

# Latvia SIG

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## President's Report



At the outset I wish you all a Shana Tovah, peace and good health for the coming year. As the New Year unfolds we will strive to expand the role of the SIG to assist SIG members with their genealogical research.

**Annual General Meeting:** At the annual general meeting in the New York Marriott Marquis on the 15<sup>th</sup> August 2006 President Barry Shay presented his report. It dealt with the wide range of activities the SIG had undertaken in the past year. At the AGM I was elected President and Don Hirschhorn was elected Vice-President. Mike Getz agreed to continue as Treasurer.

I thanked the following people:

Barry Shay, the Past President, for his very effective leadership during the past two years and for maintaining a very high standard of editorship for the Newsletter.

Mike Getz, the Treasurer, also a past President, for his valuable contribution, guidance and leadership as well as his duties as Treasurer.

Appreciation was expressed to Arlene Beare, also a past President, for her invaluable work for the SIG over many years and her endeavors in bringing on-line a number of very important data bases, including the Marriage Lists for Riga, the Family Lists for Rezekne, the All Russian Census of 1897 for Riga, Rezekne, Krustpils and areas within Courland with nearly 7,000 Jewish residents.

The SIG appreciates the continued and valuable contributions made by Rhea Plottel with regard to membership, Sarah Krein, the Webmaster, Elsebeth Paikin, the Listserve Moderator, and Dave Howard, the Shtetlink Coordinator.

**26h IAGS International Conference:** The 26h IAGS International Conference on Jewish Gene-

alogy held at the New York Marriott Marquis from 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> was a truly amazing experience. The organization of the Conference was superb and numerous laudatory e-mails have been sent to the organizing committee thanking them for their wonderful achievement.

The scope of the program was breathtaking. The range of presentations, films, workshops, field trips, cemetery visits, made this a truly spectacular event. For some time I will be reviewing my notes and the material obtained from the Conference and I am eagerly waiting to receive the DVD copy of conference lectures to catch up on the numerous lectures that I could not attend.

The dedicated volunteers were extremely helpful. In terms of accommodation alone, I can only comment that one dedicated volunteer, Roni Liebowitz assisted me beyond my expectations. The program Committee Chair, Gloria Berkenstat Freund can be extremely proud of the very successful conference.

**Lectures on Latvia:** The program related to Latvia was well represented. Bella Zisere presented material based on her dissertation research entitled, "Memory of the Holocaust in Latvia: a Contemporary Debate". It was very informative and well received. At another session Bella Zisere also spoke about and answered questions concerning contemporary Jewish life in Riga and other parts of Latvia.

Furthermore David Michaelson spoke about his efforts to restore one of the last wooden synagogues in Eastern Europe: the Green Synagogue in Rezekne. His dedication and success in moving this project forward is admirable.

**Latvia post card collection:** I gave a Power Point presentation of a selection of my post card collection of scenes taken of last century Latvian cities and shtetls. The viewers were able to visualize the shtetls where our ancestors lived and many were surprised at the sophistication of the buildings and way of life.

**Port Jews of Libau:** For me a highlight of the Conference was the presentation by Nicholas Evans who spoke on the Port Jews of Libau. He dis-

cussed current research into the Jewish merchants who traded at one of Courland's leading ports. Nicholas is a Research Associate at the Centre for Jewish Migration & Genealogical Studies at the University of Cape Town. He has published numerous articles on the Jews of Libau.

**Friends and Family:** The Conference was also an opportunity to meet friends and fellow researchers and on rare occasions to meet, for the first time, extended family.

One of the joys of the Conference is the possibility of meeting new family members. This happened quite fortuitously when I discovered a distant cousin, Anne Getlan.

Since the conference, project management software called Basecamp has been introduced for the use of the board to facilitate management of the various projects.

**Trip to Latvia:** In May 2008 we hope to lead a trip to Latvia. So far this has been enthusiastically received. Barry and Birgitta Shay were the first to indicate that they would be interested in such a tour. A number of conference participants have also indicated interest in participating in the trip. At this stage it is still a concept and a great deal of planning has to be done. If you are at all interested please contact me by email.

Before closing, if you have not yet sent your membership fees please renew as soon as possible by sending your check, payable to Latvia SIG, to:

Latvia SIG  
5450 Whitley Park Terrace #901  
Bethesda MD 20814 USA

or by paying using PayPal.

New members and those who wish to update their membership profiles, please complete the membership questionnaire included in the newsletter.

Henry Blumberg.  
President, Latvia SIG.  
henry@blumbergs.ca

## Editor's Comments

Latvia SIG participation at the IAJGS conference

in New York City is well documented in this issue of the newsletter. In addition to the minutes of the annual SIG meeting and the board meeting, I am happy to include a summary of Bella Zisere's extended lecture, *Memory of the Holocaust in Latvia: A Contemporary Debate*, which was presented in the general session at the conference. Entitled, *Memory of the Shoah in Post-Soviet Latvia*, Bella concisely describes the conflicted feelings of many of today's Jews living in Latvia and the context within which these feelings are manifested.

Dave Michaelson's mission to save the Green Synagogue in Rezekne has been the subject of previous articles in this newsletter, and I am pleased to include his more detailed account of what motivated him to engage in such a heroic task. Motivated by his quest for his own Jewish identity, Dave has embarked on a project that could well bring Jewish identity back to the few remaining Jews of Rezekne.

Rochelle Kaplan has been kind enough to report on a major project that has been launched to reconstitute the destroyed shtetls of Europe. This project, initiated by the International Institute of Jewish Genealogy (IIJG), has the potential to recreate the life and culture of millions of Jews who perished in the Holocaust. The project has already spawned sub-projects within a number of SIGs, including the Latvia SIG, to reconstitute shtetls that will ultimately add to the mosaic of shtetl life prior to the Shoah.

Mike Getz and I had the privilege of meeting Lois Ogilby-Rosen at the conference in New York, where she stopped briefly, before she departed to Latvia. Shortly after arriving on the "Red Eye," Lois unfurled the Rozinko family tree for many of us to see. As impressed as we were with the tree, we were more impressed with Lois's zeal and knowledge in Latvian Jewish genealogy research. Some of you may remember reading Lois's article, *Schmuel's Story*, in the September 2005 issue of this newsletter. From that beginning, Lois has embarked on a remarkable journey to understand Jewish life and history as she uncovers more of Schmuel's story. I am extremely happy to include her first account of that journey in this issue.

The *Interview with Motel Bliznansky*, is one of the oral testimonies that the Latvia SIG has acquired thanks to the efforts of Arlene Beare. It is certainly apropos to appear in this issue, since Bella Zisere's research is based partly on her analysis of these testimonies. In addition, we see from Bliznansky's commentary how tenuous survival was for Jews during the Nazi occupation of Latvia and, even as members of the Russian army, Jewish Latvians were not completely trusted and their survival was also tenuous.

Barry Shay  
bbshay@starpower.net

### Treasurer's Report

Our opening bank balance as of July 1, 2006 was \$5300. On June 30<sup>th</sup> it stood at \$5500. We also have some \$2500 donated to the SIG through JewishGen. The specific expenditure of these funds is governed by JewishGen and has not yet been appropriated.

#### Income:

- |                 |        |
|-----------------|--------|
| • Subscriptions | \$2000 |
| • Gifts         | \$ 400 |
| • Total         | \$2400 |

#### Expenditures:

- |                 |        |
|-----------------|--------|
| • Newsletter    | \$660  |
| • Translations  | \$250  |
| • SIG Databases | \$450  |
| • NY Conference | \$840  |
| • Total         | \$2200 |

I would like to thank Barry for his leadership and for his steady and innovative thinking, also for the help and support he provided. Barry is also a signatory to our bank account. As she has consistently done, Arlene Beare continued her important role in our work. I am grateful to Rhea Plottel for her patience with my administration and the demands on her time and resources.

The Latvia SIG is well positioned to continue its work and seriously consider initiatives to provide additional resources for our members and the community with whom we share a common interest.

Mike Getz  
Treasurer, Latvia SIG  
mikegetz005@comcast.net

### Latvia SIG Annual Meeting 15 August 2006

The annual meeting of the Latvia SIG was held at the IAJGS annual conference in New York City on 15 August 2006. The meeting was very well attended with close to 50 members present. This is certainly the largest number of attendees to have participated in our annual meeting for at least five years, and possibly longer. The following is a summary of the meeting.

Barry Shay, outgoing president of the Latvia SIG, presented an overview of the previous year's activities and projects.

**Oral Testimonies:** The SIG is in possession of 30 oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors, which include audiotapes of the actual interviews as well as transcripts of those interviews. These interviews were done under the auspices of *Center for Judaic Studies, University of Latvia*, in the year 2000. Arlene Beare and the Latvia SIG jointly funded the project. I am happy to report that the transcripts of these testimonies are now being translated from Russian to English, under SIG sponsorship, and have been, and will be, featured in the SIG newsletters as they become available. Ultimately, they will appear on the SIG website. The fourth translation in this series is included in this issue of the newsletter.

**Streamline FF:** One important service that the SIG provides to its members is the Family Finder (FF), which allows members to identify other members who may be researching and searching the same shtetl or the same family name. The data, which comprises the FF, associates a researcher's name, a family name, and a shtetl. The ACCESS database, which is currently used for both membership status and the FF, needs to be redesigned to accommodate name and shtetl searches and to more efficiently handle membership status. Please contact me if you or someone you know is proficient in ACCESS (i.e. can gen-

erate queries using logical operators to link fields and tables) and would like to help revamp our database.

**Dvinsk Cemetery Database:** The cemetery database exists in at least two places, here and in Israel. It needs to be organized and translated into English. This has been an ongoing problem, and we hope to find a solution.

**Daugavpils Ghetto List:** Thanks to Joseph Rochko of Daugavpils, Jacob Gorfin has provided the SIG with a near complete list of the inhabitants of the 1941 Daugavpils ghetto. Right now it is handwritten with Latvian notation and it needs to be "computerized."

**USHMM:** Vadim Altskan of the USHMM is in contact with Riga Archives re: Cultural, Religious, Academic, Social Organizations and Activities. He has obtained an index of cultural, religious, athletic, economic, academic, fraternal, and other types of Jewish organizations that flourished throughout Latvia up until 1941. The index has been translated into English, but the actual documents need to be translated. Mike Getz maintains contact with Vadim and will keep the SIG up to date on the progress. Part of this list was featured in the July 2006 issue of the SIG newsletter.

**Reconstitution of Destroyed Shtetls of Europe:** This project is a major undertaking of the International Institute of Jewish Genealogy (IJG), and is described in some detail by Rochelle Kaplan in her article in this issue of the newsletter. The Latvia SIG, in support of the general goals of the IJG, intends to concentrate on some of the smaller shtetls of Latvia in developing family trees of those who lost their lives in the Holocaust. In so doing, we hope to create virtual shtetls of real shtetls that existed just prior to Latvia's occupation by the Nazis. This is major project, and we need and seek the help of all of you in ensuring its success.

**Continuing Interest:** The Latvia SIG continues to monitor the status and of the Bauska memorial and other memorials, including the possible reconstruction of Green Synagogue of Rezekne. See Dave Michaelson's article in this issue.

**Need Project Coordinator:** Given the scope and number of projects that the SIG is involved in, the board decided that a project coordinator would be required to manage these activities and we are happy to announce that Devora Wilkenfield has agreed to take on those responsibilities. A project manager in real life, we look forward to working with Devora in developing plans to ensure the successful completion of these projects.

