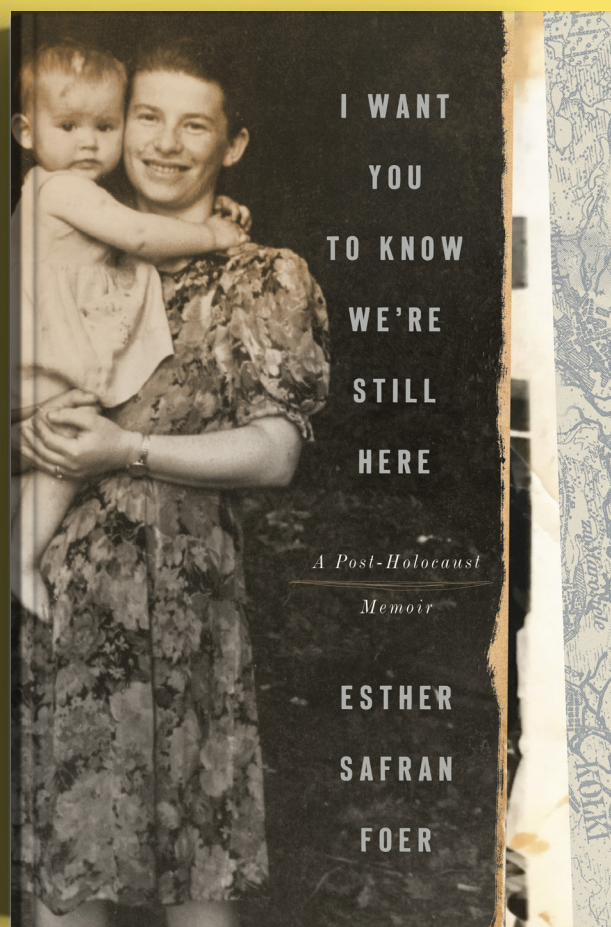


# JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

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[Jewishbookcouncil.org](http://Jewishbookcouncil.org)



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# JBC Book Clubs

## Discussion Questions

1. Think about the title: what does it mean? How does it inform Esther's journey? Who is the "I," the "you," and the "we"?
2. In the first chapter, Esther writes, "It has been said that Jews are an ahistorical people, concerned more with memory than history" (p. 5). Do you agree with the statement? In what way does your own family fit into this idea? How does this idea fit in with Jewish religious observance?
3. In that same paragraph, the author continues, "History is public. Memory is personal. It is about stories and select experiences. History is the end of something. Memory is the beginning of something" (p. 5). In what way is memory the beginning? What is shared history if there is no shared memory? What is a memory if one has not personally had the experience? Was Esther's search looking for history or memory?
4. What role did *Everything Is Illuminated* play in Esther's story? How did the fictional story echo reality and how did it impact reality?
5. Esther writes about how Amos Oz's book *A Tale of Love and Darkness* enabled her to begin to confront her own trauma around her father (p. 87). Have there been works of literature which have informed your own understanding of your family history or identity?
6. Why do you think Esther's mother kept her father's letters from her, even as an adult? Was this an act of protection?
7. Esther writes that she is a "hinge" between her mother and her own children, that she had a "role in this story as the biological link" between the two generations (p. 102). Other than being a daughter and a mother, how does she work to fulfill what she sees as her role in the story? Does her contemplation of her role differ from that of anyone in a "sandwich generation"?
8. In preparation for the trip, Esther decides to bring her family Rosh Hashanah cards to Ukraine. What does it mean to leave something behind? Why did Esther choose the cards as her object to leave?
9. On many occasions, elements from the natural world (dirt, trees, etc.) are mentioned throughout the book. When did they appear, and what was their significance?
10. Esther's son Frank appears on a panel entitled, "Can memory save us from history? Can history save us from memory?" (p. 212). What do you think that means? How would you answer those questions? In what way does *I Want You to Know We're Still Here* address or answer those two questions?
11. In recounting the family's Passover traditions, Esther writes, "it's an occasion to bring memory alive....Storytelling is fundamental to resilience" (p. 110). Why is storytelling fundamental to resilience? Do you think this is referring to personal resilience or communal? How does this contrast with the way in which Esther's parents, and many other survivors, chose to move forward with their new lives without talking much about the past? What are some of your family traditions—in general or around a holiday—that are designed to bring memory alive?

