress if he could have Nanny do some gardening for him for a few hours. The next week he asked for

some sewing. He told Nanny to come to his office when she was done.

When Nanny arrived he offered her half his sandwich, and pointing to the picture of Hitler hanging behind him he said, “Do you see who’s picture this is?”, and then pointing to Nanny said, “and do you see who is sitting here”?

Mr. Krotzer then told Nanny that “when things get really bad I’ll have two bicycles and you and Sonja will go to the border to Holland.”

Nanny doesn’t really understand his thinking because Holland was occupied.

After the war, Mr. Krotzer wrote to Nanny and told her that he knew she was not who she said she was, but she never responded to his letter.

## FARM INCIDENTS

- 1) The Polish peasants put Nanny on a horse and set it off at a gallop. She was scared out of her wits and they thought it was hysterically funny.
- 2) Nanny fell off a ladder as she was fetching some hay. The mistress of the farm simply told Nanny to “get up”.
- 3) The mistress was away one afternoon and one of the peasants took the farmer’s disabled son’s motorcycle and was never seen again.

## THE WAR IS OVER

In late spring 1945, Nanny was working in the fields when she saw English and American planes overhead. She waved to them.

Later, she saw the dead bodies of German soldiers in a field. She kept

saying to herself, “I’m going to be okay”.

Soon thereafter, Nanny was in the stable when British soldiers appeared. They told her “no work”, and in French “fini la guerre”.

Though Nanny was hopeful, she worked for two more days before she hopped on a truck with convoy of soldiers heading to France.

In France, Nanny got in touch with her sister Reine (Salka) and made her way to Nancy where she lived with Reine and her husband, Marcel.

## FRANCE

Nanny met my grandfather Michel (Buppy) at a tea at a friend of her sister’s home. She soon got a call from friends inviting her to the B’nai Brith Ball. Nanny didn’t want to go because she felt she didn’t have anything to wear. Her friends convinced her and when she arrived, Buppy was waiting for her at the door.

They began dating though Buppy was leaving for dental internship in Normandy. When he was gone, Buppy kept calling and sending “beautiful” letters.

Six months later Nanny received a proposal of marriage in the mail. She answered yes, and the rest is our family history.

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## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE (CON'D)

I watched and listened as Nanny described her childhood home, the goat she milked, the outdoor bathrooms, and the cleaning woman who attached brushes to her feet and skated around to clean the floor... Dexter is really interested in history and in science, especially life sciences. I prompted Nanny Antoinette to describe her family's healthcare, hospitals, transportation and more.

Nanny Antoinette LOVES to talk and Dexter loves to listen and learn. This was a match made in heaven.

And it got me thinking about her and her family – my family. Though I have heard many many of her stories, I don't remember all of them. And they are written nowhere. She is a fantastic storyteller and has lived an incredible life... but will she live long enough to tell my children all her stories?

Nanny Antoinette is a holocaust survivor, as was my grandfather. They both recorded video testimony for Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation so we at least have that to look back on. But there is so much more to her story than what she described in the 80 minute DVD.

She was not as candid in the video recording as I have heard her in the past. When we would visit her in her winter home in Florida, I would sit with her for an hour or two each morning and she would talk and I would ask questions. She would tell me how she felt, not only what happened or what she thought someone might want to hear.

Those are the stories that strike a chord with me. And her reality has played a large part in shaping who I am. When she is no longer able to tell her stories so eloquently, how will I?

So, as a side blog, which may perhaps at some point become the main project, I am going to begin to document her story and, of course, my take, my thoughts, and the relationship of this history to my family's future.

I started this journey by watching my grandfather's testimony again. He died 4 years ago. And then I began watching Nanny Antoinette's video. I got about 8 minutes in and have about 4 pages of questions for her. I'll be taking a trip up to her condo for that strong coffee and a chat very shortly.

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## WHAT'S IN A NAME? (CON'D)

Nanny Antoinette fell last week so we didn't get a chance to meet. She's okay – just a little black and blue. So we were able to meet this week.

We had our routine breakfast and talked about my children. We then, as usual, adjourned to the living room.

Nanny had a photo album waiting for me on the coffee table. We went through it, the who, where, what, when of each photograph. I took a few with me to copy. I'll take more next time. I feel like they're so precious that I don't want to take them all at once in case I ruin or lose them.

Today, I will share with you the photograph and a little story about Madeleine Burton.

Madeleine was married to Marc Wechsler, a Jewish physician. Madeleine was not Jewish, so when France was occupied Marc was taken away, but Madeleine was not.

Marc was taken to some sort of holding camp in the local area in France – I'm not clear on what this was and I'll have to research this a bit. Marc was determined to escape so he hatched an ingenious plan.

Somehow Marc had access to syringes; perhaps because of his profession he was assigned to the infirmary. At any rate, he injected petroleum into his arm knowing it would cause a large abscess. He knew that with a serious wound he would be transferred to the hospital for treatment.

The hospital was not secure. Marc was able to get a message to Madeleine and she helped him break out through the window of his hospital room.

Madeleine was instrumental in Nanny's life after the war. Besides being a very good friend, she was actually the person who gave her the name she goes by legally today.

She said to Nanny, "You live in France now; you can't go around with a Polish name like that".

And Nanny Antoinette agreed, and she was named Antoinette. And she left Tusha behind.