**Estonia:** Organizationally, the Latvia SIG covers Estonia but the dearth of material concerning Estonia is apparent in projects and databases and is also reflected in the lack of Estonia-based articles that appear in the newsletter. Membership interest in Estonia is minimal, as expressed in the membership questionnaires we receive. We realize the importance of Estonia and we would like to increase its presence in the SIG's activities but we can only do that if one or more of our members volunteer to be the coordinator for Estonia. Please contact Henry Blumberg if you or someone you know is interested in being the coordinator for Estonia within the Latvia SIG.

**Bylaws:** Do We Need Them? Not yet. At least that seems to be the consensus of the membership.

**Latvia SIG vs. Courland Research Group:** An issue has been raised during the year that the Latvia SIG and the Courland Research Group needs to cooperate more on activities and projects. Personally, I have not found this to be a problem even though the CRG maintains their own website under JewishGen. Many Latvia SIG members are also members of the CRG and that is as it should be. Clearly, the project to reconstitute Latvian shtetls is one area in which close cooperation of the two organizations is imperative.

**Database:** Arlene Beare is leading the effort to acquire the 1897 All-Russian Census for Dvinsk. This is an extremely large database of approximately 16,000 names. When this database is brought online, I am sure that many gaps in your genealogy research will be filled.

The following databases have been acquired and brought online under the JewishGen Latvia Database.

- All Russian Census 1897 for Friederichstadt, Jakopstadt, Talsen, Tukums
- Family List for Rezekne
- Marriage Database for Riga
- Small District Family Lists
- Treasurer's Report: See following section.

**Membership Report:** For the 2005/2006 membership year there were 60 paid U.S. members and 15 non-U.S. paid members. As of 15 August, a total of about 50 members had paid for the 2006/2007-membership year. As of this writing, there are 70 paid U.S. members and 5 non-U.S. paid members. Given the interest in Latvian Jewish genealogy, it is apparent that the Latvia SIG should attract and enroll more paid members. For example, there are nearly 600 subscribers to the Latvia SIG listserv and only a small percentage of those subscribers are paid members of the SIG. A priority for next year will be to increase the number of paid members by contacting former members and attracting new members.

**Editor's Report:** The newsletter continues to be the primary means for disseminating detailed articles and information to the paid SIG membership and other interested parties. As always, it is difficult to convince members and others to submit material for publication in the newsletter. Judging from some of the questions raised and answered on the SIG listserv, there is an adequate supply of material "out there" that could be the subject of interesting articles.

Over the last year, we have made previously distributed newsletters available on the Latvia SIG website in PDF format. Newsletters more than one-year old will continue to be made available and many of the early newsletters will be digitized so that they too can be made available via the website. Now photos can be seen in color and newsletter issues can be searched for content.

Oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors and selections of the Beth Hatefutosoth Archives have become a regular feature of the newsletter and we hope to continue this in the future. Recently, good leads have been provided for additional help in producing and enhancing the newsletter. Help is always welcomed and we encourage support in the areas of writing, editing, and design.

During the last year, with the help of Henry Blumberg, we have registered two domain names for the Latvia SIG: latviasig.org and latviasig.com. Dave Howard will be using <http://www.latviasig.org> as a construction site for Shtetlink development.

Sarah Krein, our Webmaster, has been updating and modernizing our website. She has some ideas that she would like to implement and is open to ideas that you would like to see incorporated, so please contact us.

**Election of New Officers:** As usual, new officers of the SIG were elected at the meeting. After serving two terms as president, Barry Shay has stepped down and Henry Blumberg, formerly vice president, was elected president. Don Hirschhorn was elected vice president.

Submitted by Barry Shay  
bbshay@starpower.net

## Latvia SIG Board Meeting

The meeting of Board of the Latvia SIG was held on 17 August 2006 at the Marriott Marquis Hotel, New York.

**Present:** Henry Blumberg (in the Chair), Donald Hirschhorn (Vice President), Barry Shay (Past President), Mike Getz (Treasurer), Allan Jordan.

**Apologies:** Arlene Beare, David Howard, Devora Wilkenfeld.

**Welcome:** The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting, especially the new members of the Board, Allan Jordan and Devora Wilkenfeld.

**Appreciation:** The Chairman thanked Barry Shay, the Past President, for his very effective leadership during the last two years and for maintaining a very high standard of editorship for the Newsletter.

He also thanked Mike Getz, the Treasurer, for his very valuable contribution, guidance and leadership in the last and previous years as well as for his work as Treasurer.

The Chairman also expressed regret that Arlene Beare wasn't able to attend the conference and

noted the deep appreciation of the SIG for her invaluable work over many years and her endeavors in bringing on-line a number of very important data bases, including the Marriage Lists for Riga, the Family Lists for Rezekne, the All Russian Census of 1897 for Riga, Rezekne, Krustpils and areas within Courland with nearly 7,000 Jewish residents.

He also noted the SIG's appreciation for the continued and valuable contributions made by Rhea Plottel regarding membership, Sarah Krein, the Webmaster, Elsebeth Paikin, the Listserve Moderator and Dave Howard, the Shtetlink Coordinator.

**Condolences:** Condolences were also extended to Devora Wilkenfeld on the loss of her grandmother.

The following matters were discussed and decided:

**Portfolios:** Subject to later acceptance by the members who were not present, the following portfolios were allocated:

1. Henry Blumberg, President, henry@blumbergs.ca
2. Barry Shay, Past President, bbshay@starpower.net
3. Don Hirschhorn, Vice President, sdh2381@bellsouth.net
4. Mike Getz, Treasurer, mikegetz005@comcast.net
5. Arlene Beare, Database Coordinator, arl@dircon.co.uk
6. Rhea Plottel, Membership Chairman, rivie@worldnet.att.net,
7. Donald Hirschhorn, Membership, sdh2381@bellsouth.net
8. Barry Shay, Newsletter Editor, bbshay@starpower.net
9. Sarah Krein, Webmaster, kreinflly@yahoo.co.uk
10. Barry Shay, Web Page Editor, bbshay@starpower.net
11. Dave Howard, Dvinsk and Rezekne Shtetlink Coordinator, dshoward@usa.net
12. Elsebeth Paikin, Listserve Moderator, elsebeth@paikin.dk
13. Allan Jordan, Cemetery Research Coordinator in USA, aejordan@aol.com
14. Devora Wilkenfeld, Projects Coordinator,

dwilkenfeld1@nyc.rr.com

15. Lev Moshe Lipshutz, Ventspils Coordinator, lipschutz@usa.net
16. Barry Shay, Shtetl Reconstitution Coordinator, bbshay@starpower.net

**Newsletter:** Our editor, Barry Shay, was thanked by the chairman, for regularly producing a newsletter of a high standard and emphasized that this deserved a wider readership. The newsletter is presently sent to the paid membership only. Discussion ensued for the need to increase the readership and methods of so doing were decided:

**Website:** A number of the past newsletters had been placed on the website and it was decided that further newsletters should be placed there so that past copies would be available to all who had access to JewishGen.

**Jewish Genealogical Societies:** It was agreed that it would be a major benefit for the SIG if the major Jewish Genealogical Societies around the country subscribed to the newsletter. This could amount to about 70 copies per issue. Furthermore, when the newsletters are sent to the Jewish Genealogical Societies we should request that they be placed in a prominent position and available to their members at meetings. Increased readership would probably translate into more members.

**Libraries:** An effort should be made to encourage genealogical libraries to subscribe to the newsletter, or if that isn't feasible to send them free copies.

**TOC on Listserve:** It was decided that the Table of Contents of the newsletter should be distributed via the Latvia SIG listserv.

**TOC on Web Site:** It was suggested that when the next issue of the newsletter is sent out the Table of Contents should be placed on the Latvia SIG web site.

**Individuals:** It was decided that complementary copies of the newsletter should be sent to the following, as well as to others yet to be identified:

Nick Evans, Ed Anders, Rita Bogdanova, Vladimir Bahns, Ilana Ivanova.

**Review of the JewishGen Latvia SIG Database:** It was decided that this should be reviewed in conjunction with the Webmaster to update where necessary.

**Translators:** Mike Getz pointed out the need for translators and undertook to contact Mr. Altskan of the US Holocaust Museum.

**Membership:** Concern was expressed at the relatively small paid membership of the Latvia SIG in relation to nearly 600 people who subscribed to the listserve. The paid membership was only about 15% of the number who subscribed to the Listserve.

There was lengthy discussion about the need to increase the membership and also increase awareness of the work of the SIG as well as exposure of the newsletter to a wider readership.

Don Hirschhorn undertook to work on increasing the membership in association with Rea Plottel. It was pointed out that the listserve could be utilized to mine information for potential subscribers.

The chairman stated that the newsletter was sent mainly to paid members. Accordingly, the circulation of the newsletter was limited to about 80 people and it was deserving of a much wider readership.

After a lengthy discussion the following was proposed:

There would be two classes of membership. The one class would be called "Contributing Members" and the other would be "Non-contributing Members." To be a Contributing Member a minimum annual fee of \$20 would be paid and this would entitle the Contributing Member to a hard copy of the newsletter and other benefits to be specified later. In the case of a non-contributing member there would be no annual fee and such a member would be entitled to receive email of extracts of the newsletter.

The present members are to be notified in the newsletter of the two types of membership.

**Trip to Latvia:** The chair put forward the idea of a group trip to Latvia in May 2008. This was en-

thusiastically received. Barry Shay indicated that he and his wife would join. A number of Conference participants have indicated interest in participating in the trip.

**Representatives:** It was considered important that the SIG should have country representatives in Israel and also Latvia. They were to be appointed when interested and suitable candidates were found.

**Shtetl Reconstitution:** It was emphasized that this could become a very important project and that the SIG should be involved. Barry Shay volunteered to represent the SIG in that project.

**Dvinsk Cemetery Data Base:** Work had started on that some time ago and Martha Levinson Lev-Zion, was involved in the translation. Mike Getz undertook to follow up.

**Oral Testimonies Translation:** Barry Shay reported that Inga Long was involved in those translations and that a number had already been done.

**Daugavpils Ghetto List:** Barry Shay reported on this and on the involvement of Jacob Gorfin and that it was being placed in excel software.

**Memorials Update:** It was considered that the SIG in its newsletter should continue reporting on new information related to memorials.

**Family History of Members:** This issue was raised as a possible project and it was decided that it would need further review.

**USA Cemeteries:** Allan Jordan accepted the position as coordinator of this project, which would involve detailing the Kurlander Cemeteries in NY and Philadelphia. Mike Getz advised that he had a Baltimore list. This project would also assist JO-BAR.

Submitted by Henry Blumberg  
henry@blumbergs.ca

## **Latvia SIG Activities at the IAJGS Conference in New York**

The Latvia SIG luncheon was held on Monday, 14 August. David Michaelson discussed his efforts to restore one of the last wooden synagogues in Eastern Europe: the Green Synagogue of Rezekne.

Briefly, the Green Synagogue is the only synagogue in Rezekne that survived WWII, and it is the synagogue where David's great-grand-parents were married. The building now stands empty and condemned. Dave has attracted the attention of the World Monuments Fund, the Heritage Conservation Network, and the Latvian Tourism Development Agency in his effort to restore the synagogue.

The annual meeting of Latvia SIG took place on Tuesday, 15 August. The business meeting included the election of new officers and the status of various projects and database activities.

Following the business meeting, Henry Blumberg, the new SIG president, presented his rare collection of Old Latvia memorabilia including turn-of-the-century photographs and post cards of long-gone Latvian shtetls and communities. Following Henry, Bella Zisere talked about contemporary Jewish life in Riga and other parts of Latvia. This talk was followed by a lively question and answer period.