12. The concept of names appears throughout the book, from Esther's desire to learn her half-sister's name to the descriptive nicknames that were used in the shtetls and the shifting names of the villages. There is also the poem by Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky that was read at the mass graves in Trochenbrod, "Unto Every Person There Is a Name." What is the significance of a name? Why is it so important to Esther to discover her sister's name?

13. When asked why she refused a piece of pork even in the face of starvation, Esther's mother answers that, "if nothing matters, there's nothing to save" (p. 32). What does she mean by that? What is she trying to save? Is there something that you feel so strongly about that you would stand behind it no matter what you faced?

14. Nadiya asks Esther, "Why are you here?" (p. 197). Aside from learning concrete details about her father's family, why does Esther travel to Ukraine? What does she want to find that she didn't find through records, maps, testimonials, genetic tracing, and books? Have you been on a heritage trip or thought about traveling to an ancestral homeland? In thinking about a trip like that, what did you hope to find, to learn, to experience?

# Enhance Your Book Club Discussion

## Family Photographs:

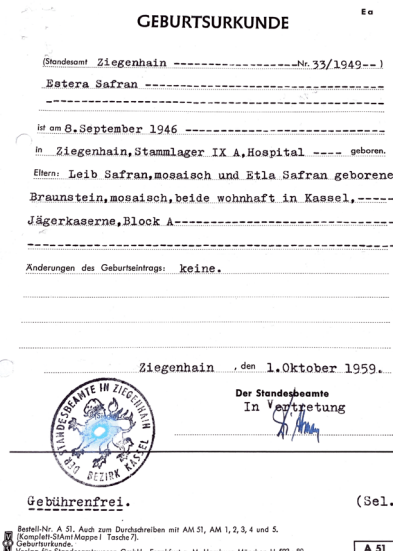
For Esther, a handful of family photographs and documents is most of what she had to base her entire family history upon. Gleaning information required research and detective work.

- Find a familiar family photograph to share. What is the story of that picture? Now, as Esther says (p. 58), “look closer.” What are details that you notice that you hadn’t before? Do those details tell a different part of the story?
- Find a picture that is more of a mystery. Who are the people in the picture? What is their relationship? What questions does the picture raise? How would you go about trying to answer those questions?

## Family Documents:

Esther has a few documents that provide an outline to her family’s life after the war. However, some actually intentionally obscure the truth. Look at the documents here which were provided by the author.

- What information do the documents tell about Esther’s family? Now, what story do they tell?
- How did they fit into the narrative of the book?



Esther’s false birth certificate

|                       |   |                   |
|-----------------------|---|-------------------|
| Date                  | 27.6.50/PH  |                   |
| Name                  | S A F R A N , Estera                                  | File AT-1023      |
| BD                    | 1946  | BP Lodz Nat Jew.  |
| Next of Kin           |   |                   |
| Source of Information | Jew. DP.Camp, Ziegenhain by Kassel<br>C.I.C. New York |                   |
| Last kn. Location     | Ziegenhain, Jew.DP.Camp                               | Date October 1946 |
| CC/Prison             | Arr.  | lib.              |
| Transf. on            | in  |                   |
| Died on               | in  |                   |
| Cause of death        |   |                   |
| Buried on             | in  |                   |
| Grave                 | D. C. No.   |                   |
| Remarks               | Index-Nr. 587996                                      |                   |

Document showing Esther’s birth in Łódź





Esther's parents' ketubah

**RECORD OF ARRIVAL**

Steamer General Heintzelman Date Aug 14, 1949 Port New York Worker Kornblith

| FAMILY | NAME FIRST         | AGE       | SEX      | SOCIAL STATE | NATIVITY       | LAST RESIDENCE | OCCUPATION |
|--------|--------------------|-----------|----------|--------------|----------------|----------------|------------|
|        | <u>Safran Leib</u> | <u>39</u> | <u>M</u> | <u>M</u>     | <u>Poland</u>  | <u>Germany</u> |            |
|        | <u>Etel</u>        | <u>49</u> | <u>F</u> | <u>M</u>     | <u>" "</u>     |                |            |
|        | <u>Ester</u>       | <u>2</u>  | <u>F</u> | <u>S</u>     | <u>Germany</u> |                |            |

Destined to: Vigdor Shereshevsky 5013-3 Street, NW, Washington uncle  
 Name Address Relationship