## WHAT WOULD YOU DO? (SEP 22, 2010)

Yesterday, I told you a bit about my now-weekly visit with my grandmother. I mentioned that she told me story that I found particularly horrific. Nanny has told me many terrible stories, but they have all been abstract enough that I have been able to listen, record, and question. She told me her parents "disappeared"; she told me "people were being taken into the street and shot". But those words for some reason were not as shocking as this story.

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# To A Never Forgotten Friend

This is Zoya.

Translated from Russian by Nanny in 2010



Zoya was a very dear friend of Nanny's during her time in Germany as a forced labourer. Zoya gave Nanny this photo of herself. Nanny had it stored in an envelope on which Nanny had written:

*Zoya Medvedeva, my best friend in Germany*

*We were together in camps. She was half Jewish. That I only found after the war. She writes a very nice dedication to me on the back of the picture.*

*April 17, 1944*

*To: Bekadorova Tantserska*

*From: Medvedeva Zoiarka*

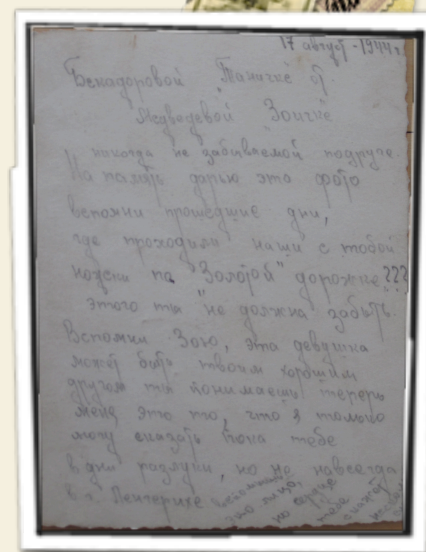
*I offer this picture to a never forgotten friend, to remember hard times spent together. We walked together the "golden road" (Nanny adds "???"). You should never forget times being with Zoya; this girl was your true friend. Most probably you remember better now. Separation was sad, though we manage to see each other from time to time. I hope that this separation is not going to be forever, so please do not forget me. Your face and heart are always with me.*

*Love Zoya*

Nanny adds at the bottom of the translation:

*Zoya stayed in the Lengerich working camp and I was transferred to a farm where I stayed till the end of the war.*

Nanny wonders what happened to Zoya. She is sure she wouldn't have stayed in Germany.



The original dedication on the back of the photo

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After the war, my grandmother lived with her sister and her husband in Nancy, France. They would often have meal-time guests from the various relocation (resettlement?) camps – I’m picturing these as post-war refugee camps.

My grandmother became friends with Mila, a woman from Poland. Before the war, she had been married to a doctor and had a young son of about 3 or 4. My grandmother couldn’t remember what happened to Mila’s husband, but she did remember this part of the story:

Mila and her son were loaded onto one of the cattle cars going from their town to a concentration camp. Mila jumped off the train and left her son in the cattle car.

I feel pain when I type that. I know this pain is directly related to my current stage in life, and my two children.

Nanny told me that her circle of friends in Nancy hated Mila for what she did. Nanny didn’t. She, in some way, understood.

I do not. I cannot imagine it. I do not judge her actions, I just cannot fathom them. I’ve thought about it all day.

Would I jump off the train to try to survive? YES.

Would I leave my son? NO. I would take him with me. We might have less chance of surviving, but I could not leave him on the train.

Nanny says I don’t know what I would do. Maybe she’s right. She claims they were dehumanized and the things they endured are unimaginable.

She says that even as she sits and tells me about it, she can’t believe what she lived through.

Mila went on to emigrate to the UK, re-married, had children and lived a good life just outside of London. Nanny stayed in touch with her until her death.

### THERE WAS NOWHERE TO LOOK (NOV 8, 2010)

I asked Nanny Antoinette whether or not she had looked for her relatives after the war. She told me, “where would I look?”

That being said, she did meet a few people after the war who knew what happened to her siblings and parents who were left in Poland.

Her sister Laura was hiding in a bunker and it was dynamited.

Her sister Mincha was taken away to the Belzec concentration camp.

Her parents had been staying/

*Mila and her baby born after the war*



hiding with Ukrainian clients of her father’s. Eventually one of their neighbours turned them in and they were taken away. Their ultimate fate is unknown.

But what of the cousins and aunts and uncles?

Nanny is sure that no one survived.

But today, we have such a wealth of information at our fingertips. I find myself compelled to do a little more digging.

I spent only a couple of hours and discovered the birth registrations of her father (my great-grandfather) and her nine aunts and uncles. I also found the marriage registration of one of her aunts, and the death registration of one of her uncles who died as a child.

Nanny was so excited. She did not know how old her father was when he was killed. And now she does. She did not know her grandmother’s name. And now she does.

Nanny gave me my great grandmother’s maiden name too, and I will look that up. Perhaps, with some additional digging, I might find some long lost relatives.

But for now, I will continue with this story... the family tree can be the next project.

### Comment from a reader:

“I’m still loving the posts about your grandmother though they really break my heart. It is so worth documenting these stories.”



# More Information



Historical information about the Jewish community in Tarnopol  
[http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas\\_poland/pol2\\_00234.html](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas_poland/pol2_00234.html)

Sonja's Story

<http://www.sonjavanderhorst.org/>

Tracking Jewish roots

<http://www.jewishgen.org>

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