Mike Getz, Bella Zisere, and Barry Shay

Following the meeting, many in the SIG contingent proceeded to see the documentary film, "My Jewish Grandfather." The film was made about 10 years ago by Danish filmmaker Casper Hoyberg, who was born in Israel to a Danish mother

and Jewish father. The film deals with his tracing the origins and fate of his Jewish grandfather who was born in Riga. The film includes historical footage of Riga and current video of his trip there.

On Wednesday, 16 August, in one of the formal sessions, Bella Zisere, a current resident of Riga as well as a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute for Political Studies in Paris, presented material based on her dissertation research. Entitled, "Memory of the Holocaust in Latvia: A Contemporary Debate," Bella's presentation focused on questions and issues concerning the Holocaust in Latvia as viewed within ethnic communities since Latvia's democratization. The critical role of the local Latvian population in the event was discussed within the context of recent scholarly research, the Latvian media and oral interviews with members of the Latvian Jewish and non-Jewish population. Now, more than 60 years after the conflict, those events still affect inter-ethnic relationships within Latvia.

Submitted by Barry Shay  
bbshay@starpower.net

## **Memory of the Shoah in Post-Soviet Latvia**

by  
Bella Zisere

Independent since 1991, Latvia has implemented a number of important political decisions to mark a rupture with the former Soviet system. Many of these political decisions concerned the Shoah and its memory.

The Shoah has been and remains one of the most difficult historical events for the Latvian Jewish population as well as for ethnic Latvians. Approximately 80,000 Latvian Jews were annihilated on Latvian ground in 1940-1941. Later, more than 100,000 Jews were taken from Western European countries to Latvia and shared that same fate.

During the decades of Soviet occupation, the memory of the Shoah was a repressed subject, which was never evoked publicly. The rare memorials on the sites of mass killings were erected

to the victims of the fascist barbarity, as if recognition of a properly Jewish tragedy during the Second World War could affect the Soviet collective memory that glorifies Soviet heroes, partisans and the Red Army. For Jews, however, the memory was a crucial element of their identity. Many of them associated the authorities' reluctance to recognize the Holocaust with their refusal to deliver exit visas to the Jews, provoking an even stronger desire for emigration. Regular meetings in Rumbula (site of the extermination of approximately 25,000 Jews from the Riga ghetto) attracted a great number of Latvian Jews, despite the threat that these meetings represented for their professional and private lives.

The situation in today's Latvia seems to be completely different than during the Soviet era. On the one hand the issue is no longer repressed; Shoah was recognized as a part of Latvian Jewish history and new memorials were erected all over the Republic. The 4<sup>th</sup> of July was proclaimed Holocaust Victims' Remembrance Day, and on that day prominent newspapers publish lead articles about the Shoah in Latvia. At the same time, the question of collaboration remains a problematic issue. Notably, Efraim Zuroff, the director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, who is trying to find the living Nazi collaborators in post-soviet countries, claims to meet a true resistance and negative attitude from the local population in Latvia.

The Latvian government, caring about the image of the country on the international scene and especially in the European Union, undertook a number of measures to ensure that the Shoah is accorded recognition in Latvia. It undeniably increased the level of overall awareness of Latvians regarding the Shoah. Except for a small percentage of far-right nationalists, the Latvian population does not contest the Jewish genocide.

Nevertheless, the great majority of Latvian civil society, often including representatives of the intelligentsia, is still prisoner to numerous stereotypes and omissions regarding Latvian history.

Primarily, these concerns relate to the analysis of pre-war Latvia. The general public, as well as some eminent scholars, claim that pre-war Latvia

was a profoundly philo-Semitic country, which hardly corresponds to the historic truth.

The presentation of Latvian history in school textbooks and manuals is another topical question for contemporary Latvia. Despite the fact that after the fall of the USSR the issue of the Holocaust was introduced in school texts, progress is yet to be achieved on numerous points, including speaking about the Holocaust in Latvia.

Another historical issue, which is often discussed in scholarly research and in the media, concerns the myth of Jewish support for the Soviet power in 1940. According to perceived opinion, Latvian Jews were the people who mostly welcomed the Soviet power and therefore betrayed independent Latvia. In reality, the assumption that most Jews received benefits from the Soviet power is quite debatable: Jewish property was nationalized, the practice of Judaism was restricted, and many bourgeois Jewish families were sent to Siberia.

While analyzing the perception of the Holocaust in contemporary Latvian society, it is also important to draw attention to the attitude of the Jewish community of Latvia towards the issue.

We can see that members of the Jewish community of Latvia attach much importance to the memory of the Shoah. At the same time, only a very limited part of the community is actually involved. The majority is either ruminating about their past without discussing it in public (which concerns mostly elderly people), or is more or less ignorant of the question (this concerns mainly younger generations). For many Latvian Jews, the memory of the Shoah is tightly linked to the anti-Semitism of the surrounding society. Moreover, it corresponds to a subject that should not be discussed in public and definitely not with the non-Jews. Talking about the Shoah, teaching about what happened at schools, can only harm the Jewish community of Latvia, living in a hostile society. This is not a surprising conclusion considering that elderly people constitute the majority of the Latvian Jewish community. The perceived anti-Semitism among the members of the Jewish community is thus dramatically higher than the level of real anti-Semitism in contemporary Latvia.

The conclusion that can be made about the transformation of the memory of the Shoah in Latvia after the fall of the USSR is quite paradoxical. We can observe a certain number of positive changes and measures implemented in order to promote the work of the Shoah memory in Latvia. In the first years of independence the implementations were solely imposed by international organizations; today we can observe that a certain amount of work is performed by the intellectual elites.

At the same time, the great majority of people remain prisoners of subjective and partial vision of the Shoah memory. The majority of ethnic Latvians (including intellectuals) still adopts a nostalgic approach to the past and do not contest the perceived myth of the Jewish communist power on the eve of the Second World War. They often generalize the Shoah and forget the details concerning what happened in Latvia. They combine the Jewish genocide with the wave of deportations of Latvians to Siberia in 1940. Most Latvian Jews, in turn, remain generally apathetic, reluctant to discuss and work on the issue or to promote classes about the Shoah in Latvian schools. They are convinced that they are being implicitly excluded from a society that is perceived as anti-Semitic in essence and therefore potentially dangerous. Consequently, the issue of the Shoah in Latvia still remains a source of misunderstandings resulting in latent inter-community conflicts.

## **Searching for Jewish Identity: Preserving our Heritage**

by  
David Michaelson

Today I don't just want to talk about my efforts to save a small, sad synagogue in a corner of Eastern Latvia. I also want to talk about why I am trying to save that synagogue. It is a story that, for me, looks at the thorny question of Jewish identity and Jewish heritage and the value of preserving that identity and heritage.

Genetic evidence confirms the belief that most Jews are closely related and that ultimately all have roots in the land of Israel or at least its general region. Even an isolated black South African tribe that claims Jewish descent, the Lemba, have

genetic traits that point to a common Jewish ancestry. Archaeology shows that the original Jews, if I can use that term for people living so long ago, lived in a small group of poor and isolated villages from around 1200 BCE in what is now the West Bank. The only unique characteristic we can detect from their archeological records, is that they didn't eat pork. In all other ways these original Jews were typical Canaanites archeologically. But they gave up pork. In those tiny, pork-shunning villages we all probably have distant ancestors.

But genetic, biblical, historical and archaeological evidence show that all of us are probably have some mixed origins. At least since the first Diaspora, and even from the earliest passages in the bible, mixed marriage and mixing with local populations have been major issues for Jews. Archeologically, those earliest Jews were Canaanites. But some of the 12 tribes described in the bible seem to have different origins. Did some people come from Egypt? Did some come from Haran or Babylon? Did the tribe of Dan, as some think, come from a people who were related to the Philistines and hence may ultimately have been Greeks? The bible, genetics and archaeology give us tiny hints at a mixed origin as well as common roots. And of course each Diaspora that we suffered brought up anew the controversies of mixed marriage, assimilation and the fundamental question of what does it mean to be a "Jew." Is our identity primarily genetic, religious, national or cultural? This is not a new question and can be found throughout the bible. In some ways being Jewish seems bound up in this identity crisis of just who we are and how we define ourselves.

What is the core of Jewish identity and why is this question one of such vital importance?

There is a politician in Brooklyn named Bill Batson. He is a good guy, running for office not out of ambition but because he is concerned about what is happening to Brooklyn. He fears that modern development is destroying the soul of Brooklyn in very real ways. Historic neighborhoods are being uprooted to make room for skyscrapers. Families who have lived in Brooklyn for generations are being forced out. And, the heritage of Brooklyn, particularly, in his view, the

heritage of the black community in Brooklyn, is being destroyed. He points to an old graveyard where black veterans were buried. He points to the Harriet Tubman museum. He points to buildings that were stopping points along the Underground Railroad. These are among many sites of cultural importance that are the first places to be lost to modern development. Cultural sites are lost first, then the rest of the community.

He fears this because he fears that a loss of heritage means a loss of identity. He says it this way: "If you take away a person's heritage, you can do anything you want to them."

This phrase struck me. He was referring to black heritage in Brooklyn. But it made a huge impression. Why, because in that phrase you have the history of Judaism in a nutshell. From the Babylonian exile to Nazi Germany, you have an attempt to destroy our identity by destroying not just our lives but also our heritage.

What does it mean to be a Jew? Genetics, religion, culture, nationality...

My wife once put it most starkly. My wife and I both have Jewish mothers and Christian fathers. We are not very religious. Yet we define ourselves very consciously as Jews. Why? I am still in the process of answering this question, but my wife put it this way: "We are Jewish because there are people out there who would like to kill us because of it."

To the average American, my wife and I look just like white Americans. But many Jews and many Eastern Europeans and everyone in Israel took one look at us and knew we were Jewish. We were glared at and jeered at in St. Petersburg and in Latvia by people who saw us and knew immediately we were Jewish. We need our heritage because without it those who hate us for who we are have that much more power over us. Our heritage, anyone's heritage, is what helps define our identity and that identity helps us survive in a hostile world. Heritage gives us the roots to stand up to society's sometimes very violent storms.

That is why this synagogue means something to me. It is part of my family heritage and a part of

the heritage of all Eastern European Jews. Hitler tried to destroy that heritage and his attempts still echo to this very day. That also struck me when I visited Latvia: the events that Hitler set in motion are still playing out for many small, dying Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. If we let this and similar synagogues go, it is one more success by Hitler, though long dead, to destroy our heritage and thus our identity. My wanting to preserve this synagogue is an effort to connect with and preserve my personal identity as well as our collective identity as Jews. And it is my personal act of defiance against Hitler and all who would destroy our identity.

What is the core of Jewish identity? This is a question I never thought much about until a few years ago. My distant cousin was Harry Danning, a famous baseball player in the 1930's. His father was the brother of my great-grandmother. I talked to him about a year before he died when I had just begun my genealogy research. I was hoping that he, as one of the oldest surviving relatives at the time, would remember things about our past. He remembered very little. What he said to me was this: "When I was a kid I was never interested in that stuff. I was only interested in playing baseball." Often, American Jews don't care about their heritage until they are adults, often only when they have children.

A simple question asked by a professor I worked with got me on the track of my genealogy. He simply wanted to know if there was a website I knew where he could look up biographies of historical individuals. He knew I was competent on the Internet, so he asked me to find him some sites. I did a quick search, and found him some sites that met his needs. But also noticed something called the SS death index, something which is probably familiar to many of you. I was curious so I clicked on the link.