Other Affiant or relative: Name Address Relationship

Communicated with: wire sent Purpose

Baggage Checked: 380 Washington

Left for: Washington R.R.R. # 153 Date 8/14/49

Discharged to: \$40 Forwarding Address:

|      |      |       |      |       |
|------|------|-------|------|-------|
| Q.V. | V.V. | St.V. | T.V. | Ng.V. |
|------|------|-------|------|-------|

HIAS Shelter Room No:

Foer family record of arrival. Esther's mother's age is incorrectly written as 49 (likely a transcription error, she was actually 29). According to Esther's actual birthdate, she was 3 at the time.

Think about your own family's official documents:

- Do you have any inherited family documents? How do they fit into your family's story? Think about what you know from these papers. What do you not know about the story that they tell? Is there anyone who might know more about the story?
- What do you think will be passed onto future generations? How complete a story do those documents tell? What papers or objects would you leave to tell the story of your life so far? If you are on social media, would you include aspects of your feeds into your archive? How would that shape your choices? What would you want descendants to know about you?

### “Unto Every Person There Is a Name”

Learning the name of her sister is a driving force for Esther, and the poem “Unto Every Person There Is a Name...” is mentioned twice in the book. Read the poem in its entirety below.

Unto every person there is a name  
bestowed on him by God  
and given to him by his parents.

Unto every person there is a name  
accorded him by his stature  
and type of smile  
and style of dress.

Unto every person there is a name  
conferred by the mountains  
and the walls which surround him.

Unto every person there is a name  
granted him by Fortune’s wheel  
or that which neighbors call him.

Unto every person there is a name  
assigned him by his failings  
or contributed by his yearnings.

Unto every person there is a name  
given to him by his enemies  
or by his love.

Unto every person there is a name  
derived from his celebrations  
and his occupation.

Unto every person there is a name  
presented him by the seasons  
and his blindness.

Unto every person there is a name  
which he receives from the sea  
and is given to him by his death.

Zelda (1914 – 1984)

Source: [Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#)

For Discussion:

- What is a name in the poem? Does the meaning of the word shift? If so, how? What is a name in each stanza? What significance does a name take on?
- Think about the structure of the poem. What does the poem say about how to live in the world?
- [In 1989, Israeli Knesset member Dov Shilansky started the annual tradition of holding a name-reading ceremony](#) on Holocaust Remembrance Day, and in 1999, [Yad Vashem launched a campaign named for the poem](#). Why do you think they chose this poem as a way to honor the memory of those who died? Why a name instead of a picture, a memory, a birthdate?
- Aside from the direct mentions, how does the poem relate to *I Want You to Know We’re Still Here*? How many names did Esther find for her father? What did the different names tell about him?

# Excerpt: *Everything Is Illuminated*

Excerpt from *Everything Is Illuminated: A Novel* by Jonathan Safran Foer. Copyright © 2002 by Jonathan Safran Foer.

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**As Esther explains (p. 112-115), when her middle son, Jonathan, needed a project for his senior thesis, she suggested traveling to Ukraine to find the family that hid his grandfather. That journey—and his imaginings of what Trochenbrod would have looked like after finding no remaining trace of it—in a fictionalized form became the novel *Everything Is Illuminated*.**

**Below is a brief excerpt from *Everything Is Illuminated*. If you haven't read the novel, or haven't read it recently, this conversation takes place between the main character, Jonathan Safran Foer, and his Ukrainian guide, who narrates part of the story (p. 59-60). As you read, pay attention to the "true to life" details in the scene that you recognize from *I Want You to Know We're Still Here*.**

It was pending this five-hour car drive from the Lvov train station to Lutsk that the hero explained to me why he came to Ukraine. He excavated several items from his side bag. First he exhibited me a photograph. It was yellow and folded and had many pieces of fixative affixing it together. "See this?" he said. "This here is my grandfather Safran." He pointed to a young man who I will say appeared very much like the hero, and could have been the hero. "This was taken during the war." "from Who?" "No, not taken like that. The photograph was made." "I understand." "These people he is with are the family that saved him from the Nazis." "What?" "They...saved...him...from...the...Na...zis." "In Trachimbrod?" "No, somewhere

outside of Trachimbrod. He escaped the Nazi raid on Trachimbrod. Everyone else was killed. He lost a wife and a baby." "He lost?" "They were killed by the Nazis." "But if it was not Trachimbrod, why do we go to Trachimbrod? And how will we find this family?" He explained to me that we were not looking for the family, but for this girl. She would be the only one still alive.

