Is There a Middle Ground?

by Marion Werle

Articles published in Latvia SIG reflect the opinions of their authors, and not the SIG as a whole. I mention this because of an article by Edward Anders, regarding his Holocaust experiences in Latvia, where he makes comments such as "Latvia SIG has repeatedly contended..." We receive input from a variety of people reflecting a variety of views, including those of Mr. Anders. There is a good reason for the expression, "Two Jews, three opinions". To say that there is a unanimity of opinion, even among the Latvia SIG board members, does not reflect reality. That there is as much debate over the Holocaust, even among Jews, astounds me. Can anybody really be objective about the Holocaust? There is a huge gulf between the views of the survivors, whose first-hand experiences are unspeakable, and those of us who can only view the experience through the dulled passage of time. There is no question that the anger and bitterness of some survivors is both justifiable and understandable. I am indignant when I view a family photo of cousins who never reached adulthood. Who can measure the emptiness of lives cut short, of an entire generation that is lost to us?

Yet is there a middle ground? Was every Latvian a murderer? There has been endless debate in this newsletter over whether anti-Semitism existed prior to the Germans' arrival, whether Latvians murdered Jews spontaneously, or whether it took the arrival of the Germans to incite latent anti-Semitism and the resulting murderous acts. Nachum Alpert, in his book The Destruction of Slonim Jewry (NY, USHMM, 1989), describes how the Germans manipulated native populations to their own ends. Describing Nazi Regional Komissar Gerhardt (Gerth) Errin, he says: "Against Byelorussian Partisans he sent Poles. Against Polish rebels he sent Byelorussians. As village elders he appointed mostly Poles or younger Byelorussians." (page 69) Jewish tradition teaches that we are created in the image of God. It also gives credence to the duality of human nature, characterized by the yetzer ha-tov (good inclination) and yetzer ha-ra (evil inclination). Whether the Latvian murderers did their deeds spontaneously or with German provocation, was the end result any different? The murderers chose to follow their yetzer ha-ra, and for this they bear responsibility. Whether they did it spontaneously or required provocation from outsiders, it won't bring our murdered relatives back, and doesn't change the outcome of their deeds.

Regarding the issue of righteous gentiles, even among the Latvians, I recommend that

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From the Editor’s Desk

Happy (secular) New Year to everyone. First, I would like to thank Marion Werle for putting together the last newsletter, while I was on an extended business trip.

Two issues ago we published Holocaust related articles by Andrew Ezergailis and Mike Getz, and in this issue we have a response from Edward Anders, and another related article by Gary Fitteberg. Latvia SIG is a genealogical newsletter. When we decide to publish articles not directly related to genealogy, and there are differing points of view, we will try, though we may not always succeed, to give everyone “equal time”. However, all articles submitted to the newsletter represent the opinions of the authors alone, and are not endorsed or representative in any way of those of Latvia SIG.

Also in a past issue, we published a report of a trip to Aizpute. The Shtetl Focus translation of the appropriate Pinkas Ha-kehilot article is in this issue.

Marion Werle has another article here on how she used the USHMM Extraordinary Commission records. Gary Fitteberg has a review of a book by Boris Kacel in this issue, and also a short note of a USHMM project he and Kacel plan to launch.

It is time to plan to attend the 1999 Summer Seminar in New York. JGSNY has kindly given permission for the information and application found at the back of this issue to be published.

SIG members have done a good job of submitting articles for the newsletter, but we have not been so good at volunteering for other projects. A SIG without participating members cannot be sustained.

In a previous issue, Mike Getz published a list of projects that can be done now, but we need the volunteers. Please help! On this note, Marc Dyer has volunteered to lead the effort on the Pinkas of Dvinsk Burials. If you wish to help, contact information is on page 3.

Finally, membership renewals are now due. Information is on page 3.

Robert Heyman, Editor, Latvia SIG
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Membership Renewals Now Due

It is time to renew your membership for the 1999 year. Please send payment in the amount of $20 for those in the United States and Canada, and $30 for all others to

Latvia SIG
c/o Mike Getz
5450 Whitley Park Terrace #901
Bethesda, MD 20814

Those not renewing by the end of March will be dropped from the membership list, so be sure to get those renewals in soon!

Pinkas of Dvinsk Burials

SIG member Marc Dver has volunteered to lead the effort to get the Pinkas of Dvinsk Burials translated. For those interested in helping out, he may be contacted by e-mail at dver@avoda.jct.ac.il, or by snail-mail at

Marc Dver
Muss Hall 577
2540 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, NY 10033

You may also be interested in checking his web page at http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Valley/4100, though it will be moving to the JewishGen servers soon.
Aizpute Shtetl Focus

Translated by Jasha Viskanzi, with permission from Yad Vashem, from Pinkas ha-kehilot, Latviyah ve-Estonyah, pages 54-59. Editor: Dov Levin. Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 1988.


A regional town in Kurland.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>In Numbers</th>
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<th>Percentages</th>
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Until the End of World War I

History of the Town

The town of Aizpute sprung from an ancient Kurlandish castle. In 1295 Aizpute passed over to the rule of the German Order, and in 1378 it was granted the status and rights of a town. The town was the capital of the Piltan District and an important commercial center.

For a long time, the District of Piltan and its capital, Aizpute, were independent enclaves within Kurland. In the beginning Piltan was the private estate of the ruling Bishop of Kurland. Afterwards, it was sold to the Danes, and in 1585 the district passed over to the direct rule of the Polish king while the other districts of Kurland were autonomic dukedoms under the auspices of Poland.

Throughout the changes in government, the German citizens of Aizpute maintained their municipal rights: they had a mayor, council and court, and the municipal authorities collected taxes from the inhabitants. In the 17th Century, Aizpute was the largest commercial center in Kurland, and it served amongst other things for the export of wheat to Holland. In 1795, Aizpute together with all of Kurland passed over to Russian rule. In 1819, its administrative-legal status was put on a par with that of the rest of the Kurland region, and Aizpute and the district lost their special character.

At the outset of World War I, Aizpute was conquered by the German army, and at the end, by the Bolsheviks.

The Establishment of the Community, the
Demographic and Economic Development and Legal Status

Due to the special legal status of the Piltan District, the Jewish settlement in the district preceded those settlements in other parts of Kurland. It is estimated that the first Jews arrived there in the 17th Century, following an invitation from the Bishop of Kurland, who wanted to raise its economic value, and they also settled in the surrounding area of Aizpute. Most probably they only settled in the town itself during the period of Polish rule. The laws that were imposed upon the Jewish settlements in the towns of Kurland did not apply in the District of Piltan, which was mentioned as being under the direct rule of the Polish King. Following an agreement that was made at the end of the 17th Century between the King of Poland and the aristocracy of the District of Piltan, attempts were made to equate the status of the Jews there to that of the Jews in the remaining dukedoms of Kurland. Various taxes were imposed upon them and expulsion orders were issued against them. However, the orders were in fact not carried out or they were only partially carried-out. Proof of this is that there was a house of prayer in the district in 1708. In the first half of the 18th Century, the Jews raised a tax to the municipal authorities, and thus their right to settle in the town was in fact recognized. The first document in which Aizpute Jews are mentioned is dated the 21st of July, 1740. It states that the Jewish synagogue taxes (Jüdischecapellageldel) will be equally divided between the mayor and the municipal court.

In 1750, the orders for the expulsion of the Jews were invalidated, and they were granted the right to legal settlement. It was determined that the Jews would raise an annual protection tax for the district aristocracy (one thousand Albert Florins, equivalent in that year to 330 Talers). Every Jew was liable to pay the tax according to his income. The poor were exempt from the payment. On the 9th of September, 1751, a permit was obtained for the construction of a synagogue, and permission was given to purchase a plot of land for this purpose. Jews were also granted the right to establish a community, according to that prevalent in Poland and Latvia. Thus, the first Jewish community in Kurland was officially established. The Jews had a few rights in the town: they paid municipal taxes, they enjoyed freedom to trade and they were registered in the merchant's guilds.