I found I could look up any dead person who had a SSN and get a little info on that person. On a whim, I entered my father's name. My parents divorced when I was a year old and I never knew my real father other than knowing that he wasn't Jewish and that my original last name was Kunkel, a German name. I entered my father's name and found that he had died.

I never knew my father, so this had only a vague emotional impact on me. But the thought that I could use the Internet to discover my origins fascinated me. From there, and from my mother's memory, I not only tracked my father's lineage back to the 16th century, thanks to the fact that German Lutherans keep perfect church records, but I also traced my maternal grandmother's ancestry back a couple of generations to two towns in Latvia: Daugavpils, previously known as Dvinsk, where my great-grandmother Dora was born, and Rezekne, also known as Rezhitzka, where my great grandfather Solomon was born.

I found our addresses in the 1897 All Russia Census and was able to visit our homes in Rezekne. I found near by a condemned, run-down synagogue that just might have been the synagogue my family used.

As some of you may already know, I've since spent a great deal of time trying to raise the needed funds to save and restore that synagogue. My decision to do this was purely an emotional one. I wasn't really sure why I wanted to at the time. But somehow I knew it had to do with my identity, with both my family's past and the past of Eastern European Jews. Now I know that it has to do with Bill Batson's comment: I want to preserve our heritage so that we have one more deep root to help us withstand those who hate us for what we are.

In 1845, the small East Latvian town of Rezekne (or Rezhitsa in Russian) was part of the massive Russian Empire that stretched from Poland to Siberia. In that year, a small wooden synagogue was built in Rezekne. This synagogue was one of about a dozen synagogues in the city of Rezekne in the middle years of the 19th century, synagogues that served a large Jewish population, about half the total population of Rezekne at that time. This particular synagogue was painted green, and hence the building has been known ever since, rather prosaically, as the "Green Synagogue." The Green Synagogue is the only synagogue in Rezekne to survive World War II, and even now it stands, though only as an empty, condemned building. Like the Jewish population in many corners of Eastern Europe today, the Green Synagogue is in danger of being forgotten and

lost.

Rezekne is a city that was shaped by an interaction of cultures: native Latvian, German, Russian and Jewish cultures mixing both peacefully and violently. Rezekne was originally a castle town and the ruins of its castle, possibly dating as far back as the 9th century, remain today. The castle was one of the first buildings built in Rezekne. But signs of a Jewish presence are just as old since right next to the ruined castle is another old building that is thought to have been the town's first inn, and this inn was thought to be run by Jews from very early on.

This was a very common pattern in Eastern Europe, with Jews running local inns and taverns next to the local castle. The Jewish population of Rezekne grew as the city grew until half the city was Jewish.

My great-great grandfather, Schmuila Jankel Luban, was 24 years old when the Green Synagogue was built. Jankel's last name, Luban, had probably been recently adopted by the family, since it was around that time that Jews commonly took last names in Eastern Europe. "Luban" indicates that the family was originally from a shtetl near Lake Lubanas in Eastern Latvia. The Lubans were a family of craftsmen, not well off, but not so poor either. They lived mostly in the brick buildings in central Rezenke, not in the run-down wooden homes of the poorer class. Jankel married a woman named Kreine and they lived not too far from the Green Synagogue.

Jankel is the earliest Jewish ancestor I can trace. In his honor, my wife and I named our son "Jacob," linking my son with his Latvian-Jewish heritage. We don't know when Jankel and Kreine Luban died, and there is no record that they ever left Rezekne. They almost certainly are buried in the run-down Jewish cemetery just outside Rezekne that I show here. The last record of their existence is in the 1897 All Russia Census, where I learned of their existence and their address.

By 1905, two of their sons, Sawel and Henach and their families fled Russia for America fleeing political unrest, military conscription and pogroms. Henach had been forced to serve in the

Russian army in the ill-fated Russo-Japanese war and when on leave he fled Russia rather than being sent back to the front. Both Sawel and Henach married and had children by the time they fled Russia. In fact, my grandmother, Celia, was the last member of these two families to be born in Rezekne. Since both families lived near the Green Synagogue, it is very likely that when they married, Sawel and Henach had their weddings at the Green Synagogue. Both families settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where some of my distant relatives still live. Sawel became Solomon Luban in America and was my great grandfather. Henach became Henry Luban in America and many of his children, grandchildren and further descendants are still alive

### Rezekne: Mass Grave



There is one hint that another Luban brother may have existed. There is a single record of a Berko Luban running a store in Rezekne in 1911. Who Berko was and if he has any descendants are unknown. By the time I was born, all memory of Berko had faded, as had any memory of the Green Synagogue. By the time I was an adult and searching for my roots, many of us had even forgotten that we were from Rezekne at all.

While my family was thriving in America and forgetting about Rezekne, the Jewish population left behind suffered terribly. Emigration, starvation, pogroms and forced relocation reduced the Jewish population of Rezkne considerably by the time World War II began. But the Green Synagogue survived. It was even renovated in the 1930's.

When the Germans came, in one single day, 5000 Jews and the Latvians who tried to help them were machine-gunned just outside of town. I visited that place, the only actual Holocaust site I have ever visited. Walking along the grassy space that is the mass grave, walking for a very long time along that grave, the impact of *5000 killed in one day* hit me very hard bringing tears in my eyes and a great deal of anger to my heart.

The Jewish population of Rezekne was almost wiped out on that single day. Only a handful survived, protected by some local Latvians. By the time many members of my family were returning to Europe as soldiers in the US military fighting the Nazis, those Nazis had all but wiped out any of our relatives who had remained in Rezekne.

The Nazis shot even the graves in the Jewish cemetery. But somehow, the Green Synagogue survived. All other synagogues in Rezekne were destroyed.

But the Green Synagogue still stands. Some remember that it was used as a holding pen for Jews on their way to death camps and that this is why it survived. Rezekne is on the major railroad route between St. Petersburg and Warsaw, so Jews from all over the region were brought into town to await transport to the camps. Rezekne was one small node on a massive railroad network feeding the death camps. The Green Synagogue may have been the last synagogue many of those people would ever see.

In 2003, after I had rediscovered my family's past and found their addresses in 1897 Rezekne, I went to visit the city of my great-great grandfather to see where we had come from. I took my wife and stepdaughter and we met with Rashel, the head of the Jewish community of Rezekne, to see the city and to learn what it was like when my family had lived there.

Rashel showed me the addresses where my family used to live. Some buildings, like the one where my great grandparents lived, are gone. But some, still stand. And many of those addresses are near the Green Synagogue, suggesting to me that the Green Synagogue was our family's synagogue.

The city itself is beautiful, though we saw some remnants of lingering anti-Semitism. But overall our brief stay in Rezekne was very pleasant. The countryside is beautiful, the town small and quiet. It is a part of Latvia that is more Russian than Latvian, and most restaurants had Russian menus and served Russian food.

Today only about 50 Jews remain in Rezekne and they have no proper synagogue since the Green Synagogue was condemned in the 1990's due to severe water damage. Their shul is a handful of rooms in an office building.

Our tour of Jewish Rezekne ended at the Synagogue and it was there that Rashel told me much of what I have told you today. We saw the synagogue by candlelight. The inside is dusty and water damaged with many windows boarded up and parts of the ceiling falling down. It was a very sad building, but some old painted decoration from the 1930's, if not earlier, and even a few fragments of the original stained glass still remain.

The Green Synagogue of Rezenke



I stood there that day in the condemned Green Synagogue and imagined the wedding of my great grandparents. My ancestors had probably stood in that same synagogue more than 100 years before I did. And then I imagined thousands of terrified Jews in the 1940's spending one night in that same synagogue before being sent to almost certain death.

The joys of weddings and the fear of death surrounded me in that dark, sad building. It was at

that moment that I decided that I would try and save the Green Synagogue. As a monument to the Jews who had helped shape Rezekne from its early days as a castle town to its later days as a stop along a major Russian rail line, I wanted to save that synagogue.

As a place for my family to return to see where we came from, I wanted to save that synagogue. As an act of defiance against the Nazis who practically wiped out the Jews of Rezekne, I wanted to save that synagogue. And as a symbol of hope for the surviving Jews of Latvia, I wanted to save that synagogue.

I had never undertaken this kind of project before and had no idea how to go about it. I still have only a vague idea of how to complete the project. But I was very lucky in that the local government had renamed one of the adjacent streets *Israel Street* in honor of the synagogue and had looked into what it would take to restore the synagogue.

The Green Synagogue of Rezenke



Sadly, the plan was dropped due to lack of funds. So I thought that perhaps I could help find at least some of the funds needed to restore the Green Synagogue and so, soon after returning to the US, I went online to find funding agencies that might be interested and to find descendents of Rezekne Jews who might be able to help me. I was able to find some two-dozen descendents of Rezekne Jews who were interested in helping restore the Green Synagogue and without their help and advice, I would never have even been able to begin. And it is through this network of Jewish descendents of Rezekne Jews that I was able to get the

ball rolling.

About a year after returning from Rezekne, I obtained a small grant (about \$14,000) from the World Monuments Fund's Jewish Heritage Grant Program™ that would cover the cost of hiring an architect to survey the site of the Green Synagogue and determine what work needed to be done and how much a full restoration would cost.

That phase of the project has recently been completed and now the real work can begin. The local government in Latvia, inspired by the interest that I and the World Monuments Fund were showing, was able to find more than \$40,000 to repair the roof, so that no further water damage will occur, and to repair the timbers that have been most damaged. But this is only the beginning. The site survey that the World Monuments Fund supported has found that nearly \$200,000 worth of repairs will be needed to restore the synagogue to the way it was in the 1930's.

I am hoping to find people who are interested in preserving this small piece of Eastern European heritage, in defying the Nazi attempts to eradicate all signs of Judaism in Europe and in giving hope to the surviving Jews of Latvia.

I invite anyone who can help raise money or interest in this project to contact me so that the Green Synagogue, which has stood for 160 years of both joy and despair, can continue to stand for the Jews of Rezekne and as part of our surviving heritage.

## **Project to Reconstitute the Destroyed Shtetls of Europe**

By  
Rochelle Kaplan

We've all been there. Finding a father's Hebrew name on a gravestone. Discovering Americanized parents' names from a Social Security application or a marriage certificate. Finding an unknown relative and a relationship on a ship manifest. Ferreting out unknown children, perhaps an unknown parent or siblings on a census or revision list. Imagine somehow multiplying this, for an extended family, even for a village, where marriages between cousins was not uncommon. That day may not be far off.

Probably the most intriguing lecture I heard at the 2006 IAJGG Conference held in New York City in August was the Project to Reconstitute the Destroyed Shtetls of Europe, presented by Dr. Sallyann Sack and Professor H. Daniel Wagner. The project was inspired by a Randy Daitch article in Avotaynu, Vol. XIX, No. 4, Winter, 2003. Daitch is the co-author of the Daitch-Mokotoff Soundex System.

Daitch decided to research the surname Adler. A cousin's great-great uncle, Morris Adler, age 92, told the researcher that the name was originally Szmedra and the family came from the town of Przysucha. At the Center for Jewish History's Genealogy Institute in New York City, computer terminals provided links to the Encyclopedia Judaica, JewishGen, Yad Vashem, the Ellis Island manifests and Ancestry.com. Typing Szmedra into the Yad Vashem Pages of Testimony database, Daitch found thirty people who fit the profile.

In the same building that houses the Center for Jewish History is YIVO. Daitch requested the finding aid for the post-WWII case files of the American Joint Distribution Committee. This enabled Daitch to find connections between the names mentioned in Yad Vashem and Morris/Moritz Adler. He made further discoveries using the New York Times archive and the Ellis Island database. Thus, Daitch was able to reconfigure part of a family from Przysucha.