He moved his finger along the face of the girl in the photograph as he mentioned her. She was standing down and right to his grandfather in the picture. A man who I am certain was her father was next to her, and a woman who I am certain was her mother was behind her. Her parents appeared very Russian, but she did not. She appeared American. She was a youthful girl, perhaps fifteen. But it is possible that she had more age. She could have been so old as the hero and me, as could have been the hero's grandfather. I looked at the girl for many minutes. She was so so beautiful. Her hair was brown, and rested only on her shoulders. Her eyes appeared sad, and full of intelligence.

"I want to see Trachimbrod," the hero said. "To see what it's like, how my grandfather grew up, where I would be now if it weren't for the war." "You would be Ukrainian." "That's right." "Like me." "I guess." "Only not like me because you would be a farmer in an unimpressive town, and I live in Odessa, which is very much like Miami." "And I want to see what it's like now. I don't think there are any Jews left, but maybe there are. And the shtetls weren't only Jews, so there should be others to talk to." "The whats?" "Shtetls. A shtetl is like a village." "Why don't you merely dub it a village?" "It's a Jewish word." "A Jewish word?" "Yiddish. Like schmuck." "What



does it mean schmuck?” “Someone who does something that you don’t agree with is a schmuck.” “Teach me another.” “Putz.” “What does that mean?” “It’s like schmuck.” “Teach me another.” “Schmendrik.” “What does that mean?” “It’s also like schmuck.” “Do you know any words that are not like schmuck?” He pondered for a moment. “Shalom,” he said, “which is actually three words, but that’s Hebrew, not Yiddish. Everything I can think of is basically schmuck. The Eskimos have four hundred words for snow, and the Jews have four hundred for schmuck.” I wondered, What is an Eskimo?

“So, we will sightsee the shtetl?” I asked the hero. “I figured it would be a good place to begin our search.” “Search?” “For Augustine.” “Who is Augustine?” “The girl in the photograph. She’s the only one who would still be alive.” “Ah. We will search for Augustine, who you think saved your grandfather from the Nazis.” “Yes.” It was very silent for a moment. “I would like to find her,” I said. I perceived that this appeased the hero, but I did not say it to appease him. I said it because it was faithful. “And then, I said, “if we find her?” The hero was a pensive person. “I don’t know what then. I suppose I’d thank her.” “For saving your grandfather.” “Yes.” “That will be very queer, yes?” “What?” “When we find her.” “If we find her.” “We will find her.” “Probably not,” he said. “Then why do we search?” I queried, but before he could answer, I interrupted myself with another query. “And how do you know that her name is Augustine?” “I guess I don’t, really. On the back, see, here, are written a few words, in my grandfather’s writing, I think. Maybe not. It’s in Yiddish. It says: ‘This is me with Augustine, February 21, 1943.’” “It’s very difficult to read.” “Yes.”

# Q & A with Esther Safran Foer

Once you had visited Trochenbrod and learned the name of your sister, did you feel like your ongoing search was completed? What changed for you, having made the trip? Are you still actively searching for new information?

**Esther Safran Foer:** I will probably always be searching, but not with the same intensity as the search for the name of my sister. I am always pursuing connections.

**Did your mother ever hear a full account of your trip?**

**ESF:** My mother only ever heard bits and pieces of the account. I think that is all she wanted to hear.

**Do you think you'll return to Ukraine?**

**ESF:** I might. It would be a very different trip. There are probably very few people who are still alive who can provide first hand information. I feel lucky that I made the trip when I did, since a number of the people who had any knowledge of my family are now deceased. I have maintained a connection with one member of the family that hid my father, and also with my guides.

**Do you still travel with ziploc bags?**

**ESF:** Absolutely. I don't go anywhere without ziploc bags.

**Do you celebrate two birthday dates or have you celebrated the March date since your "coming out" party?**

**ESF:** I only celebrate my real March birthday, but all of my official records have my September "birthday"—and changing it would be complicated. I suppose I will always have two birthdays.

