

Preface

KNYSZYN, POLAND, 2009

The clouds came at me.

What are you doing here? What took you so long? Where's everyone else?

Not cumulus, not nimbus, and not cumulonimbus, those clouds hovered, strange but familiar. They sat low in the sky, stalwart, distant, and firm. I, too, had questions, but no chance to ask.

Downtown Knyszyn occurs at the intersection of Tykocka and Szkolna streets, named for the town of Tykocin, with its square, empty brick synagogue cum museum, and for the Jewish school that once stood down the block. Soon after the Jewish community of Knyszyn took root in 1705, there came to be a synagogue at that crossroads.¹

Wrapped in countryside, Knyszyn was once the seat of Polish kings. Zygmunt August (in English, Sigismund II Augustus), known for saying “I am not the king of your conscience,” came to Knyszyn for relaxation and game hunting, and in 1572, died there. The king (a statue of him stands near Town Hall) spent a total of five hundred days in Knyszyn.²

I had one. And my own hunt: a quest for the origins of the knish.