Dr. Sack and Prof. Wagner read with profound interest the Avotaynu article, and with Dr. Neville Lamdan, first director of the Institute for Jewish Genealogy, decided to try to create a family tree for each victim listed at Yad Vashem. To this end, they are piloting a study using three towns in Poland and Lithuania. One of the Polish towns is Zduńska Wola, close to Lodz. Professor Wagner is heading up the research for that town. The other Polish community is Ostrow Mazowiecka. Stanley Diamond and Judy Baston of JRI-Poland are expected to help with assembling databases. The Lithuanian town is Pusalotas; Howard Margol, past president of IAJGS and current Lithuania SIG president, will help gather information for that town. I quote from the Institute's webpage:

The International Institute of Jewish Genealogy, in a vast, innovative, multi-year project, proposes to mobilize genealogical science and skills to recreate destroyed Jewish communities throughout Europe, primarily by reconstructing the webs of kinship that bound the victims to others living in their community (and beyond) on the eve of the Holocaust. Family trees will be developed for the victims using new technology that merges genealogical information from several extensive databases now available on the Web and elsewhere. An exploratory study is underway on three selected communities to test the feasibility of the project design. Because of its scope, the project will be conducted in collaboration with other groups of researchers. The project director is Dr. Sallyann Amdur Sack.

The Pages of Testimony list the place of residence during the Shoah, so one can cluster the victims by place of residence and create webs of kinship. It is true that as many as half the victims of the Holocaust will never be known. Still, one can advance what is known about the currently named victims. Genealogists can be valuable here. They can submit Pages of Testimony and photographs of victims. They can also contribute financially to make the project viable.

The plan is to merge various genealogical databases, much as Daitch did for one family. There is a two-track approach. One is to have a custom built database at Yad Vashem, one that might use sources such as the Social Security Death Index and the Ellis Island Database. The second is to use various genealogical sources to find additional victims of the Shoah, members of families, to illustrate their multiple relationships and post these on the web. The hope is to pull family trees into the present. Researchers will use Yizkor books, pages of testimony, the 1939 Books of Residence and census records.

One stumbling block was agreeing on what is meant by “the eve of the Holocaust.” Yad Vashem uses Kristallnacht. Some decimated communities, however, use the date their Jewish inhabitants were massacred.

A daunting task is gathering all the sources of information about a place and its people. In 1942,

in Zdunska Wola, for example, there were 12,000 Jews out of a total population of 30,000. Nazis liquidated the Zdunska Wola ghetto on August 9, 1942. Some died in the ghetto. Some were transferred to the Lodz ghetto or to Auschwitz or elsewhere. Survivors were dispersed. As Prof. Wagner stated, “To rebuild the forest, first one must identify the trees. To rebuild the community, first one must identify the information sources.” Some information is in local museums, some in local or regional archives. Photos may survive from descendants or elderly town residents. For many shtetls, like Zdunska Wola, information can be gleaned from a number of sources and databases, such as:

- vital records for births, marriages, and deaths
- books or directories of permanent residence for specific years
- tombstones in the Jewish cemeteries
- surnames taken from available business directories
- applications by Jews for identity cards
- entries from Yizkor book necrologies
- Pages of Testimony at Yad Vashem
- names inscribed on Holocaust memorials in various locations

Reconstituting many these shtetls and developing family trees will be a difficult job. Data will have to be merged from overlapping, and sometimes inaccurate, sources. Variations in data that may refer to the same individual will have to be reconciled. Once the information is compiled, family trees can be combined to create communities. Communities can then be associated with shtetls, possibly more than one since family members often migrated to nearby towns.

A critical issue is to be sure that two individuals linked via different databases refer to the same person. Solving this problem requires a statistical definition of identicalness. New software may have to be developed that associates probabilities with the underlying criteria that define identicalness.

Other problems will have to be solved where ambiguities exist. Just think of the problems you’ve encountered in your own genealogy research, and multiply that by ten of a hundred. For example, the Hebrew Tzvi may appear on metrical records

but Hirsch on the tombstone. What about name changes, second marriages, different families with the same name, different birth dates for the same person, etc.

This project, as envisioned, will be difficult and challenging to accomplish, but the rewards will be even greater. It could become the primary means by which victims of the Holocaust can be integrated into the life they were not allowed to live. So please, if you want this pilot project to succeed and expand:

Submit Pages of Testimony and photographs to Yad Vashem.

Donate to the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy. To get the address and to get on their mailing list, visit the website: <http://www.iihg.org/home/index.html>. Donations of above \$25 are tax deductible in the US

## **A Journey to Latvia**

by

Lois Rosen  
La Cañada, CA

*I have just returned from my first trip to Latvia and I have many thoughts about this trip: why I went, what I saw, things I learned, who I met, and all the things I may never know or understand. These thoughts are now haphazardly captured in a jumble of journal entries, e-mails, photos and even video footage. As I unravel these thoughts, I will attempt to share them. Bear with me as I begin my story. I hope you will follow me in the months to come as I find my thread and weave it into the fabric of tales I want to tell.*

My name is Lois Rosen. I traveled to Latvia after a year and a half of researching the ROZINKO family of Daugavpils. My husband and his brothers inherited a box of documents, photos, and letters from their grandfather, Louis Rosen (formerly Bine-Leib ROZINKO). Why the box landed in my lap, and not my husband's is another story. I opened the box. What began as an effort to sort and organize some old papers has become a journey, and this journey was clearly beckoning me to be its traveler.

I began immediately to organize, identify, clarify,

and ask many, many questions. I sought vital records in the U.S. and made inquiries at the Latvian State Historical Archives. I contacted family members from disconnected branches of the family tree and I wrote letters to members I wasn't too sure existed at all. I created our tree, and shared it with all family I could find.

I used the JewishGen Family Finder and contacted someone from Latvia who happened to be looking for ROZINKO, too. She turned out to be a third cousin to my children: her great grandfather was Louis Rosen's brother. Her English was excellent, and we began communicating regularly via e-mail. She shared with me what she knew about our family history, and told me about Latvia and how her grandfather had survived the war. I told her about the three branches of the family in America. She explained that more were here in America now, some were in Riga, and others lived in Russia. She told me the ghetto in Riga might very soon be reconfigured, preserving only a small part of its original Jewish identity (as a museum). Most of it would be razed and modern housing would replace the original structures. I was soon motivated to go and see for myself. With the support of my husband and three children, as well as that of the extended family with whom I had been sharing my research results, I planned a trip to Latvia.

An important aspect of this journey for me was that I wanted very much to choose the paths as they appeared, rather than have someone plan the trip for me. I did not want to hire a guide. This was both a decision based on my finances as well as my desire always to be aware of what I was seeing and doing. I needed a translator to help me hear the voices, but didn't want there also to be a guide to plan and interpret the sights.

I was very lucky to have found family in Riga. Their 19-year-old daughter speaks English, Latvian and Russian. She is the sister of the cousin I first contacted (who now lives in the UK). She would go with me as my interpreter, but would also be seeing some of these places for the first time herself. I had sketched out a rough plan, aware that my English-speaking cousin could only be with me for part of my Riga stay. I wanted to spend 4-5 days in Riga, where I hoped

to see the ghetto, the Archives, the Jewish Museum, Rumbula, Salaspils, and I would visit with family. I then hoped to go to Lithuania to see what I believe is the family's shtetl, and I planned ahead to meet researchers of the local museum there. I hoped to return to Latvia via Subate, where some family members had had property. I would then go on to Daugavpils, where our earliest family photos were taken and where I had made arrangements to meet with members of the local Jewish community.

After my arrival, I went immediately to my hotel in Old Riga. My cousin arrived soon after I did, and we set out immediately to see the magnificently preserved center of the old town. The streets are cobblestone, and the buildings are restored. They are painted amazing shades of blue, pink, green, amber, peach... There are preserved or restored adornments, cornices, doorways and window boxes. I visited St. Peter's Church and went to the top to get a bird's-eye view.

Over the next few days, I visited Riga with my cousin. She taught me how to take buses all over the city, the most inexpensive way to travel. We visited sights, museums, and the Archives. At the Archives we met the researcher who had done all the work, and had found so many documents, for our family. I was invited to dinner in the family home. I brought them a large printout of our family tree. We talked and talked, and shared many, many pictures. We continued to explore Riga together.

The ghetto, in contrast to the old town, is striking and sad. It is made up of tumbledown houses, vacant lots, burned-out shells that were once houses, boarded up buildings, and some much newer soviet style structures. It is a poor neighborhood where it is not uncommon to see someone drunk falling off a front stoop onto the sidewalk of a busy street. The old Jewish Cemetery, on the ghetto's periphery, is a park. It is there that Abram ROZINKO, father of Louis Rosen and his eight brothers and sisters, is buried. There are no gravestones left, only the bases buried in the ground from which the stones were sheared. No one was there, but us... and one man walking his dog.



Old Jewish Cemetery in Riga

The ruins of the Choral Synagogue nearby are also now in a park. There, old ladies sit and chat and kids roughhouse in the ruins as if they were in a playhouse. It is there that Louis Rosen's brother, Schmuel ROZINKO (grandfather of our Latvian cousins), was killed. On July 4, 1941, Latvian "self-defense units" serving the Nazis burned the Shul to the ground with Schmuel and his wife Lea, together with hundreds of Jews, locked inside. After the war, the site was leveled and made into a park to glorify communist workers. No mention or ceremony was made to commemorate the murders of these Jews. Forty-seven more years passed before a large stone bearing a Mogen David was placed on the site as a memorial. No one at these places seemed conscious of the history buried there and the memorials present.

We went to the New Jewish Cemetery (Shmerli), and found many monuments and carefully cared-for graves. Most stones are in Russian, though I did find a few in Hebrew. I searched for the grave of Enta ROZINKO, Abram's wife. I was told that unless our family had evidenced continued care for her grave over the years, the grave would have been deemed abandoned, and the stone would have been removed. The plot would have been reused. No family was there to care for the grave from 1940-1968.

When my cousin could not accompany me, I called a couple whose number was given me by a colleague of my husband. They are Jews from Latvia who are survivors of the Holocaust. They

happened to be in Riga when I was there, and spoke English. They offered to show me their Jewish Riga. They spent the whole day with me and told me everything they could, speaking openly and with heart. I was honored that they shared their time and stories.

Together we visited Rumbula, the woods outside Riga where thousands and thousands of Jews were murdered, and the concentration camp called Salaspils. It was somber and moving and very, very lonely. Again, no one was there but the many souls of those killed. I was amazed again and again as I visited each place marking the presence and annihilation of the Jews of Latvia that there were simply no visitors. There were the ladies on the bench and a few children here and there... but no tourists, no families, no Latvians, no Russians visiting these sites. No one.

From Riga I wanted to get to Pasvalys, Lithuania, then back to Latvia around Daugavpils. I knew my cousin couldn't accompany me, and I needed an interpreter who could speak Russian. I contemplated a professional guide, taking a bus (and risking finding an English-speaker there), or hiring a driver. I became very aware of those trying to make money off of foreigners unsure of the value of the Lat. I knew a bus ride from Daugavpils to Riga would cost only a few Lats, but a taxi ride within Riga itself might run me 7-12 Lats. How could I trust someone to quote me a fair price for my trip from Riga to Pasvalys to Daugavpils?

To be continued...

Please feel free to contact me with questions or thoughts. I will continue this story with my visit to Lithuania, my stop in Subate, and my days in Daugavpils.