During the second half of the 18th Century, the Jewish community of Aizpute was the most important in the District of Piltan, and it had a special status towards the rest of the Jews in the District. In 1850, two Jews from Aizpute - Yeshayahu and Zvi Cohen were appointed as appraisers to assess the amount of protection tax to be paid by every Jew living in their District. They were also guarantors for the collection of the tax. For this purpose, they were accorded penal authority: to impose fines and take mortgages. One year later, it was determined that the Jews of the District must purchase etrogs (citrons) for the sukkahs only in Aizpute, and that all Jews residing up to a distance of five miles from the town must celebrate in the town itself. In 1760, the two above-mentioned guarantors were also given the right to collect taxes from the Jewish merchants of Mitau (Yelgava) coming to trade in the District. In later years, despite the fact that the method of taxation was changed and the collection of the protection tax was transferred to local Jewish organizations throughout the District, the special status of the Aizpute community was preserved also due to their economic importance. In 1782, for example, the Jews of Aizpute and its surroundings raised close to half the
protection tax raised by the Jews in the entire District (278 out of 604 Talers). When they were behind in the tax payment, the President of the Court of Aizpute issued a proclamation in 1788 to the Jews of the District to make up the deficit. In 1783, it was prescribed that all the Jewish merchants in the District must be registered in the merchant's guilds of Aizpute. After the annexation to Russia in 1796, this right was also extended to Jewish merchants of Kurland who wished to do so. In that same year, 33 merchants were registered: 8 in the First Guild, 2 in the Second Guild, and 23 in the Third Merchant's Guild.

The Jews of Aizpute were entitled to vote for the local municipal institutions, but not to be elected to them. Nevertheless, in 1799, one of the prominent members of the community, by the name of Pinchas Eichel, filled a public position in the municipal court. After 1819, the Russian government authorities equated the status of the Jews of Aizpute with the status of the rest of the Jews of Kurland (see introduction).

At the end of the 18th Century, the Jewish community numbered several hundred persons: In 1782, 140 heads of households and 40 young men were registered in the book Hlevrat Kadisha (Burial Society), and in 1797 the community numbered 209 males. In the first half of the 19th Century, the Jewish community grew rapidly and became the majority of the town's population. Most of them came from Lithuania, primarily from the Zamut belt, and some of them, including the first settlers of the town, from the trading towns of Eastern Prussia—Hamburg, Danzig and other towns. In 1840, a large part of the community—96 families, totaling 618 persons—left Aizpute emigrating to the Kharkov region in southern Russia within the framework of the settlement program initiated by the government. Following this event and due to a cholera epidemic that swept the town in 1848, the number of Jews declined. Nonetheless, in 1863 the Jews still comprised half the town's population.

The economic status of the community was strong. The Jews took an increasingly large part in the town's commercial sectors: In 1800 the Jews constituted 30 percent of the total number of those registered in the town's merchants (14 out of 42 merchants), and in 1805 their percentage rose to about 58 percent (15 out of the 26 merchants were Jews). During the next thirty years, the number of Jews in merchant's guilds grew considerably, and in 1835 reached 180. Their position was generally well off, and amongst them were also the very wealthy. For example, in 1792, a Jewish merchant recorded in his Will the value of his assets, which was dozens of times greater than the annual protection tax of all the Jews of the Piltan District. At the same time, there were broad classes of poor and impoverished Jews. Many of them were amongst the many immigrants who left, as mentioned, to settle in the Kharkov region with the hope of improving their economic position. In the last third of the 19th Century, there was a gradual decline in the number of Jews and their relative percentage in the town. Towards the end of the Century, they comprised only 35 percent of the total population.

During World War I, not all the Jews of Aizpute were expelled due to the rapid entry of the Germans to the town, but many left due to hardships of the war. In the course of the war, 26 private buildings and 5 public buildings belonging to Jews were destroyed.

Public Life and its Institutions

In the first years of the establishment of the community, the Jews of Aizpute required the Rabbis of the town of Shkud in Lithuania,
and in 1760, Rabbi Aharon Levi Horowitz of Shkud served as rabbi of both communities. In following decades there was already a well-organized community in the town with a developed system of institutions that also served the Jews in the surrounding area. There was an independent rabbinate and rabbinical court, which existed after the aforementioned rabbi moved to Aizpute already in 1770; a public assembly, which elected a Gabbai [synagogue treasurer] once a year; Hewrat Kadisha, synagogue, bath house, charitable trust and other various societies such as “Talmud Torah”, “Bikur Holim” [Charity for the Sick] and “Hewrat Mishniot”. Since 1763, they began to keep a community ledger, which was written in German with Hebrew letters. The ledger was arranged in an orderly and methodical manner. Each member had a page on which his debts and payments were recorded. In 1782 as mentioned, 140 heads of households, 40 young men and 21 Jews from the vicinity were registered. The Gabbais were in charge of the writing of the register, the community institutions and management of expenses and income, which also included the collection of taxes and salary payments. They had to submit a monthly report on their activities. In 1782, for example, it was recorded in the ledger that the community collected in that year 2,155 Gulden. This sum included taxes to the authorities -- 1,026 Gulden for protection tax to the aristocracy and 168 Gulden for municipal tax (the poor were exempt from these taxes) -- and the following taxes for community purposes: “Korovka” tax -- 550 Gulden, donations to the synagogue (going up to the Torah, etc.) -- 365 Gulden and payments to the charity fund, which were collected by the Shammash [orderly] who visited homes twice a week -- 46 Gulden. A large part of the community’s expenses was allocated to the Rabbi. In that year (1782), the rabbi’s salary totaled 525 Gulden -- the sum of the entire Korovka tax, and the Jews in the surrounding area also participated. Another important source of income was the personal donations. In 1792, for instance, one of the gentlemen bequeathed a sum of 750 Talers, more than three times the annual protection tax for the community’s various needs. In 1861, the town had three synagogues and two minyans [small prayer houses].

The economic position of the community and the marked influence of the German culture in the town, drew to it Jewish doctors and intellectuals at the turn of the 18th Century. Amongst them was Daniel Kleif Ben-Haim of Amsterdam, the composer of the essay “A Small Flowerbed”. He lived in Aizpute for about ten years, and took part in community life. It was here that he published (in 1777) the first edition of his essay; the two Eichel brothers of Copenhagen - the aforementioned Pinchas Eichel, who served as the legal advisor to the municipal court and was the son-in-law of one of the richest and most prominent members of the community, and Yitzhak Aharon Eichel, who translated into German several Hebrew essays, such as the prayer book and the Book of Ecclesiastes; Dr. David Avramson, a native of Danzig, who wrote a medical book in German; Dr. Aharon Solomon Tobias, a physician and surgeon from Poland, who resided in Aizpute until his death in 1782, leaving behind medical journals; Dr. Avraham Brennerdet, who studied medicine in London, and after several years of activity in Aizpute, filled important medical positions in Russia and was awarded the title of Court Advisor.

The Rabbinate of Aizpute was traditional-orthodox, and amongst its rabbis were the above-mentioned Rabbi Horowitz, who left the town after several years of office and moved to serve as the Rabbi of Berlin; Rabbi Yosef Ben-Menachem, who dealt in kabbala [mysticism] and served in the town from
1779; his son-in-law, Rabbi Yecheiel Michal Ben-Arie, was at first a dayan [religious judge] and was afterwards appointed to the position of rabbi which he held until his death in 1835; Rabbi Yehoshua Zelig Hacohen served in the Rabbinate of Aizpute from around 1839 to 1852. This rabbi was first a merchant and an estate owner in Piltan, and afterwards studied with Rabbi Haim from Woloczyn. He died in Jerusalem in 1853; Rabbi Itzhak Zeev Aronowitz, who was before that the rabbi of Laukova in Lithuania, served in Aizpute in 1852 until his death in 1876; Rabbi Avraham Heller held his position until 1881 after which he moved to Libau (Lyepaya). His essay, "Beautiful Landscape", including discourses and Rabbinical commentaries, was printed in 1907; Rabbi Zvi Hirsh Yaacovson, a native of Talsin (Talsi), who leaned towards Zionism, served from 1904 until his immigration to Eretz Israel in 1913. In Eretz Israel [Land of Israel], he was a teacher in the "Herzlia" High School and afterwards the founder of the Yeshiva [Religious academy] in Tel-Aviv.

At the turn of the 19th Century, in addition to the traditional Talmudic hederim [religious schools], there were two schools for Jewish youth: a Russian government school and a private school under the management of J. Pos. In the decade preceding World War I, Rabbi Moshe Yaacovson was active in spreading the Zionist concept and the Hebrew language. Under his influence, secular studies and the modern Hebrew language were introduced into the local Talmud Torah, and books and newspapers from Eretz-Israel were brought to the town.

During World War I, the Zionist spirit grew stronger in the community: they began to collect donations for the settlement in Eretz Israel; they publicly celebrated the Balfour Declaration and in 1917 the first Zionist Association was founded by the name "Kadima", which organized into its ranks the majority of the local youth.

Between the Two World Wars

Demography and Economy

After the war, only about half the Jews were left in the town. A few more dozens of Jews returned to the town by 1925 within the framework of the repartition, and from this year onwards the absolute number and the relative percentage of the Jews in the town declined steadily.