**Have you made any new Trochenbrod connections or discoveries since the end of the book's narrative?**

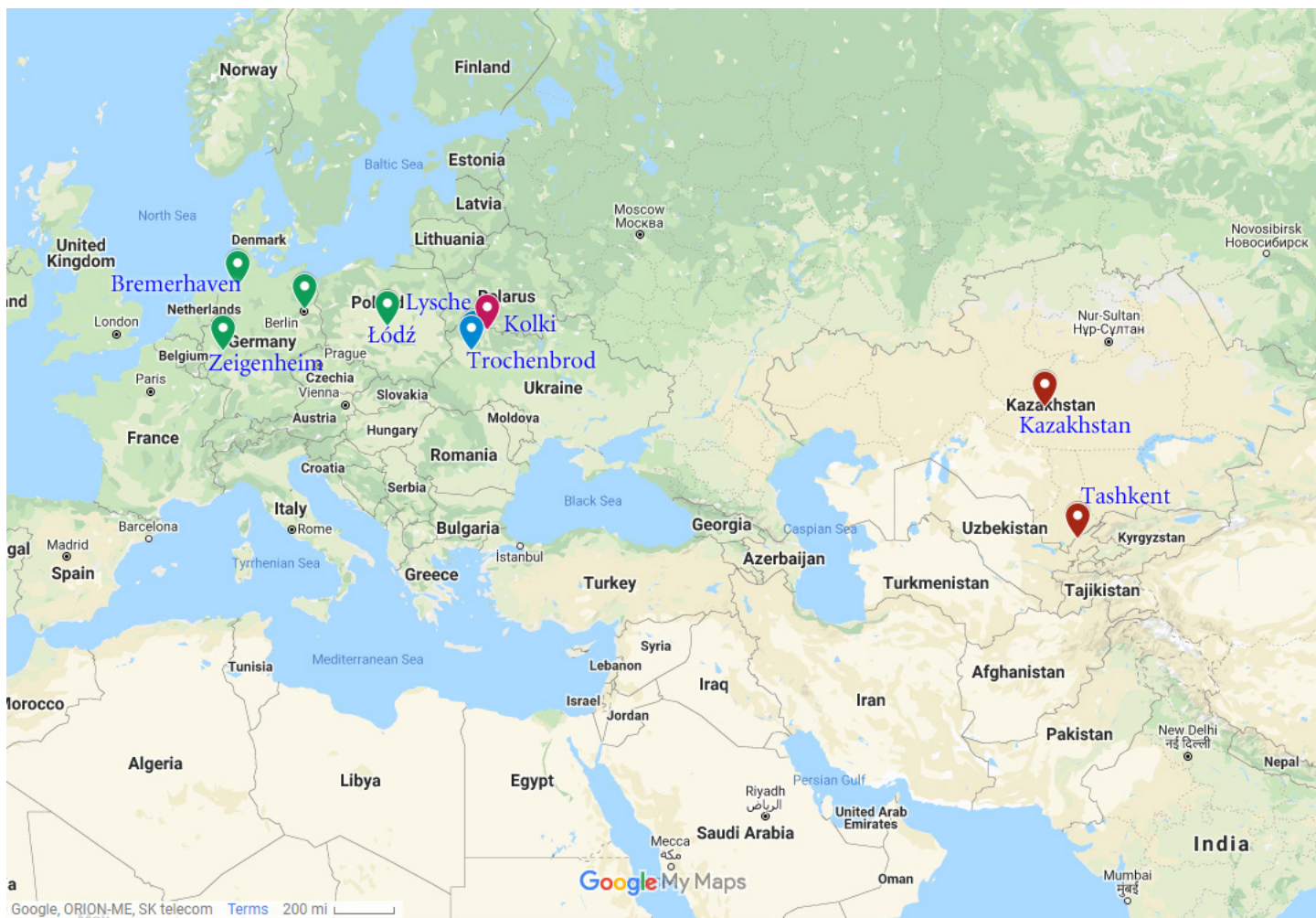
**ESF:** I have certainly stayed connected to many of the Trochenbrod friends who I met in the process of my journey of discovery. We've had several "mini reunions."

**What advice do you have for people who are interested in taking a heritage trip?**

**ESF:** My best advice is advance research!! Go to the web, check out maps (old and new), go to Jewish Gen, hire a guide and encourage them to advance the trip and find people that you can talk to.