### **An Interview with Motel Bliznansky**

Interviewer: Aina Antane, Center for Judaic Studies, University of Latvia, Riga  
Date of Interview: 26 September 2000  
Translation to English: Inga Long, Falls Church, Virginia

M. B. : I will start from my birth. I was born on December 28<sup>th</sup> 1920. My father came from the Jewish village in Western Belorussia, not far

from Baranovichi. And during WWI he fought in the front near Riga. And he was injured there – by a splinter – under his eye, a nerve was damaged. He was discharged. And there he met my mother and got married here and stayed there.

A. A: All your father's relatives- are they from Western Belorussia?

M. B. : Yes, yes. My father had five brothers and four sisters. Well, then, of course, the war spread them apart. The oldest brother lived in America, then he went to Israel for a visit, fell and broke his pelvis. He was in the hospital and died when he was 65.

A. A: What was his name? Do you know?

M. B. : I think-David. He was in America. He has children there. When I was in Israel I met him. Their name is Bliz. It is shortened. It should be Bliznansky, but in English- Bliz. His first name was Milton. Milton Bliz.

My mother also had a brother Max. His name was Max Kogan. It was my grandmother's last name. He was 22 years old. I was only three days old when his wife, their two children and he left for America. Back then it was a long trip and both their children died during that trip. And there, in America they've got two more daughters and a son. He was a very good cobbler, he was working a lot and later became a manufacturer – he had 12 shoe-factories, not far from Boston.

A. A: What was your mother's mother's name, do you know?

M. B. : Rashel.

A. A: Tell me something about her.

M. B. : She lived with us. My mother had four children, two boys- my brother and me- and two sisters. And actually our grandmother raised us, because our mother was working- she was a tailor, she was sewing coats for the stores on Marijas Street - they all were Jewish stores and my mother had a shop, she employed seven girls, I think. It was seasonal work. You know, they worked from 6 a.m. till 10 p.m. in season. And then there was a break for two or three months

and then new season started, let's say winter. My mother was working a lot ...

A. A. : Where was her shop located, do you know?

M. B. : The shop. Well, the last one was in the apartment, on 1A Parka Street, where we lived. We had a seven-room apartment and in one of the rooms, there was the shop. So.

A. A. : Your granny raised you?

M. B. : Our granny raised all of us. She had diabetes and the son from America was helping her. Sent her money and, ... you know ... he was helping her. My father was a cobbler. My mother's brother, who went to America taught him that.

When my father married my mother, her brother taught him that - he was a good at it, because during WWI he was a bookkeeper in Poland, but here he had a profession and on Avotu Street - near Stabu Street he had a shop and worked for "Rinks," which was a company in Riga. He was a Balt-German [the owner of "Rinks"-ed.] and for all those years he worked for him until they repatriated to Germany in 1939 - they were local Germans. But they had a very good relationship- and not just in business ... Rinks lived on Jurmalas Street. He owned a big store near the riverbank. My grandmother had a daughter from the first marriage, which...we lived in - 60B Avotu Street then - and the daughter, the second daughter ... I forgot her name...last name Sheiner - her husband's last name and he also worked at my father's shop. They had five children - four daughters and one-the oldest-son. But that son was working in the market. His name was Srolik-short from Israel, I think. He was 27 when he got married - it was in 1939. And after a year they had a child. And they - their family - didn't flee. And after the Soviet regime came in 1940, he went to work in the "Radiotechnika" - the radio factory as it was called that back then.

A. A. : "Leibovic."

M. B. : "Leibovic"—that's right. He was working there and when the Germans occupied Riga, he thought that it would be better to go to work,

but they shot him at work immediately.

A. A. : What about the wife and daughter?

M. B. : The wife and daughter also stayed here with her mother. They lived on 53-55 Avotu Street. But the Sheiner family was sent to the ghetto. One daughter married a Latvian, her name was Nesse, she had a daughter and had a Latvian surname...She [Nesse-ed.] lived with her husband and his mother. And she came to the ghetto and brought food for her parents. Her husband died in 1942 in Riga of tuberculosis, or I don't know what...and in 1943 her Latvian neighbors saw her. And then came the Latvian gunmen and wanted to take her and her daughter away. But the grandmother [husbands mother - ed.] said that she is her son's daughter, she didn't give her up - and the daughter [child -ed.) stayed. When she [Nesse -ed.] was sent to jail, she was sewing - they had a shop in the jail, but later they shot her. And of the all the Sheiner family, only the oldest daughter Ida survived. She got married in 1938, I think, or 1940. She lived with her husband separately from the others - his name was Fole, but I don't remember the last name. They fled to somewhere in Pskov region, and there in some village she gave a birth to a boy. But he [Fole -ed.) was taken into the army and was seriously injured, evacuated to the Urals, where he stayed in the hospital for eight months and after that was sent back to the army again. When he was on the way, we got his orders where it said that they were going to the front, and that's it. Obviously they were bombed there and he died there.

But my parents, my brother and me, when they advanced - on June 27<sup>th</sup>, when the Germans were advancing, we went to 5 Blaumana Street, where there was a committee to sign up volunteers. But then shooting started there from the attics ... guards .... Even though different ammunition was given - there was a guard being mustered from workers.... My brother got a shotgun and left - straight from work, he was still in his working uniform .... And people were running, left cars. My friend and I, we went to Brivibas Street. Heavy trucks were going there - the Red army was retreating. Some of them didn't stop, but one Red army's truck stopped. And we - a few of my

comrades and I – climbed up in the body of the car where a lieutenant with the gun was sitting ... So we went down Brivibas Street across the bridge and during the ride we were shot at. There were dead people laying by the bridge. When we went to the road that goes to Mazsalaca, on the left side there was a road, there we got off the truck because they started to form a defense over there. Well, we walked there... Because there were lot of people walking across the bridge from the city over there, since there were many factories on the way. There were trucks full of people. Then busses stopped, two busses full of young people like us, they took them to Incukalns to unload bombed echelons. There were laying machine – guns...well, we dug burial holes right next - to unload the railroad. Well, the bus drivers were Latvian. So we went further on two busses. And then again they dropped us off – the busses were returning to Riga.

To make a long story short – it was dark already, and we stayed somewhere at the farm, we were hungry. Farmers gave us milk with bread, and we ate. Then we got on the military trucks, where officers were evacuating together with their families. We crossed the border to Estonia. And then, I remember, we stayed overnight in some official's office of some city. Immediately we fell asleep like we were dead. I had a change of clothes with me - socks ... and suddenly at night – I don't know how long we were sleeping – an hour, two, three ... at night it was dark, we were told, Germans dropped paratroopers. And there was a highway – we went on it, my friend – his name was Vishkin — and I. Later I was with him in Russia. We went on the highway – there was lots of fire – everything was burning. We went towards the border – that highway went to Pskov. There were heavy trucks on this highway...

A few dead people were lying by the road. ... Later Vishkin and I got into the truck. It stopped because of airplanes – they stopped [the people - ed.], ran to the field while the airplanes flew back, but then people came back and we – back to the truck. And so we went to the Russian border – well, the Soviet border. The border was closed. But refugees – there were plenty of them – hundreds... And they said that they had

been there for three days already. But after an hour or two while we were there they opened the border and we walked across. That was the road to Pskov. But then came the German airplanes. There was shooting. All of us – we ran to the field, there were bushes. I was together with Vishkin and we didn't notice how the shooting ended and everybody left, when we noticed – nobody was there anymore.

We went back to the road and stopped the military officers driving by. They took us to Pskov. There we passed Pskov's Kremlin, streets. We got to Pskov, and got into the first food line – the only money we had were coins – we bought some small rolls, ate and heard that in the terminal there was a train from Riga. An airplane factory had been evacuated. They went with equipment, there – trucks, workers – the whole train was evacuated from Riga – the 85<sup>th</sup>, well, the aviation factory. There were guards, but among them was one our comrades. He said: "Come on ...". And we got onto the platform and started to move. Do you know how slow the train was moving? It was stopping more than moving, because lots of trains were going to the front, but this one - to the rear. It took nine days. But they were giving out dry food to all workers, to all personnel, including us, too. There were sausages, small rolls... But it was so hot on the train, you know, on the platform... And then, I remember, at the one stop - Maksimovka – it stayed in my memory – they started to check everybody out – who was on the train. And they kicked us off the train because we weren't from that factory. They dropped us off and left ... But 5 minutes later another train came from Belorussia. Well, we got on that train and went to Kirov. We passed Kirov at night – we didn't stop at Kirov. And got to Slobatskoye. But Slobatskoye is where Rainis was deported. And there was even his house. Well, they fed all of us there. Then came wagons from the collective farms – around a hundred of them, you know, wagons and horses, not like in Latvia - well fed, but...from the collective farms. And they sent all of us to "Belaya Kholunica." Slobatskoye was 30 km from Kirov, but "Belaya Kholunica" was 47 km farther. There was a factory and village near. There was the river Vyatka. And those 47 km the youth, which was

us – we walked. Women and children traveled in the wagons. We walked all night. We got there in the morning and they assigned us to the apartments of the locals. Vishkin and I and two more were assigned together... One was a communist who has been in jail during Ulmanis times with his wife. But the wife was with the daughter – the front caught her, but they met. But the daughter died on the road. Such a fate ... Well, they assigned us to the work. I was working with lumber. It was during the summer, but in the fall they started to recruit us to the army. And there were deported Estonians who were building a bridge on the Vyatka...and there were women. What was his name, I've forgotten his last name. He was blind in his right eye, but he went as a volunteer. But Vishkin and me ...

A. A. : Was that your neighbor, who went as a volunteer?

M. B. : The one whom we lived with in that apartment, and the landlady had a son – a teenager. Well, they assigned – there were 3000 [people -ed.] and everybody was working in that factory. You see, there was one ... there wasn't even a toilet. A toilet was, you know – winter was eight months long, and the toilet was – everybody had a garden. And near the garden there was a little shed. And there we went, and later all that – in the garden. But the only bathroom was in the military committee of this village. And not far away there also was a dining room. Well, they took us in the army. Besides – the neighbor and the other one, I've forgotten his name, also went as volunteers, because they heard that a Latvian division had been formed. But this neighbor – a communist – he went as a volunteer, but he thought that they wouldn't take him since he was blind in his right eye. But since he was a communist, they said they'd find a job for him, and they took him to the back of the army. And later he was injured, and was somewhere in Gorky – I met him after the war...

In the army I was designated as a “non front liner.” But Vishkin – he was a musician, he was playing on the saxophone, they took him immediately – but we were in the military village in Slobodskoye – we were serving there. And they immediately accepted him in the military orchestra

and with this orchestra he went to Vienna. He was telling me that after the war ended, when he was demobilized, he became a head mechanic in Riga's fashion house. He was a specialist, mechanic. He said to me, “As soon as they took a city, the very next day we marched in with the orchestra.” And so he went to Vienna.

But in 1941 it was freezing out there, the temperature dropped to -40 ° C. Especially there. I was putting the bullets into the semiautomatic pistol, I touched – well, I was inexperienced – I touched it with my bare hand...and almost lost it. The sergeant immediately ran to me and put a wool mitten on...and I've got 2<sup>nd</sup> degree frostbite. But there was one solder who got 3<sup>rd</sup> degree frostbite and his flesh already started to fall apart, you know... And never the less even though the commission declared me as a “non front liner”, it was in December when the counter attack to Moscow was in preparation. There was a reserve alpine regiment, because they all were with Finns – they had been skiing since childhood, they were like devils. But when we were going ... Besides, there were two brothers from Daugavpils in this regiment. What were their names ...? One was a cameraman, but the other - a boxer. And they heard about me, you know, my arm hurt a lot, but they signed up as volunteers to the Latvian division. Since then I haven't heard about them, ever. They were from Daugavpils. I forgot what their names were.