The economic situation of the Jews of Aizpute during this period was well off. It is stated in a Joint Report dated 1920 that only 10 percent of the Jews are poor, 80 percent have sources of income and an additional 10 percent are wealthy. The Jews' two main economic branches were commerce and trades, who based their living on the affluent and developed agricultural surroundings. The Jews engaged in all branches of trade - amongst them were tailors, hatmakers, furriers, shoemakers, sewers, watchmakers, tinnies, locksmiths, painters and butchers. Their share in commerce was particularly noticeable. In 1935, their percentage in some of the town's commercial branches was as follows (see table at top of next page):

Most of the Jews had small businesses, where they worked by themselves or were assisted by family members; the minority employed several clerks, shopkeepers or laborers. Amongst the 21 large factories and workshops in Aizpute which employed more than 5 workers, only 4 were owned by Jews: a factory for light beverages and lumber mills. There was also a small group of Jews in Aizpute who had liberal professions: four out of the seven physicians in the town, one lawyer out of three that engaged in this
<table>
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<th>Branch or Type of Business</th>
<th>Total Numbers</th>
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profession in Aizpute, three dentists and a handful of teachers in Jewish educational institutions. Because of the small number of large factors and the shortage of employment, many of the youths left the town.

Jews were elected to the town council and several of them served during different periods in the position of deputy mayor. In 1926, for example, amongst the 20 town council members, three were Jews. In the twenties the relations between the Jews and their neighbors were sound. During the thirties, the general escalation of anti-Semitism was also felt in Aizpute, which was expressed, amongst other things, in assaults on Jewish students in the Latvian high schools and attempts to encroach upon the Jews' economic status.

Community Institutions

After the war, the Jews of Aizpute organized as a religious community, and the traditional "Korovka" tax was the main source of the community's income. Rabbi Mordechai Norok was sent to the national convention of Jewish communities in Latvia, which was held in 1920, as a representative of the community. In order to assist in the battle against typhus and other epidemics from which the town suffered in the post-war period, the community operated an old bathhouse and reached a special settlement with the local Christian pharmacist regarding sale of medications to Jews. During this period, the community also supervised the local welfare association, which was maintained on member's taxes, totaling 130 members. A "Hospice for the Poor" Association also operated in the town to accommodate poor wayfarers.

In 1922, with the aid of a grant from the Joint in the sum of 62 million Lat, a cooperative bank called "Savings and Loan Fund" was established. Representatives of the bank participated in conventions of the Jewish credit funds, which were held in Riga.

With time, other welfare associations were
founded, such as “Bikur Holim” [charity for the sick] and the “Women’s Association”, which organized various events for charitable purposes and also played a social and cultural role in the community. In addition, charity funds were also founded, such as the butchers’ “Charity Banquets” and the tradesmen’s “Charity Workers”. There was a synagogue and yeshiva in the town. Rabbi Eliezer Ze’ev Shitz served in the beginning as rabbi, and in the thirties— the son-in-law of Rabbi Haim Zaiman Zvi Sharel. From the mid-thirties, the influence of “Agudat Israel” [religious party] in the community increased. At the end of the decade, Y. Feldman served as head of the community and was also a member of the town council. He participated in all the community’s philanthropic organizations. In 1938, the fiscal balance of the community was 4,107 Lat in respect of expenses and 4,809 Lat in respect of income.

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Aizpute had a Jewish elementary school in which about 100 students studied - there were four classes in 1920 and six classes in 1926. In the 1933-34 school year, the number of students dropped to 90. The language of study was in the beginning German. Judaism and Hebrew language were taught twice a week. Under the influence of a group of the Hebrew teachers in the school, they began to gradually pass over to teaching in Hebrew, and in the 1927-1928 school year, the name of the institution was officially changed to the “First Hebrew Elementary School”. The prevailing influence of “Agudat Israel” in the second half of the thirties was also reflected in the field of education. In 1939, “Talmud Torah” was established for afternoon studies for the school students.

Political and Cultural Activity

After the war, the “Haskala” [Education] Association was founded in order to spread the Hebrew language and the Zionist
concept, and its members founded a Hebrew library in 1919-1920. They organized the youth to raise donations for the “Keren Kayemet Le Israel” [Jewish National Fund], and under their influence as mentioned, the Jewish school became a Hebrew school. Zionist teachers and representatives, who arrived in Aizpute in the early twenties, also contributed to strengthening the Zionist influence. Amongst them were Eliyahu Carmel of the illegal “HeHalutz” in the Soviet Union and Yaakov Maimon-Wesserman, the author of the first Hebrew stenography book, who served as a Hebrew teacher in the school, organizing evening Hebrew classes in which 50 students studied and tried unsuccessfully in 1920 to found a branch of “HeHalutz” in the town. The opening of the Hebrew University was publicly celebrated in the Aizpute Synagogue. The “Association for Culture” was founded in the mid-twenties in the spirit of Zionism, and a dramatic group was established in the thirties, part of whose income aided pioneers to immigrate to Eretz-Israel.

The first Organization of Jewish Youth was founded in 1923 as a sports association of the Jewish School students. It was organized by the gym teacher (not Jewish), and she later on joined the National Organization of Latvian Scouts. In 1924-26, a branch of the “Maccabi” Organization was founded in Aizpute. This was a national Jewish sport association that also engaged in cultural activity and maintained an orchestra. In 1928, a branch of “Shomer Hatsir” was founded with about 50 members in the thirties. They worked a small plot of land that they received from the community. About twenty of them immigrated to Eretz-Israel. In 1930, a branch of “Beltar” was founded, numbering 28 members in 1931 and 20 members in 1932. Its ranks grew slightly in later years. In 1933, a “Hapoel” convention was held in Kurland.

The activity of the “Bund” was sparse in Aizpute: several young people, mostly amongst the students, were members of the Communist part. In addition, the Zionist parties are active in the town, primarily the Socialist Zionists, the General Zionists and the Revisionists (Hetzhar). Zionists were elected to the town council and a few of them served as deputy mayors (e.g., Hirshhorn on behalf of the Socialist Zionists and Moses Hugo on behalf of the General Zionists).

In the first half of the thirties, the Zionist influence in Aizpute increased considerably, and half of all the Jews in the town - 221 persons - took part in the elections to the 1933 Zionist Congress.

The results were as follows:

In the second half of the thirties, the Zionist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congress</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>List of General Zionists</th>
<th>Zion Youth-Socialist</th>
<th>Revisionists (Hetzhar)</th>
<th>Mizrachi</th>
<th>Total No. Of Voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14th</td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35</td>
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<td>15th</td>
<td>1927</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17th</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
activity in the town dwindled as a result of the immigration to Eretz-Israel and an increasing shortage in immigration permits. There was also a decline in "Maccabi" activity, and the soccer teams and orchestra that it established were broken-up. Applications of Jewish athletes for acceptance to Latvian sports associations were rejected. In contrast, the activity of "Agudat Israel" intensified, and in 1939 a women's branch of "Agudat Israel" called "Batya" was founded in Aizpute, with the assistance of activity from Lyepaya.

**During World War II**

**The Soviet Rule (1940-1941)**

During this period most of the businesses were nationalized and the public life of the Jews was gradually obliterated. On the 5th of October 1940, a decision was made to close Maccabi. An official liquidator was appointed and the branch was obliged to conclude the liquidation process within four months of the day of the official publication of the decision. "Hevrat Kadisha" [Burial Society] was closed following a principle decision of the 12th of December, 1940. In the wake of similar decision, the remainder of the cultural, religious, educational, economic and political organizations, including the local parties and youth movements, were closed one after another or the nature of their activity was changed. Many Jews, especially the left wing, tried to adjust and fit in with the institutions of the new regime, particularly in the economic and political area. A Jew by the name of Michael Blum was appointed to the position of deputy mayor in 1941.

Several days after war broke out, the roads leading out of Aizpute were still open, particularly the main north-east axis that ran through Koldiga and Tokoms to Riga, but many Jews hesitated and couldn't decide whether to escape or to remain. Others, mostly the men, were hastily recruited to the "Worker's Guard" and were confined to the town, amongst them were also those that tried to leave town and were returned by order of the Soviet Authorities. The severe shortage in transportation vehicles also made departure difficult. Some of the Jews that managed to leave the town were captured by the advancing German Army. Amongst them was a small group that reached Riga and was caught there. They met the same fate that the rest of the Jews met later on. Within the framework of the official evacuation to the Soviet Union, only a few dozen Jews managed to leave, some on their own initiative and some had positions and connections with the Soviet institutions. But most of the Jews remained behind.