# Maps

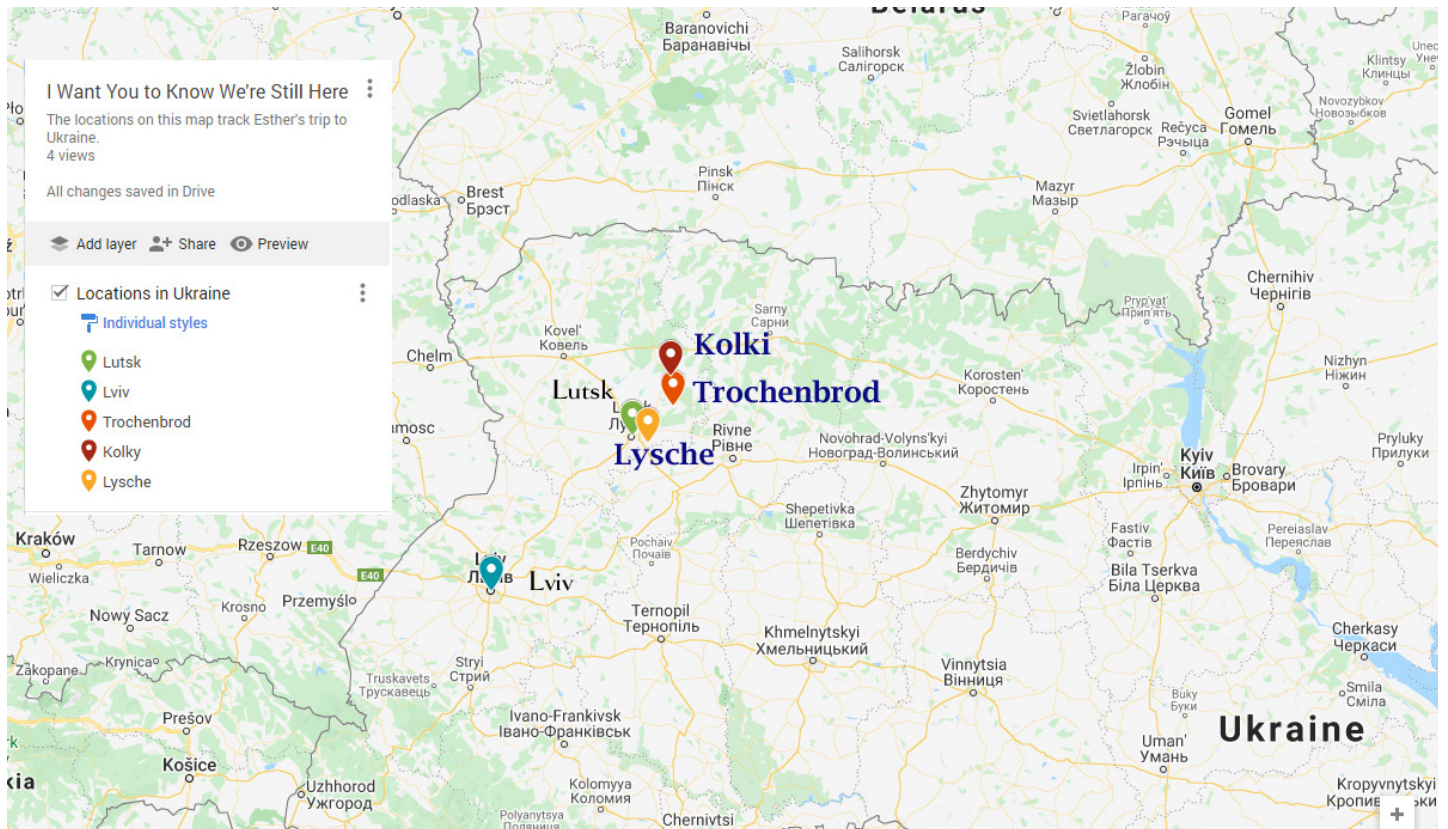
## Map of Significant Locations for Esther's Family: 1940-1949



The map above is color-coded to reflect her parents' stories and that of the family's post-war locations. The locations in blue reflect Esther's father's locations, those in red show Esther's mother's hometown and the faraway places she fled to on foot to escape the Nazi invasion. The green pins show the cities that the family inhabited post-war, Łódź, where Esther's parents met and were married, and where she was born, Berlin and then Ziegenheim, where they moved to and then spent time in a DP camp, and Bremerhaven, where they eventually left Europe for good on their way to the United States.