Yes, there was a time - to make a long story short - when we started the attack near Moscow, they formed the regiment and the political officer gave a speech. We only had three months of training... And they said that the whole regiment would go to Moscow on skis, you know – that, well ... They said we are attacking, that Moscow is in danger etc .... Everybody got a helmet and a wool helmet-liner ... and an overcoat and boots ... then they gave us padded pants and jerseys - one side was white for camouflage, but the other - gray. All that equipment was still from pre-war times. And then the commissars started to call us up – they called me, there was one Ukrainian, a Finn – from near Leningrad, some Poles ... together eight people. And there were those two brothers from Daugavpils. We weren't trusted. They took all of our equipment and gave us used

ones instead. Boots with puttees, you know – and sent us to the kitchen – to peel potatoes. But the very next day the regiment left...but we were put on the train...and went to Kirov, to the factory, to the military factory. And this military factory was still being built, but already producing. There was no roof yet. All the equipment came from Canada and England. Well, at the department of personnel, I remember, there was one desk for shipping and another – for building. At first they sent us to the building desk – without profession: on the quarry – to break the stones. And so on.

We lived in a mud hut, where the prisoner camp used to be. And mud hut was, you know, plank beds for a hundred or even more people on each side of the wall. Everything was rationed, bread, too ... And we were on duty – did laundry. There was also a mud hut – sauna, where we were washing padded jerseys for the army. Also we were on duty as guards. And once in the city – we were going to the city to the bazaar – to buy things and to the movies. There, you know, they had prices – a ticket cost three rubles, but people were rushing for tickets. And during that time they stole my wallet with two of my passports – the Latvian and the Soviet one, which I already had and my food stamps .... Well I was starving... I was left with three rubles, but the loaf of bread cost 200 rubles and more on the black market... I went to the head of the department and told them how it happened... So they gave me an additional lunch. I was starving and didn't go to work – they could sentence me for that. At that time if you were late for 5 minutes, they could imprison you for five years. So I went to the administration where the department is and saw that the head engineer – Fait – was a Jew. I went to him and told my story and said – I want to be re-assigned to the department of shipping. I told him about my situation – that the department of building would charge me. He said, "What will you do in the factory without any skills?" But I had no idea about the factory; the only thing I remembered was that they had lathe operators. And I said, "I will learn to be a lathe operator." He noticed that I was a Jewish guy and wrote to the department to transfer me to the third shop, whose supervisor was also a Jew. Or to the sec-

ond shop? I don't remember whether it was the second or the third shop .... And his last name I also forgot ...

I went to him. [the supervisor of the shop -ed.] In those times Jews helped each other out. But the whole factory – all of the supervisors were from Leningrad, they were building and working and producing ammunition. But this was a machine factory. He asked, "Well, what do you want?" "I want to be a lathe operator," I only knew of that specialty... He said, "Good, I'll put you as a machinist's assistant for a while, and then after few months I'll transfer you to the lathe operators. He sent me to Kasatkin who was a supervisor of the machine department. There was a huge shop; they were making ammunition, too. Kasatkin was an old Leningrad – born guy, and I was trying hard – I thought – time is going, and I have to learn a profession. I was asking a lot of questions and he liked that, he was explaining things to me. I started to work, but back then we were working 12 hours shifts – two shifts, 12 hours each and two weeks in a row without days – off ... and that's how I was working – he explained everything to me.

After that ... near the train terminal there was a market, "Shy market," as the locals called it. Then there was a raid. It was a big market. Suddenly I noticed that people were running and jumping over the fence, escaping - to make a long story short – they took us in – approximately 50-60 people total, they put us in line and took us to the war committee. And they were asking for papers – but I didn't have any ID with me – my passports were stolen ... But at that time they were mobilizing the youth – girls and boys from the collective farms, but in the collective farms they didn't have any IDs back then – no passports. They were given there some licenses valid for three months. But we had an accountant, some girl – and she was filling out forms and giving them to the war committee, or to the militia, I don't remember. I told her, "Sign me up, too," so she signed my name and later I got that license. Well, as I said, I was working at that factory, which made me a military person. "But why not in the army?" they asked me. I said, "I don't know." Immediately they gave me notice: to come a day later to be sent to the worker farmer

army and to bring a cup, some clothes and a spoon...

I returned from the war committee near the train terminal and I had to go past the train terminal and had to walk 3 km through the forest to the factory. And all the money I had I spent on buns... And I met some guy Racun, he was a supervisor of the tool department in our shop. A Jewish guy – he was from the battlefield. I think, he was already 20 years old. I was telling him, that they got me... But he says: “Silly man. You know what: go to the supervisor of the shop and tell him that that they got you, and they kind of said that if you had a reservation you wouldn’t have to go.” Well, I went to him. He was a very good man – that supervisor. He had a good heart and everybody respected him, as well as the Russians, you know, such...well, I told him all that ... He immediately ... But in the factory there was a boss – he was a military man ... his name was Popov. He gave me a note: “Please reserve me Bliznansky Mott-he is a the fourth category machinist.” I didn’t have a fourth category then yet, but reservation was possible only from the fourth category – it was necessary. I was working – there were two of us – Volodya Lukashev in one shift, but I was working on the thermal treatment of the tools in the other shift. But the supervisor of the sector was Kasatkin, getting on in years, he was 55 years old. And I went to that military chief and said to him: “Here is a notice, which was given to me and this note ...” He took it and then said: “Go to work, come after a week!” A week later I came and they gave me a military ticket with a reservation. Later I met that Racun, he asked me: “Well, how are you?” I told him. He said: “Well, that’s how it will be till the end of the war.” And that’s how it was. I was thinking that I should make it up. And so I was working up to the highest category. I worked till 1946. In 1945 ...

Yes, I haven’t told the story about how I found my parents. As it turned out, my brother left, my oldest sister – she went ... her husband - Boris Segal, he was a photographer in Kemeru sanatorium, and she ran to Kemeru when the war started. They didn’t get to Riga, but they fled together. She made it to somewhere in Middle Asia, but Boris was taken into the army – he was a sapper

and in 1942 was killed by a mine. Well, she ended up in Buguruslan where there was a center for refugees and there she found my parents. As it turned out, my parents were together with my youngest sister – she was 15 at that time – she was born in 1925. On the morning of 28<sup>th</sup> they... do you understand, when the shooting started, many wanted to get home, but all those streets – Terbatas, Krishjana, Barona, Suvorova – they were closed – the army was retreating. They couldn’t get home, therefore they left. And the next morning – we lived on 1A Park Street, it is not far away from the train terminal – they left the apartment – we had a seven room apartment, there was everything there – and they left it and went to the terminal. They got on the last train. The train was bombed and in the beginning they got to the Chernyi Yar, then Germans advanced on it. My father was a cobbler and he got a job very quickly – there was a workers’ cooperative, where they were making clothes for the army... So the Germans were approaching and my parents went to Stalingrad. And in Stalingrad they met my brother – he wasn’t in the army yet. They met my brother on the bank of the river – unexpectedly, and soon after he was mobilized and sent to the mines, but later to the army, and later he was injured ... All the time they retreated and they stayed in Tbilisi hospital for two months. Well, and later he got married there ... After the hospital he was sent to the collective farm for two months to get better, after which he was sent to Kvartcheli – somewhere in the mountains to process ore. He met an electrician there who took him to work as an electrician above ground – it was easier to work there. Well, he got married there ... He returned to Riga later than me with his wife who was pregnant. But I got to Riga in 1945 – after the war...

A. A. : Excuse me, you started to tell how you found your parents ...

M. B. : Oh ... yes. All the time I ... there was an editorial office of the newspaper “Cina,” and they were registering everybody from Latvia, and I was always asking them about my parents and relatives ... And all the time it was the same answer, “No.” For two years they weren’t registered because at first they were in Chernyi Yar, then in Stalingrad where he got his job, but when

Germans advanced on Stalingrad, they fled and then ... my father, as a new military man – he ran there ... but my brother wasn't there anymore, he was mobilized ... they went to the barge to flee, but in the barge they only transported military personnel, but later, I don't know, they got on the last barge – with my sister and my mother ... and he said that they had been shot at, and mines were in the water ... I don't know how they crossed the Volga ... and later got to Chimkent. And there he settled and got a job. And he was doing well there. And after two years of war going on – they registered in Bugurslan. And next time when I, as always, went to get the newspaper “Cina,” they gave me their address in Chimkent. And I wrote them a letter and they started to send me packages. And, you know, it was Uzbekistan – where there were fruits and jams. But sending packages wasn't allowed, therefore they sent them as military, they knew some people in the post office ... I was working on such a factory as military and got several packages. Even though they were feeding us well – three times a day, 800 grams of bread per day and if I was working good, if the quota was reached, I got an additionally 400 grams per day. If there was no milk, then they gave us cheese made out of sheep's milk ... So they were feeding us very well for war time. But when the war was over ... you know ...

But then after Gorky he returned to Kirov – that communist, my neighbor, that had a wife ... he was a barber. He was working as a bosses barber. But back then you couldn't quit your job at the military factory, because you were counted as being mobilized... In 1945 I asked for a vocation and went to Riga. My parents returned to Riga in May of 1945. Well, Riga was liberated in October of 1944, but they returned in May, I think. The apartment was empty. The apartment was sealed, but Germans lived there or I don't know whom – there still were eight sewing machines – but the apartment was empty. And the seal was broken – it was either the caretaker or I don't know whom .... We found the one machine at the neighbors and they returned it immediately without any problems. But in that building some navy department moved in, so it was impossible to get back all that building and the apartment. But my sister had lived on K. Barona Street with Boris –

her husband in three room apartment. She got the apartment as a Red army military person. But one Polish person had lived there since 1942, probably the fireman, but they returned this apartment to her, but her husband died ... I returned to the factory, otherwise I would have been arrested – because I was mobilized. And there it started in 1946. I have forgotten his name – his name was short. Was it Grig? I have forgotten

This barber and his wife are going to Riga – they were releasing him. I told him, “Talk to the boss. You used to shave him.” [his neighbor, the communist –ed.]. So he spoke to the boss and he signed the release form. And we all went together to Riga. His daughter was born during the war. And we all arrived together in Riga, and eventually they left for Israel. And, besides, when I went to Israel for the first time in 1975 to visit my mother – my mother lived there – she went to my sister's in 1963. My sister has lived there since 1958. But my sister found our uncle who lives in America. She found him from Israel, because, you know, during the Soviet times people were afraid to correspond abroad, you know – relatives abroad ... and we didn't know his address. She found out ... when she was already in Poland. And he wrote to her to go to Israel, because American Jews are supporters of Israel. And he sent her the money, \$6000, to buy an apartment in Tel Aviv. He sent her \$200 more to Poland for the ticket, then another \$200 more to Italy – he helped her. And she wrote to our mother and in 1963 my mother decided to go together with her youngest daughter. So, she went. My oldest sister and me, we went to walk her to the plane for Moscow. And when she arrived in Israel, he came from America to meet her.

You know 1943... Well, he was, you know – an American ... He bought her padres [? –ed. ] for the income, you know, well, billionaire. But he came ... of course he stayed at the hotel ... he was there for three weeks – all the time he was teaching them how to live ... But my sister, she was a singer, she performed there in opera in Tel Aviv. And he gave her the money so she could buy a house. He told her how to keep the house ... and that the husband has to work. They didn't think about the artists as highly as people did in the Soviet Union. But she bought an apartment

on shlisengen, which means it is an apartment where the part is paid off and she pays the owner – a loan, the apartment wasn't completely hers, but she can't ... And she still is living in this apartment, because that owner ... he died already, they were very rich people ... what was I talking about?