**Under Nazi Rule**

At the end of June or at the beginning of July, 1941, the German Army entered Aizpute. There were over 400 Jews in the town. They were obliged to do forced labor, wear yellow patches and the remainder of the decrees of the Nazi Regime was imposed upon them. On July 24th, 1941, 39 Jews were shot to death near the Fedoras cemetery. On Monday, the 6th of Heshvan, 5720 (October 27, 1941), the Jewish community of Aizpute was annihilated.

The planning of the genocide and its execution was ordered by the German Security Police of Lyepaya, as the town of Aizpute was under its area of authority. The municipal forest - at a distance of 3 km from the town, near the Kalvini railway station - was fixed as the site of the execution. Three pits were dug at this spot of a total area of 100 square meters. In preparation for the slaughter, the local Latvian police concentrated the Jews in the synagogue.
They were allowed to take with them packages on the false pretense that they were about to be transferred to another place. On the morning of the "action", German Security Policemen (10-15 men) arrived from Lyepaya to the scene of the murder, accompanied by a Latvian firing squad of about 20 men, which was under their command. Ten trucks were round up by the synagogue, some of which arrived specially from Lyepaya. The local police loaded 10-20 persons on each truck, and took them to the site of the killing that was already surrounded by armed local police. The Jews were unloaded from the trucks, marched several hundred meters to a meadow on the outskirts of the forest. The Germans awaited them there, and they searched their bodies for money and valuables. The Jews were ordered to set down their packages, lie on the ground and wait. The victims were taken to pits in groups of 10 -- men, women, children and babies in the arms of their mothers -- and they were shot by a Latvian firing squad. Every two marksmen aimed their weapons at a distance of 5 meters at another victim. The "action" lasted a few hours, and at the end all the packages of the murdered were transferred to the local police station. On the 3rd of November, 1941, the German Security Police of Lyepaya reported the execution of 386 Jews in Aizpute, and at the entrance to the town a sign was erected stating "Jüdenfrei" [free of Jews]. Two Jewish women found a hiding place with a Latvian farmer, but they were discovered after a few months. The women were murdered and the farmer was arrested. Another Jew found shelter with a Latvian woman until the end of the war, and he apparently is the sole survivor out of all the Jews of Aizpute that remained under Nazi occupation.

After the war, Jews returned from Russia to Aizpute, and a few of them were shot by Latvian adversaries of the Soviet regime.

In 1973 a tomb was erected in the town with the inscription: "In Memory of the Victims of Fascism".

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Latvia Current Events

courtesy Mike Getz

LATVIAN PARLIAMENT APPROVES NEW GOVERNMENT.

On November 26, the Latvian Parliament approved, by a 59-24 vote with no abstentions, the minority government of Vilis Kristopans. Kristopans's Latvia's Way party, and the party of outgoing Prime Minister Guntars Krasts, the Fatherland and Freedom Party, each has seven portfolios in the new government.

Portfolios for the Latvia Way party include foreign affairs and finance, and portfolios for the Fatherland and Freedom party include defense and internal affairs. President Guntis Ulmanis said he believes one of the new government's main tasks in the near future is to expand its ranks to include members of other parties.
Amidst Latvians During the Holocaust

By Edward Anders

As a Latvian Jew from Libau (originally Eduards Alperoviës) I was pleased to see Marion Werle’s fair and informative review of Andrew Ezergailis’ book, “The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944” (Latvia SIG 2 [1], 14–15). Ezergailis has mercilessly exposed the involvement of Latvians in the murders, but the subtitle of his book—“The Missing Center”—alludes to a lasting legacy of this involvement: poisoned relations between Latvians and Latvian Jews. The extreme bitterness of camp survivors is understandable, as they suffered countless brutalities at the hands of Latvian murderers while having little contact with ordinary Latvians. The “deep denial” of many émigré Latvians is also understandable (though not excusable), as they—like many Japanese, Austrians, French, Swiss, etc.—find it hard to admit wrongdoing by their own people, let alone by themselves or their friends, and still cling to some Nazi propaganda. I shall contribute a “voice from the center”, having been in a unique position to observe the Latvian people during the German occupation. I saw shades of gray where others saw only black and white.

I survived the Holocaust by falsely claiming that my mother was an Aryan foundling, which made me a half-Jew. The German authorities believed this fairy tale long enough to spare us during the killings of 1941 (although I came within a few hours of being shot during the Libau Aktion of 12/15/41). They kept granting us 3-month exemptions from Jewish status while my mother was searching archives for a (non-existent!) baptismal record. And when they in 1943 finally refused to grant us another extension, they neglected to notify the SD, enabling us to survive in legal limbo. During a moment of confusion in late 1944, we escaped to Germany, metamorphosed into ethnic Germans, and thus survived the war. My other 24 relatives all perished.

Good and Bad Latvians

Having attended Latvian schools until 1941 and lived in Latvian society 1926–44, I had plenty of contact with Latvians from many walks of life. I was old enough (15) in 1941 to see, hear, and understand a lot; enough to testify on the German Army’s complicity in the Holocaust at the 1948 Nuremberg trial of the German High Command. And—if I may say so without being immodest—I am known in my field of science for my elephantine memory.

My family was quite well known in our town of 60,000, and was 100% Jewish—my grandfather was gabbai, my brother and I had had Bar-Mitzvah, etc. Thus, whenever we appeared in the street in Nazi times without the yellow patch, we were highly visible irritants to local anti-Semites. If we survived nonetheless, it is only because these anti-Semites were outnumbered by people who helped us or at least chose not to harm us.

I accept Ezergailis’ estimate that about 3,000 Latvians (0.5% of the adult male population) participated in the murders, as killers or accomplices. Another 5–20% were anti-Semites of varying degrees of viciousness. The remainder ranged from indifferent to strongly compassionate; some of the latter aided Jews or even saved their lives. I encountered all these kinds. For example, two brave women gave false affidavits supporting my mother’s fairy tale, several other people (including some Latvian police officers!) who could have exposed our tale...
did not do so, but either helped us or turned a blind eye. A number of neighbors, friends, and even strangers expressed outrage at the persecutions and killings. I was forbidden to attend school, but all my former classmates and teachers continued to be friendly.

Latvia SIG has repeatedly dwelt on the atrocities of Latvian killers, but has never mentioned any of the more than 200 “righteous gentiles” who saved the lives of Jews. Of the 1300 Latvian Jews who survived the German occupation, 300 were saved by Latvians. Still more Jews would have been saved, had 52 of the rescuers not been arrested with the Jews they had hidden; 14 of the rescuers paid with their lives for their good deeds (figures from the historian Marijs Vestermanis, director of the Museum-Archive “Jews in Latvia”). To hide a Jew took far more courage in Latvia than in Denmark or Holland, as the usual penalty was death rather than a reprimand or brief prison term. Still, the dock worker Dānis Lipke saved 56 Jews, mostly strangers, by farming them out to 29 friends. I wonder how many of us would have risked our lives to hide a stranger for 3 years, feeding him from our meager food rations. That Lipke was able to find so many hosts without being betrayed shows that Latvia was not quite the hotbed of anti-Semitism alleged in Latvia SIG.

Of my nearly 100 coworkers on several jobs only three were overt anti-Semites. The most vicious one got me fired after tormenting me with tactful remarks such as, “now we are all drinking Jewish blood that has seeped into the ground and is coming back in our drinking water”. Some people on the street yelled at us for not wearing the yellow patch and denounced us to the police; our janitor and a neighbor reported to police that my father was hiding in our apartment, who then arrested and killed him; other Latvian policemen arrested my brother and me in the December Aktion and would have killed us, had we not been spared at the whim of a German policeman, etc. (Already on the way to prison, a young Latvian policeman, seething with hate, wanted to shoot us on the spot, but was deterred by an older policeman).

I believe that Ezergailis has given a fair account of Latvian conduct and attitudes during the Holocaust. For my home town, I found his assessment confirmed in the biweekly report of the SS- and Polizeiführer Libau of 1/3/42, right after the big mid-December Aktion in which 2,749 Jews were shot [USHMM manuscript RG-18.002M, file 83–1–22]:

The execution of Jews carried out during the report period still is the conversation topic of the local population. The fate of the Jews is widely deplored, and thus far few voices have been heard in favor of the elimination of the Jews.