## Map of Locations from Esther's 2009 Trip



For more information:

[JewishGen Ukraine SIG: Reunion of Trochenbrod Descendants](#)

[JTA: The Ghost Shtetl of Trochenbrod](#)

[Map: Trochenbrod](#)

[Mi Polin: Trachimbrod](#)

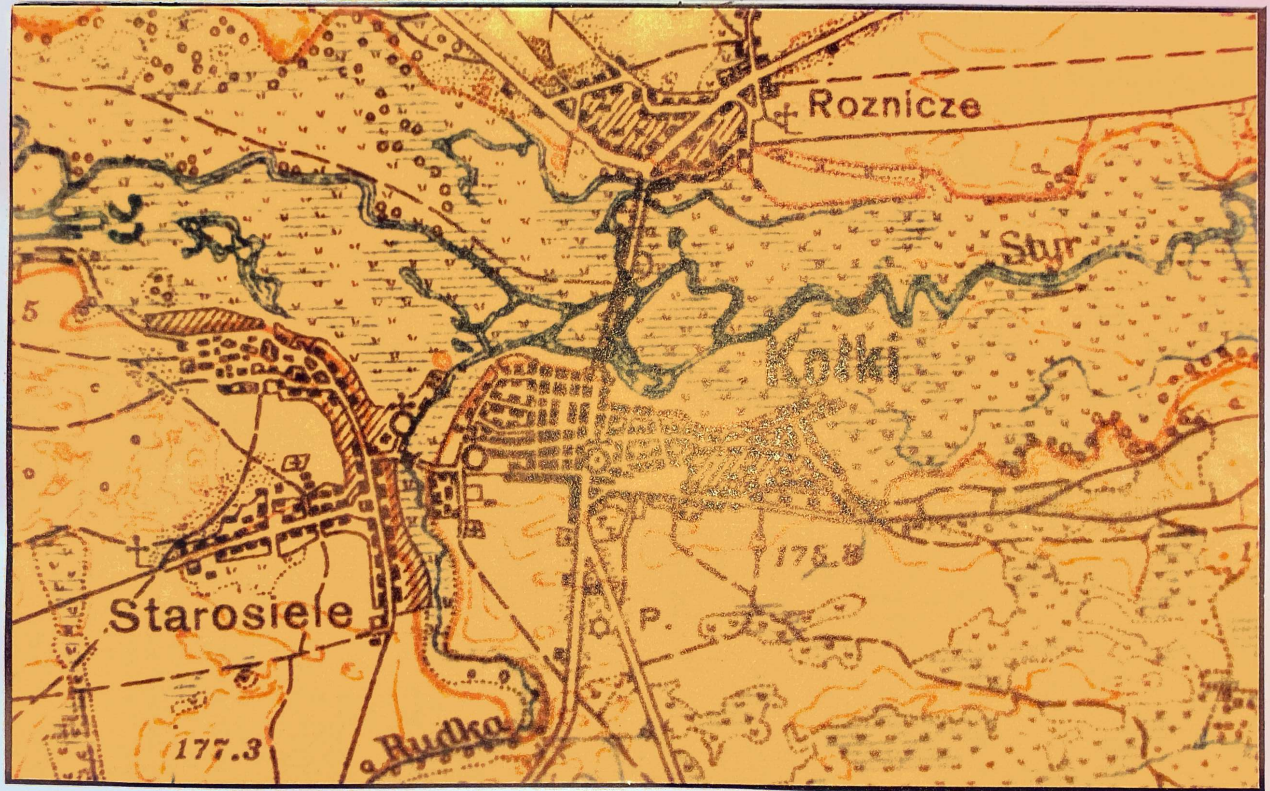
[Vanished World: Trochenbrod](#)

[Website of Bet Tal](#)

[Trailer: Trochenbrod documentary \(includes footage from Esther's 2009 trip\)](#)

[Trailer: Lost Town](#)

[Website for Lost Town film](#)



*Kolki 1923*

1923 Map of Kolki, courtesy of Esther Safran Foer



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Jewish Book Council, with roots dating back to 1925, is the only nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of Jewish-interest literature. For nearly 70 years, we have supported and celebrated Jewish authors and books, and used literature to bring people together for meaningful discussions around Jewish life, identity, and culture.

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