A. A. : About how your uncle came from America to teach her how to live.

M. B. : He did. And he didn't like that ... that apartment and that she was working ... You know, she was listening to him – and didn't pay any attention to what he was saying ... And when he left, he didn't give that *pardes* [? –ed.] to my mother, he sent her money instead. And he started to send \$150 a month to her and my sister, I think ... Then he sent my mother and sister tickets and they went to visit him. Well, he hosted them very nicely, you know, reception in a restaurant, and special hallways – apartments, so she could perform – to sing, she was a singer. They were there for about a month. Well, they had a good time ... and then they came back. But he had asthma. What's wrong?

When he first came to America, he was working very hard, he was a very skilled specialist and a few years later – he founded his own factory. And he had asthma, so every summer he went to Puerto Rico, because of the warm climate ... and when he went to Israel, he had a private doctor with him, because he was sick. He died when he was 70, but his son continued to send the money to my mother and sister. But my mother died when she was almost 90. She died on December 15<sup>th</sup> 1995. Yes, when she died she was 89 years and few months old. She didn't suffer... She was very smart woman and as I remember, even though she had problems with her metabolism, she never ate dinner. I was visiting my sister in 1975, after that I have been there several more times – so everybody is gathering at my sisters for a dinner, but my mother had a breakfast, lunch, then tea at 5 o'clock, and that's all. And she had her routine – she was sitting in the hallway, watching TV while everybody was having dinner. And even, I remember, she had a bad metabolism and her legs were swelling ... but you see – she had a long life. But when she died ...

my uncle's son continued to send \$150 every month. Even now. Well, those twelve factories, his son and two in sons-in-law got them. And then their children ... the oldest has three children, the son has four children, and the youngest has two children. The children came to visit my sister in Israel ... So.

About pre-war life ... I was working ...

A. A. : Let's start with your childhood. What do you remember? What language were you speaking at home?

M. B. : At home we were speaking Yiddish.

A. A. : What was your childhood surrounding – except home – the neighborhood, for example?

M. B. : We lived in a 12 apartment building – where all were Jews and the landlord was a Jew – his name was Cuker. He was fat and he had a big apartment on the second floor.

A. A. : Where was it?

M. B. : 60 Avotu Street. Then it was 45 Avotu Street, but now it is 60 Avotu Street. Well, we were playing in the yard – there were trees and lot of children back then. We lived in apartment No. 7, but my aunt lived in apartment No. 11 with her five children. Her name was Sheiner. We knew everybody in the house. You know, how children are ... playing ...

A. A. : During the games what language did you speak?

M. B. : Yiddish – I didn't know Russian. I started to know Russian and Latvian only when I started to go to school; they started to teach us in the third grade. I attended Jewish school No. 3 in Riga. There were eight Jewish schools back then.

A. A. : In Yiddish?

M. B. : In Yiddish. Besides that there were also in Hebrew. There were also schools where majority was in German, because there were families where they spoke in German. There were also a private school "Kamai." My older sister in the beginning attended a Russian school – where the principal was Mishina, but when she went to the

fifth grade, there was a crisis. You know – the crisis was from 1929 until 1933. It was hard – my father didn't have a job. He was doing some social work – they were wheel-barrowing the ice, stone – my father was physically a very strong man. He grew up in the country ... I remember, we were four children and granny – a family of seven, and every three days we had 5 lats, and we went to the market and bought the products for those 5 lats. Then everything was cheap – partially because of the crisis – people didn't have money and farmers were selling cheap.

Well, then ... I was six years old back then, I think, and I attended the preschool. But at the school they were teaching in Hebrew, Russian, German, Latvian, and Yiddish. Now, in the Jewish school here in Riga they also taught Latvian, Russian, Hebrew, and English starting in the first grade. Well, preschool, then first grade and I graduated in 1934. But my sister couldn't pay because of the crisis. So she switched to the Jewish school. But she learned quickly ... and later went to the high school that she had to pay for. Near Brivibas Street there was a Jewish high school. My youngest sister also went to our school No.3, on Brivibas Street, near Artilerijas Street. And when I graduated from the school, so to pay for me and my sister ... and besides, there were no prospect to graduate high school and to get to the University - only rich people could do that. I didn't have such a prospect and they arranged for me to work at the factory and to learn a profession. In the beginning they thought maybe I could be a furrier, but I had to work three years for free for the master as a delivery boy, therefore they arranged for me to work in the shop. And the store was "Simson & Liv", on 1 Merkela Street. I started to work at the store on January, the 1<sup>st</sup> 1935. For three months they were paying me 15 lats. There was a manufacture. Then I was paid 20 lats for a half of year, then 30 lats. I was already a salesman. But Simson was a Jew himself, from Jelgava, but lived in Paris. And he returned here and opened a wholesale and retail together with Liv. People from the suburbs came to shop there. But Simson didn't have any children, he was intelligent and all the time he was sending the money to his wife to Paris. But eventually he brought her from Paris – she came

here. But during the WWII they were hiding him on the beach. You understand – he was in the armoire somewhere ... And the whole war – till the liberation he survived, yes, and in 1946 I met him, he was old. He was more that 80 years old, but he was saying: "You know, I still can have 50 grams ..." And then he got into the jail, I don't know what for, that was already in the Soviet times. I don't know, how long he was there – got three years or so ... Well, something commercial ... But Liv was deported to Siberia.

A. A. : When? Before the war?

M. B. : They deported him ... Yes, before the war in 1940. And, by the way, he is buried in Shmerli cemetery, and his wife, too. His son visits – I have met the son. I knew his wife when she was still his bride. He was all business, active – knew how to sell. But he wasn't one of those billionaires, but they deported him anyway. Now people are saying – Latvians, Latvians were deported. They deported everybody, Jews too – five thousand of Riga's Jews were deported ... He, of course, returned from Siberia in Khrushchev's time in 1956, after the death of Stalin. Year and a half later I switched to "Hercfeld," also a store on 5 Marijas Street. It was also the soft goods store. He paid me 10 lats more ... But the last three years before the war...my sister was working at "Vulf"—a knitting goods store, on the intersection of Barona and Park Street, I think. Now there is a store "Elegant," and shoe repair shop. And she knew some Yugelsson and she arranged for me to work in his store on 33 Marijas Street. They were two brothers – bachelors, by the way. One was still a student. And they were driving to the suburbs to sell goods – they were selling to the stores and taking the orders. On the second floor they had warehouse – shirts, pants, and dresses were made there ... And when they were away I was taking the orders, executing them – I was making the packages and delivering them on my bike. They personally knew my sister and trusted me. And I was working there till the Soviet regime came. The older of brothers fled ... They were a commercial family, their relatives in Old City were selling flour, sugar ... by the sack ... they were salesmen. He was sent to the ghetto. I've heard that he liked to drink in the ghetto and there was a curfew and that he was

shot. But George-Yurgenson a student, I don't know about him – if he survived or not ... I don't know. I just remember that he was a student ... he was still young then – 25 or 26 years old, but the oldest one was 32. So...

A. A. : Tell me, please – whom did your parents associate with? Was it mostly the Jewish community?

M. B. : Yes. But there were also our relatives – my mother's cousins. One was a butcher, but the other one had a big company in Old City on Peldu Street. Their name was Fogel. I don't remember what kind of business they he had. I just remember his wife had rheumatism all the time. All swollen. But during the war they were sent to the ghetto, and also in the ghetto he settled down pretty well – as a butcher, near the meat. But ... was his name Iakov? I don't remember anymore – the other brother, who owned a company in Old City – he escaped from the ghetto and they caught him in Mezaparks and shot him. And the butcher was shot, too because of his brother, who escaped ... He was shot in the ghetto. But this butcher's son – they spoke German in the family – he spoke fluently in German, survived during the war and later in occupied Germany he was a translator for the West German government. When he demobilized and returned as a master sergeant .... But his brother fled to Tallin. And when they went on the boat from Tallin to Lenin-grad, the boat was bombed and he died – the brother Avyi. But this brother survived the entire war .... and he was told that his parents were killed. And he said, when they caught those Gestapo men, they were looking for volunteers to execute them and he signed as a volunteer to shoot them.

A. A. : What was his name?

M. B. : Fogel. Well, he has a daughter. He married one girl here who was studying in the conservatory. But he died early. Or all the military were like that ... those four years of the war. But his daughter married a Latvian here, in Riga, but now I don't know where she is. And she didn't want him to be buried in Shmerli cemetery, so he was buried in Raina cemetery.

A. A. : Do you know his daughter's name?

M. B. : I have forgotten ... My memory....

A. A. : Tell me please, about your family's way of life. Was your family religious?

M. B. : No.

A. A. : But you were keeping all of the Jewish traditions, like Pesach and other feasts?

M. B. : The traditions were kept ... especially granny was following that ...

A. A. : But Saturdays? Sabbath? Were the candles lit?

M. B. : Yes, the candles were lit. Traditions. My granny died in 1979, no – what am I saying ... she was 79 in 1939. When granny died, we buried her in Shmerli, but after the war we couldn't find her grave anymore, because all the grave stones were knocked down during the war. All three thousand of them. They were reconstructed. So she was the one keeping the traditions. We were preparing for Pesach and put the drink and the wine in the shed for three months ... We did everything, but didn't go to the Synagogue. Sometimes we went to Sukkot, when they were giving lehet and wine, to the synagogue on Stabu Street.

A. : But did you have Bar Mitzvah?

M. B. : We had a Bar Mitzvah ... I was reading and preparing with the rabbi ... I almost knew it by heart...

A. A. : Thank you!

## Membership Fees are Past Due

This is a reminder to kindly renew your subscription to the Latvia SIG and Newsletter. Our subscription year runs from July 2006 through June 2007. Please mail your check, payable to Latvia SIG, for US \$20 for the US and Canada, and \$30 (bankable in the US) from elsewhere, to:

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You can also remit your payment through PayPal to: **mikegetz005@comcast.net**. We look forward to your participation and support.

In an effort to simplify the process of submitting membership dues, especially for people who reside outside the United States and Canada, the Latvia SIG accepts payment via PayPal. PayPal is a web-based service that facilitates paying bills and fees via email.

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It is important that new members complete and mail the membership form on the following page — this form can also be found on the Latvia SIG web site — so that we can enter family names and locations on our **Family Finder**. Also, please include the other information requested on the form to help us make the Latvia SIG an even more effective resource for genealogical research.

Please note that the new membership year runs from July 1, 2006 to June 30, 2007 so dues are now due for the 2006/2007 membership year.

As a courtesy this issue of the newsletter is being sent to those subscribers who have paid for the 2005/2006 membership year, but have not yet subscribed for the 2006/2007 membership year. Future issues will only be sent to paid subscribers for the 2006/2007 membership year.

**Latvia SIG Membership Questionnaire**

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Whom are you researching? (Latvian cities only) Please use location names/spellings as found in *Where Once We Walked*. i.e. the modern names of the cities as used in Latvia today.

NAME:..... LOCATION:.....  
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Bibliographical or archival sources used in your Latvian genealogical research:

Information on Latvian Jewish communities, history of Jewish presence, current status, contacts:

Cemeteries, travel experiences, etc:

Suggested newsletter topics:

Translation skills: Hebrew, Latvian, Russian, Yiddish, Other (specify)

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