Yes, there were Latvian goons who beat and robbed Jews on the street or in their houses, from the first days of the German occupation. But there were many others who showed their sympathy. Many Latvian newspapers carried editorials attacking and threatening those Latvian “fools and traitors” who gave food to Jews, kept befriending them, or even greeted them on the street. That such editorials kept appearing shows that more than a few people were involved.
Latvian Anti-Semitism

Latvia SIG has repeatedly contended (1) that the Latvian people and their government were profoundly anti-Semitic, and (2) that Latvian involvement in the Holocaust was a natural consequence. I shall show that (1) is an exaggeration: some of the allegations are true, others are true but one-sided, whereas still others are erroneous. Thus a different explanation must be sought for (2).

Yes, Jews were essentially excluded from civil service, but Jewish schools were supported by the state. Yes, it was hard for Jews to enter some faculties of the University, because those 89% who had attended Jewish schools had trouble passing the stiff Latvian language exam, but many Jewish students simply enrolled in science or engineering and then switched. Evidently this method worked, as Jews were over-represented in law and medicine (as well as business). Yes, some Jewish businesses were nationalized (including my father’s grain mill, at two-thirds of fair market value), but only in some branches, and so were German businesses in these same branches. My father was able to keep his grain export business and continued to get export licenses until the very end of independent Latvia (6/17/40)—contrary to the report of a US legation official in Riga that licenses were being withheld from Jewish businesses (Latvia SIG 2 [1], 24–25, 1997). Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany continued to get visas until the end, even after most other countries had stopped taking Jews. Shades of gray again.

Yes, there was a virulently anti-Semitic organization in Latvia (Pēkopiķi = Thunder Cross), but it was outlawed under Ulmanis and its publications were forbidden. Yes, Prime Minister Ulmanis once visited Germany, but apparently did not see Hitler, never again returned after becoming President, and certainly did not make “regular visits to Hitler, signaling an unofficial alliance” (Latvia SIG 1 [4], 4, 1996). Indeed, 6 months after Ulmanis seized power, Jewish religion classes were established in Latvian elementary schools in the middle of the school year, presumably at the urging of his orthodox friend and adviser, Mordechai Dubin of Agudat Yisrael. (I still have my second-grade report card, showing that Jewish religion class started in mid-year). All told, Latvia in the 1930’s was more anti-Semitic than Italy or Scandinavia; about the same as France, Switzerland, the USA, and Canada; but less so than Germany and several Eastern European countries. Ezergailis’ description of Jewish-Latvian relations in independent Latvia is largely accurate, and is supported by Rabbi Nurock’s 1939 speech in New York (Latvia SIG 1 [4], 12–14, 1996) as well as by Vestermanis’ articles.

A major question in assessing Latvian guilt is whether Latvians killed any Jews on their own, before arrival of the Germans. Ezergailis has extensively documented Latvian involvement in mass killings of Jews, but notes that it always began only after arrival of the Germans. As a counterexample Mike Getz has reported the organized killing of some 300 Jews in Subate, which he contends took place on 6/23/41, 6 days before arrival of German troops (Latvia SIG 2 [1], 15–17, 21–23, 1997). However, Soviet trial records show unequivocally that this massacre occurred a month later, on 7/21/41, in the fourth week of the German occupation (Ezergailis, Latvia SIG 3 [2], 00–00, 1998. A more extensive version is in press in Genocide Studies, 1998). It was carried out by Latvian “Self-Defense” men (auxiliary police, Schutzmannschaften), but on German orders and under German supervision. Getz’ June date, from a 1942 underground report, apparently was off by one month. A few details from that report are accurate, others
are not.

Allegedly there exist other reports of killings before arrival of the Germans. I can easily believe that a few sporadic, hit-and-run killings took place, but no methodical, organized massacres. As every judge, historian, and journalist knows, even eyewitness reports often contain errors, and these multiply with time and passage from mouth to mouth. Any such reports must be thoroughly checked for plausibility and consistency with other evidence before being accepted. One example is an incredibly garbled survivor account on the Internet of the July-December 1941 killings in Libau, where the facts are very well known. Another example is the oft-repeated canard that in some towns Latvians killed all Jews during the interregnum and then put up a sign “Judendreich” at the town entrance. Our society has safeguards against unconfirmed “bobbesmyseh”; hearsay evidence is not admitted in court, raw FBI files are equally unacceptable, and responsible journalists require two independent sources for every alleged fact.

What Turned Some Latvians Into Killers?

Even though there were no mass killings before arrival of the Germans, there looms a large and disturbing question: how did thousands of Latvian “Self-Defense” men turn into cold-blooded killers or accomplices in the first few weeks of the German occupation?

Like every country, Latvia had a small percentage of vicious anti-Semites, but they never were able to enjoy the pleasures of a pogrom. Their predilections for violence had been totally restrained by the norms of the Latvian state and society; the police and courts would not tolerate violent acts against Jews or Jewish property. Recall that events which triggered pogroms in Russia and some other Eastern European countries never did so in Latvia (Easter, disappearance of some gentle child, assassination of Alexander II, 1904/5 revolution, Civil War 1918/20, etc.) These norms apparently still held during the interregnum and even at the very beginning of the German occupation, as Einsatzgruppe A complained when comparing Latvia with Lithuania:

It was significantly more difficult to start similar cleanup operations and pogroms in Latvia. However, after exerting appropriate influence on the Latvian Auxiliary Police, it was possible to initiate a Jewish pogrom in Riga [on 7/4/41] during which all synagogues were destroyed and approximately 400 Jews were killed (Quarterly Report of Einsatzgruppe A, 10/15/41).

This “Latvian Auxiliary Police” unit was the notorious Arajs Commando, which had formed 3 days earlier. Evidently the most vicious anti-Semites only needed a signal that killing of Jews now was not only tolerated but encouraged and rewarded. Other Schutzmänner were reluctant at first:

[A 7/16/41 report for Daugavpils only]. The Latvians, including the leading active ones, have so far behaved passively toward the Jews, and did not dare rise against them...as opposed to the active attitude of the Lithuanians, the Latvians have hesitated to organize and mobilize themselves against the Jews.

Yet within a couple of weeks the most murderous elements had gathered into enthusiastic killer squads of the Latvian SD (Aräjs Commando, Ilūkste “Death Battalion”), whereas many other Schutzmänner had allowed themselves to become accomplices, some of them even serving on firing squads if ordered to. What had happened to these men?

During the Soviet occupation, the NKVD had deported more than 30,000 Latvians (half of
them a week before the German attack) and killed additional thousands, further intensifying people’s hatred of the regime. Although the victims included a disproportionate number of Jews (at least 5,000), the Germans by intense propaganda redirected this hatred onto Jews, claiming that the NKVD and Communist party were run entirely by and for Jews, that Jewish doctors had tortured prisoners, that Jews—not German artillery and bombers—had set cities on fire, etc. They further dehumanized Jews by classical anti-Semitic calumny, from ritual murder to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which were serialized in newspapers.

This crude propaganda cynically exploited people’s thirst for revenge, by providing local Jews as scapegoats for the distant culprits of the NKVD. Compared to the charges that had triggered pogroms in Czarist Russia—a disappeared child, rumors of Jewish involvement in an assassination—these new charges were enormously weightier, yet they neither incited pogroms nor kept many Latvians from “widely deploring the fate of the Jews”. But they sufficed to turn hard-core anti-Semites into cold-blooded killers, sweeping along the gullible, the amoral, and callous opportunists with stunted consciences. Peer pressure and obedience to authority did the rest, as for the well-studied German Police Battalion 101 (Christopher Browning: Ordinary Men, 1992).

Latvian involvement in the killings was not due to some unique, pernicious streak of the Latvian people. I suspect that a reservoir of such potential killers exists in many civilized countries—note the 10–20% votes for chauvinist parties with thinly disguised anti-Semitic, Neo-Nazi ideology. Such killers would have come out of the woodwork even in German-occupied Western Europe if two additional ingredients had been present: a huge grievance that can be blamed on Jews, and on-the-spot mass killings staged by Germans for emulation. As it happened, there was no suitable grievance, and the Nazis for some reason were reluctant to kill Western European Jews on their home soil, preferring to do so in the East.

**Latvians in the 1990’s**
We must distinguish between Latvians who fled to Germany in 1944/45 and those who remained in Latvia. The émigrés comprise decent people along with scoundrels, who, regrettably, have been fairly successful in dominating the Latvian émigré press in the US, Canada, and elsewhere. Although some articles and letters commend Ezergailis for exposing this dark chapter in Latvian history, many others viciously attack him, branding him a traitor and defending Latvian participation in the killings by blaming Jews for the NKVD deportations. A few readers have returned his book, others propose to burn it.

The worst of these émigré demagogues were collaborators or even killers, and thus have a strong interest in distorting the truth. Fortunately they are dying off, and I hope that Ezergailis will prevail among the younger generations, as well as the decent older people. (Yes, I know a number of such people. For example, when I was War Crimes Representative of the Federation of Latvian Jews in Munich in 1946–49, one Latvian émigré gave me a list of more than a dozen Latvian murderers).

I have recently visited Latvia and again saw shades of gray. President Guntis Ulmanis says and does all the right things, and well deserves the major award that the B’nai Brith Anti-Defamation League gave him in early 1998. His office also responded very positively to my letter urging preservation of the Tukums Jewish cemetery (reports of its imminent demolition turned out to be false). His government also seems to be tough on
Holocaust murderers. When Ezergailis researched Soviet trial records in the Riga Archives, he found that two Subate murderers, who had been sentenced to 20 or 25 years in the gulag and loss of property and civil rights, had petitioned the Latvian government for rehabilitation after Latvia had become independent. Their petitions were denied.

On the other hand, there still are anti-Semites around. A small bomb was set off at the Riga synagogue, damaging a basement window. I have heard second-hand reports of mildly anti-Semitic remarks by a few government officials, including a cabinet minister, and of strongly anti-Semitic remarks by callers to a TV program. The Riga City Council took forever to name a street after Ianis Lipke. And a fair number of people prefer to continue the Soviet taboo on discussion of the Holocaust. All in all, just like much of Western Europe!

These observations show once more that Latvians—like people of all nations—come in all shadings, from saints to murderers, and deserve to be judged as individuals. Tarring all of them with the same brush is not only unfair but also counterproductive, the more so as most Latvians now living were born after the Holocaust and bear no personal guilt. The Jews currently living in Latvia have chosen, for better or for worse, to coexist with Latvians. We are not helping them by firing shotgun blasts at all Latvian people and Latvian governments. Instead, let us work toward positive changes in Latvia, including a frank reappraisal of Latvian actions—good and bad—in the Holocaust, and an honest treatment of this subject in schools.

Latvian Jews, especially those who actually lived there, can make important contributions to this reappraisal. We need to move beyond sweeping generalizations and second-hand stories, and approach the subject with the critical eyes of professional historians. Just because something is printed and reprinted does not mean that it is true. Paper is remarkably indulgent, and will not let out even a tiny squeak if the most blatant nonsense is printed on it.

I conclude as I began, with a reference to Ezergailis. We owe him profound gratitude for his outstanding, scholarly, meticulously researched book. It honors the victims better than any monument in stone could, as expressed by his dedication: "I dedicate this study to the Jews of Latvia who died in the Holocaust". I hope he never gets discouraged by the attacks from extremists of both groups.

Permanent Display on Jews of Latvia at US Holocaust Memorial Museum

by Gary Fitleberg

Gary Fitleberg and Boris Kacel (see book review, page 27) are working together to gather materials for a permanent display on the "Jews of Latvia" at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and welcome copies of family heirlooms, genealogy charts, photographs (family and shtetls) to include in the exhibit. Credit will be given to all contributors. Please send copies with identification to Gary Fitleberg, P.O. Box 8373, Calabasas, CA 91302. Your assistance and cooperation are greatly appreciated!
In My Opinion...

The Missing “Truth” About “The Missing Center”

by Gary Fitleberg

Andrew Ezergailis has done a remarkable job gathering document collections from various archives and has presented us with an extensive bibliography in his book *The Holocaust in Latvia 1941-1944: The Missing Center*. In his attempt to analyze this tragic period in Latvia’s history, he includes many impressive graphics and illustrations, including photographs, maps, and tables.

In the preface of the book, Mr. Ezergailis so aptly states “This is the first work by one of the natives (Einhsimiche) as the Nazis preferred to refer to the Latvians. I hope that I have avoided the more obvious moralizing that the topic invites. Try as I may, in conceptualizing the work, I could not avoid showing my Latvian past and colors.” This truth becomes clearly and transparently self-evident.

In the introduction of the book, in a section entitled, “Who Killed the Jews of Latvia” (Spontaneity versus Orders), Mr. Ezergailis boldly makes the assertion as author, historian, professor, and scholar that “Historians with a predilection for perceiving predetermined historical forces should also absence of pogroms in Latvia’s past. No Jewish synagogue had been burned in Latvia until after the Germans arrived. Among anti-Semites, Latvia was known as a ‘Jewish country’ not one where pogroms took place. The Latvian-Jewish relationships in the 1920’s were not without their problems but there was nothing that would have predicted the murders of 1941.” The footnote to this text adds, “For example, from the Jewish perspective, Latvian Jews in America who wrote a memorandum, do not consider the possibility that Jews would be murdered in Latvia.” citing Records of the U.S. State Department relating to...Latvia Film M1177, Roll 17, frame 0340ff.

On face value, this appears to be an authoritative statement and is even supported as “official” because it is based on a document contained within the Archives of the U.S. Government.

Unfortunately, the reader of Mr. Ezergailis’ work of scholarship must trust the author’s analysis as an “authority” on this subject because one cannot review the actual text of the document as one can with “Stahlecker’s Answer to Lohse’s Guidelines on Treatment of Jews in the Ostland” which can be easily reviewed as an appendix at the end of the book. One would not normally need to question its authenticity as it is cited in both the bibliography and the footnote to the text.

Fortunately, this “memorandum” was published in *Latvia SIG, Volume 2, Number 1, April 1997*. We will soon see why. If, however, one delves further, one will see a completely different view, upon closer examination of the actual text of the document, revealing a more accurate picture of the real “historical truth” of the Holocaust in Latvia and prior anti-Semitism in that nation.

The document is actually “A Report to the Secretary of State from Riga, May 27, 1940” by John C. Riley, The Foreign Service of the United States of America, American
Legation Correspondence found in the National Archives – “The Jews in Latvia” in the records of the U.S. State Department relating to Latvia film M1177, Roll 17, frame 0340ff, declassified by the State Department on June 2, 1979. The remainder of the document contains population statistics and other information about the Jews of Latvia prior to the German invasion. The report also mentions a subsequent dispatch about the extent of Jewish property interests and estimate of participation in commercial, industrial, and professional life of the Jewish community of Latvia.

One can clearly see just on its face that the so-called memorandum was written neither from the Jewish perspective, nor by Latvian Jews in America, as Mr. Ezergailis asserts and leads the reader to believe. As one delves further into the details of the text, the actual truth of the contents is finally exposed for all to see.

A completely contradictory statement by author John Riley of the State Department emerges and shows the misleading nature of the Ezergailis text and corresponding footnote. “According to reliable information, the [Latvian] Government decided upon an anti-Semitic policy last September [1939] and the resignation on October 24, 1939 of Alfred Valdmanis, the Minister of Finance, was made by him as a gesture of protest.”

This is a significant statement for many reasons. First of all, both the date of the resignation, October 24, 1939, as well as the date of the report, May 27, 1940, about Latvia’s “unofficial” policy of anti-Semitism was clearly before either the Russians or Germans occupied Latvia. Mr. Ezergailis is thus unable to shift responsibility to either the Germans or Russians. Mr. Ezergailis could have benefitted and utilized this information to support his assertion in his book that the supporters of Alfred Valdmanis who later participated in the Nazi established General Directorate of the Land Self Administration “were even at times active in the outer fringes of resistance and worried the Germans very much.” This topic surely deserves further exploration and investigation.

The report continues, “The application of anti-Semitism in Latvia is made very easy by the administrative technique of the country. Nearly everything is permitted but only on the basis of a special permit. If a Jew wishes to establish a business, dismiss or engage employees, move his residence, transfer his business premises, or perform any of the innumerable functions of life or business, such a permit is usually withheld without explanation. In addition, under the pretext of recruiting additional labor for the land, Jewish households are being deprived of their servants under 50 years of age. There is, moreover, discrimination against Jewish lawyers, doctors, and dentists. I am informed that no Jewish lawyers have been admitted to the practice since the coup d'etat on May 15, 1934,” referring to the Karlis Ulmanis regime in which the constitution was suspended in Latvia.

It gets even better, or worse, depending on one’s interpretation. Further, “The [sic] imposition of taxes on Jewish business is described as confiscatory and many Jewish industries are prevented from obtaining sufficient raw materials, while Latvian and state owned competitors receive ample stocks.” Apparently in Mr. Ezergailis’ authoritative analysis of the situation he does not consider these as serious conditions in the Latvian-Jewish relationship leading up to the murders of 1941.

There’s even more. “A leading member of the Jewish community who belongs to an industrial family which has been established in Latvia for 200 years, is the only one who,
in private conversation, has struck an optimistic note. He does not believe that anti-Semitism in Latvia will ever achieve the proportions which it has reached in Germany.” Only one leading member of the Jewish community who was a resident of Riga, again, not a group of Latvian Jews in America who was tragically and unfortunately wrong.

Riley’s report states unequivocally that the leading anti-Semites are said to be President Ulmanis, the Minister of Public Affairs M. Vilhelm Munters, and M. Alfreds Berzins, the Minister of Public Relations. The role of President Ulmanis is a rather controversial one and not a topic of discussion to debate here. It should be noted for the record in his book, Ezergailis refers to Alfreds Berzins as “the propaganda minister of Ulmanis.” Berzins was a member of the Maks group responsible for the killing of the Jews of Rezekne. The Maks group were regional Latvian police (Schutzmannschaft) who enthusiastically “assisted” in the murders of Jews in the local shtetls and towns.

Mr. Andrew Ezergailis, in the preface of his book, bravely and courageously declares, “For all the errors of fact and concept, I take full responsibility, and no friend or colleague should be blamed for them.” Later, he states that the subject of anti-Semitism in Latvia awaits its historian. I agree with Mr. Ezergailis 100%. The final chapter of the history of the Holocaust in Latvia has yet to be written.

Mr. Ezergailis was thoughtful enough to open the dialogue on this very important subject and he is to be commended for doing so. His work of scholarship will set the foundation for further study by future historians. Latvia and Latvians must take full responsibility for its active role in the collaboration of these murders and not shift blame towards others before it can truly call itself a “democratic” and “independent” nation in the world community. A completely accurate and honest look into its past will guarantee that the same mistakes will not become part of the present and the future.

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**Liepaja Web Page**

by Paul Berkay

The purpose of the Liepaja/Libau web page is to help individuals trace their ancestry in this city. The information on the page will help a genealogist become familiar with the streets of Liepaja through maps and lists of German and Latvian street names. A database of Old Libau property owners for 1938 is also provided, so that individuals can look up their ancestors.

Links include:

--Modern-day and historical maps of Liepaja/Libau
--Lists of German and Latvian street names for Old Libau
--Links to various related resources, including Latvian Businesses, Latvian Penpals, and Embassies

--Photos of old Latvian money from 1899 to 1910.
--A 1938 Old Libau property owners' list with surnames, business names, street numbers, street names, and mortgage numbers.

Parts of the database can be viewed as HTML pages, or the user can download the entire 5000 record database and view it with Access 97.

Paul’s web page may be found at
http://members.aol.com/liepajalat
Extraordinary Commission Records for Latvian Towns Available for Translation

by Marion Werle

As the Soviet Union recaptured lands from the Germans in World War II, it established a commission, known as the "Extraordinary Commission to Investigate German-Fascist Crimes Committed on Soviet Territory", whose purpose was to document German atrocities occurring on Soviet soil. The records of the Commission are arranged by locality. I first learned of these records at the Washington Summer Seminar in 1995. Since that time, the list of records available for Latvia has become more complete. Peter Lande, of the JGSGW, who is a volunteer at the Holocaust Museum, has made reference to the documents in his ongoing What Happened to Shmuel and Rebeka During the Holocaust? lectures and articles (for example, see Avotaynu, volume XIII, number 4, Winter 1997, pp. 22-26). The Avotaynu article referenced previously happened to mention that records existed for my ancestral shtetl. I contacted Mike Getz, who made copies of the Ribinishki (Riebene) records, and I had them translated. Since then, Mike has obtained copies of the remaining Latvian records from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Vadim Altškan of the USHMM has been especially helpful in helping to identify and locate these records, and the Latvia SIG is grateful for his assistance. At the end of this article is a list of the towns for which such records exist. The Latvia SIG would like to encourage individuals interested in a town or towns to contact Mike and arrange to have such records translated. The SIG does not have the resources to pay for translations of all records, but will be happy to make copies available to individuals or groups of individuals who can arrange for translation, and donate the translations to the SIG.

Andrew Ezergailis, in The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941-1944: the Missing Center, (Riga, Historical Institute of Latvia, 1996, pp. 17-18), describes the contents of these records in a description of the files of the Soviet Extraordinary Commission held at the State Historical Archives in Riga: "The archives are organized by districts, and each district file is subdivided into smaller, sometimes raw, data files from pagasts and towns. The murder sites are usually illustrated by charts, indicating their geographical location and size of the graves. Frequently, lists of murdered Jews are also part of the file. If the Jews were killed locally, it is indicated in the records, but usually Jews from smaller locations were sent to larger towns, and that is also indicated. Lists of people participating in the killings or arrests are also in the files, and it is noted whether the killings were done by locals, Germans, or some other unit." The records I have seen, for both Preili and Ribinishki, are handwritten in Russian. There is a narrative of atrocities that occurred in the area, as well as a list of victims and perpetrators. The lists are arranged by family, and show relationships to the head of household. They also include ages. Bear in mind that the lists were compiled from interviews with inhabitants of the towns, some years after the fact. While the data is of genealogical and historical value, it is nonetheless subject to error, as a subsequent example will illustrate. This is secondary data, and should be treated as such. Ages should not be regarded as authoritative--they are based on the recollection of neighbors, not fact.
Identifying my relatives who perished in the Holocaust has become a personal crusade; prior to beginning my research, I had no idea that I even had relatives who remained in Latvia. The records of the Extraordinary Commission for Ribiniski (Riebene) provided a missing link that identified a complete family. Because my mother's relatives were women, it was difficult to identify (from photos with first names only) accurate family groupings, and it was difficult to do research without knowing married surnames. My only clue was a photo of a baby, with the inscription, "To Uncle Chaim, from Michle Getz". Michle appeared as an older child, in a group photo of five of my mother's cousins. My grandfather had four sisters that I know of, but the real mystery was, whose children were in the pictures, and were they all siblings, or from separate families? There are still two children whose parents I can't identify, but the rest is becoming clear, largely due to these records.

The bottom of the page is an excerpt from the Extraordinary Commission records from Ribiniski.

Entries 65 through 70, identified as the 19th Family, show the family of Abram and Genia Gets (Getz), children Mikhla, Sora, Losel and Shlomo. Michle/Mikhla is the same girl in my photos, and Sora is also in the group photo. Genia Getz signed her name as Hane Rochel in my photo, and she is variously identified as Rocha, Gena, and Gena Roha in official documents. Information subsequently obtained from the archives shows Abram Getz, her husband, as having been born in Subate, certainly making him a relative of Mike Getz, although the exact relationship remains to be established. Children Losel and Shlomo are unknown to me. There are indications, both from a photo and a garbled name in another document, that there was a child named Nusin, who does not show up in this list. Archival records from 1935 show that the family had three children, the two girls and a son whose name was neither Losel nor Shlomo. The 15th Family,
headed by Iosif Skutelski, shows daughters
Enka and Vera. Vera is Dvera Skutelski, one
of my grandfather’s sisters, who shows up in
two of my photos. I do not know of any Iosif
Skutelski, age 75. My great grandfather,
whose name was Nusin, died in the 1920’s;
however, my great grandmother, Beila, was
killed in the Holocaust, and would have been
in her late 70’s. She had two daughters, Enta
and Dvera, shown living with her in
inhabitant listings from 1935. The inclusion
of two unknown Getz children and the
unknown Iosif Skutelski are both indications
of the limitations of the Extraordinary
Commission records as genealogical sources,
since the information they contain may not
be accurate.
It is worth mentioning a web site with an
example of a listing of Extraordinary
Commission records. It is the JewishGen
ShtetLinks site for Skhudvil, Lithuania,

found at:

<http://www1.jewishgen.org/ShtetLinks/shkudvil/victims1.html>

This online listing shows a variety of death
dates and locations, and does not show ages.
The examples I have seen show that deaths
occurred over a period of several days, but
the lists do not differentiate death dates or
locations.

A list of Latvian towns for which we have
Extraordinary Commission records follows.
Please contact Mike Getz
(mgetz@erols.com) to obtain copies of the
records for your town. We look forward to
compiling a comprehensive database of these
records.

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President's Message

continued from page 1

you read a sermon by Harold Schulweis, the senior rabbi of my synagogue, who was the founding chairman of the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers. Those of you who are familiar with Rabbi Schulweis' written or spoken words will realize that he can express ideas with an eloquence that few can match. The sermon I refer to is on the internet--its URL is <http://www.vbs.org/rabbi/hshulw/ memory.htm>. He makes the case that recognizing the role that righteous gentiles played in the Holocaust in no way diminishes the suffering and loss to our people. I will not even attempt to paraphrase the sermon--I recommend that you read it in its entirety for yourselves.

This is the last issue of the newsletter that will feature the ongoing debate of the Holocaust in Latvia. While there is no question that the Shoah has affected all of us with Latvian roots, I must remind you that we are, first and foremost, a genealogical organization. We will continue to publish Holocaust-related material that is related to our genealogical search--internment lists of Latvians from Stutthof, Extraordinary Commission lists of Holocaust victims, survivors' lists, and any other material that will help us to identify our ancestors. We will leave the ongoing analysis of the nuances of blame to the plethora of Holocaust scholars and organizations that exist, and urge those of you who wish to pursue such issues to get involved in these groups.

On another, more mundane topic, we have begun discussions with JewishGen regarding incorporation under their non-profit umbrella. It appears that we will be able to retain our autonomy, while acquiring both legal incorporation and non-profit tax status. This should assist us with fund-raising for record acquisitions, translations, and other projects.

Last, but not least, we are still in need of volunteers. Robert Heyman and I will both be relinquishing our positions as of the next Summer Seminar, and we need to insure a strong succession. Several members of the Latvia SIG online mailing list were enthusiastic about creating a searchable Latvian Jewish genealogical database. As I wrote in the mailing list, this is not a simple task, and people who have not participated in such a project have no concept of the work involved. Besides the data collection and data entry, there are issues of transliteration standards, how to handle patronyms (the LitvakSIG debated a long time over this issue), what data to include, how to best organize it, not to mention many technical details which I don't even know myself. If anybody with database experience (and I mean more than just creating an Access database on your desktop PC for personal use) would like to volunteer to lead this effort please contact me. We need to inventory what data we have available, since we already have a good deal of data in various spreadsheets. I am sure that many of us have data from Feigmanis that doesn't seem to pertain to our own families. If we compiled all of that data, it would certainly contribute to the group effort. However, nobody has yet volunteered to lead this effort, which will take a lot of work, but will create a lasting resource. Please contact me if you are interested.

Wishing you a happy and healthy 1999.
Book Review - From Hell to Redemption

by Gary Fitleberg

Author Boris Kacel poignantly points out that revisionism is on the rise and that many people deny the Holocaust ever occurred despite strong overwhelming evidence to the contrary. He believes it is incumbent upon each and every survivor to tell his story and to make a written record of all the tragic events for the sake of posterity as an eyewitness.

"I wrote this book in my senior years not because I wanted to but because I felt obliged to speak out for the now muted voices of my family and friends lost forever in the war. I am one of the few to be able to tell what happened to me and to the thousands of other Jews under Nazi occupation in Riga, Latvia and other countries."

From Hell to Redemption is the stirring and detailed account of an individual young man's fight for survival during the Holocaust. It is the story of an individual who lived, saw, felt, suffered and experienced man's inhumanity and wants to share it with the rest of the world.

Boris Kacel enjoyed a carefree life as a youngster living with his family in a peaceful middle-class neighborhood in Riga, Latvia. All of that changed in 1941 when the German troops attacked the Soviet Union, crossing the border from the Baltic to the Ukraine.

Initially Kacel and his family were forced to move into a Jewish ghetto in the slum of the city. Soon, however, he and his father were relocated to a different part of the ghetto while the rest of his family, including his 'Guardian Angel' mother, two younger sisters, and a younger brother perished in an "evacuation" of the Riga Ghetto to their untimely tragic fate in the Rumbuli Forest.

Kacel and his father were subsequently incarcerated at seven different concentration camps located in four different countries together. These included a "Kaiserierung" at Ilgeium Cement Factory in Riga; Kaiserwaider Concentration Camp, Vaivare Labor Camp (Estonia), Sonda Labor Camp (Estonia), Stutthoff and Buchenwald.

Separated from his father, Kacel made a daring escape from the Nazis and was eventually liberated by the U.S. Armed Forces. Kacel had no desire to return to his native homeland Latvia after witnessing terrible atrocities and where he lost most of his family. After living a few years in Germany, he emigrated to the United States in 1947 where he was originally reunited with his father and found a productive and satisfying life.

Now in his later years in life, Kacel felt compelled to share his experiences, to speak out for the now muted voices of his family and friends, and to provide eyewitness testimony to the atrocities that took place and now risk being forgotten.

All proceeds of this book will be contributed by the author to fulfill his "long-standing dream" for a permanent visual memorial of the vanished Jewish Community of Latvia in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C.
You don't want to miss the exciting schedule of workshops, lectures and meetings that is being planned for the 1999 conference in New York City. Whether you are just beginning your family research or have been researching your ancestors for many years and now consider yourself an advanced genealogist, you will find programs of interest and have the opportunity to check out New York's wealth of historical and genealogical resources.

And, while here, you will certainly want to take some time to explore and experience New York, a dynamic city of

... fascinating neighborhoods
... fabulous museums and galleries
... marvelous restaurants
... stupendous shopping
... Broadway and Off-Broadway Theater
... and so much more!

Please join us for an exciting week of educational programming, research opportunities, networking with genealogists from around the world, and a grand time in a great city.

For more information:
Visit our web page: http://members.aol.com/nyc99conf
E-mail: nyc99conf@aol.com
Write: Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc.
600 West End Avenue, Suite 10F
New York, NY 10024
# 19th Annual Conference on Jewish Genealogy
## August 8–13, 1999
### Registration Form

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**Early Registration** (Must be postmarked by May 15, 1999)  
U.S.$150

(Includes a conference syllabus and the revised edition of *Genealogical Resources in the New York Metropolitan Area*)

**Early Registration for Spouse/Companion** (No printed materials included)  
U.S.$50

**Regular Registration** (After May 15, 1999)  
U.S.$175

(Includes a conference syllabus and the revised edition of *Genealogical Resources in the New York Metropolitan Area*)

**Regular Registration for Spouse/Companion** (No printed materials included)  
U.S.$100

A full refund of registration fees will be made upon written request received by June 15, 1999

**Daily Attendance Registration** (No printed materials included)  
@ U.S.$60 per day

**Additional Syllabus Order**  
___ number of copies @ U.S.$25 each

**Kosher Banquet** • Thursday evening, August 12, 1999  
___ number of tickets @ U.S.$55 each

**Total**

Please enclose your check or money order for the total amount payable to **JGS, Inc.**

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**Hotel Reservation Information:** To receive our group reservation rate at the conference site, call the Marriott Marquis Hotel at 1-800-228-9290 and tell them you will be attending the 19th Annual Conference on Jewish Genealogy. The conference rate is U.S.$163 per night, single or double occupancy, plus tax. This rate is available from August 6 to August 14 and, to obtain it, you must make your reservations by July 6, 1999.

**NOTE:** Conference rate is subject to availability.

**Travel Arrangements:** Discounted fares are available for conference registrants through American Airlines (for travel in North America), Continental Airlines (for travel in North America, Latin America, and Europe), and Amtrak. The airlines offer a discount of 5% off the lowest published fare or 10% off full coach fare, plus an extra 5% discount on tickets purchased 60 days in advance of the conference. For American Airlines, call 1-800-433-1790 and mention STARfile: S56689UA; for Continental Airlines, call 1-800-468-7022 and mention code IB9EMP. To obtain the best rates for your trip and for full particulars, call Valerie Wilson Travel, Inc. at 1-800-776-1116 or 212-592-1342.
Conference Name Tag & Family Finder Information

Print your name as you wish it to appear on your name tag: ________________________________

Print up to 5 ancestral surnames and towns that you are researching. These names will be listed on your name tag. Please use the modern spelling as listed in Where Once We Walked (WOWW).

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What is your level of expertise in genealogy?  
☐ Beginner  ☐ Intermediate  ☐ Advanced

Do you have a disability that requires an accommodation? _____ If so, describe what accommodation you require: __________________________________________

Please let us know your needs by May 15, 1999

Do you need a roommate?
For assistance in finding a roommate, fill in the appropriate information below and include a self-addressed stamped envelope with your registration.

[ ] Male  OR  [ ] Female  [ ] Smoking  OR  [ ] Non-smoking

Date of Arrival __________________________ Date of Departure __________________________

Please return your completed registration form as soon as possible.

MAIL REGISTRATION FORM AND YOUR CHECK OR MONEY ORDER TO:

JGS, Inc.
600 West End Avenue, Suite 10F
New York, NY 10024

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT CONFERENCE REGISTRATION, CONTACT:
Linda Cantor at
(516) 872-3765 after 6 p.m. New York time
Fax (516) 825-0917
E-mail: lincan@worldnet.att.net

INFORMATION ON TOURS WILL BE SENT WITH YOUR REGISTRATION CONFIRMATION.