

Latvia SIG

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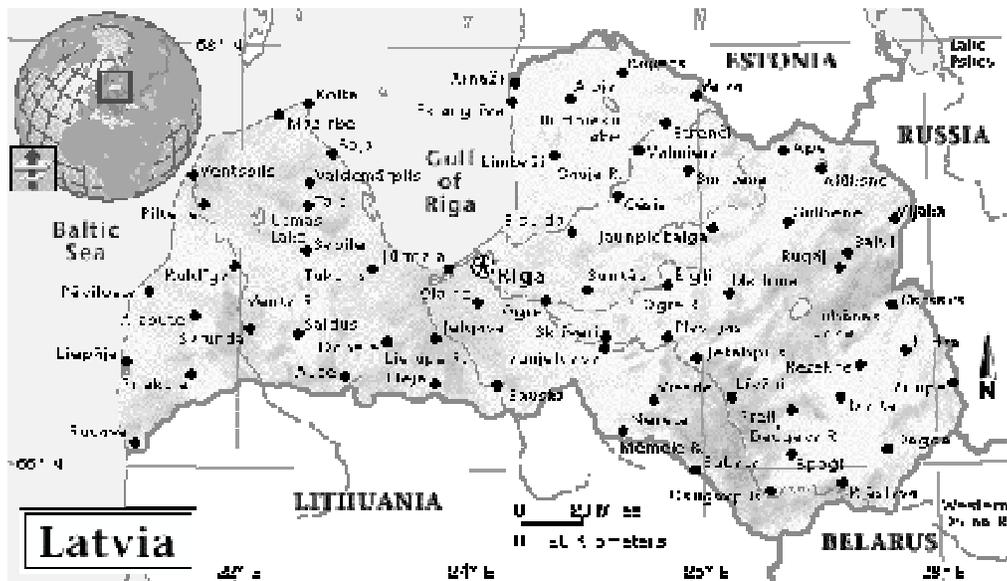


Table of Contents

President's Report	2
Editor's Comments	2
Rosh Hashanah in Riga	4
Riga Visit October 2002	5
Latvia/Lithuania Reminiscences	8
Dispute In Latvia Over Text On Monument	9
The Massacre of the Jews in Auce	10
Origins of Courlander Jews	14
Riga Expulsions	18
Preservation of Jewish Heritage	19
Genealogy: Reality and Fantasy, A Discussion with Blake Eskin	19
Estonia Finally Has A Home	20
Holocaust Revisionist Speaks to Packed House in Estonia	21
Identification of Given Names	21
Membership Fees via PayPal	22
Latvia SIG Membership Questionnaire	23

President's Report

Shalom Chaverim!

I write to you as the civil calendar gets ready to greet the new civil year and may it find us all healthy, happy, and fruitfully pursuing our research!

What have we accomplished after six months in the job? We have changed our name and orientation to include the Jews from Estonia, who were "orphaned" and without a home until now. Adam Katzeff has agreed to head that aspect of the SIG, so any of you who have stray family in Estonia should please contact him. We have a lot of material that will help you and that we intend to database and put on the web when we are able. You can contact Adam by email at: adam.katzeff@pop3.bip.net

Len Yodaikin has been very generous with providing us with some of the resources for Estonia and we are grateful to him!

Something new that we are trying is to subdivide the "book" of Latvia and Estonia into "chapters." "Chapters" are now being formed for Dvinsk and Rezekne. Goldingen already has its own page on Jewishgen's Latvia site. The idea behind these "book chapters" is that in order to undertake a more in-depth study of each town or village that your family might have been involved in, we plan to form an area study/interest group that will be responsible for acquiring and data basing available sources. These groups will be semi-independent, but under the umbrella of SIGs for Latvia and Courland. Constance Whippman is the database coordinator for all the "chapters." However each "chapter" will be responsible for what it wants to database and for making its own web page if, indeed, it wants to. Ideally, we would eventually have pages for Mitau, Talsen, Sassmacken, Hassenpoth, Windau, and so forth. You get the idea! Anyone who is particularly excited by this project is encouraged to get in touch with me at: martha@bgumail.bgu.ac.il.

This could be very far reaching if we do it right and you are the only ones who can do it!

As you may know, yearly dues for the SIG run from July to July. Those of you who have not yet paid your dues, please do so now! Regretfully, we will be unable to send any more newsletters and publications to people who have not officially joined the group .

Martha Levinson Lev-Zion
President, SIG Latvia

Editor's Comments

I'd like to thank the contributors to this issue of the newsletter for providing interesting and provocative articles and commentary. The unfortunate and disturbing issue of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial appears as a thread through several of the articles and is an issue that concerns all of us. I expect that future articles will address this theme as well.

Over the years, many members of the Latvia SIG have visited Riga and other parts of Latvia in a quest for information about their families. Arlene Beare has been to Riga many times to learn about her family and to acquire information that could help others in their genealogy research. Arlene's account of her latest trip to Riga highlights some of the changes she's noticed in Riga and includes information she acquired from the Jewish Museum's photographic archives.

Another Latvia SIG member who has visited his family's birthplace is Yehudi Gaffen. In "Reminiscences," he tries to answer the questions that many of us who have visited the birthplace of our parents still have and to connect the events of the past with those of the present. Yehudi has also created a website containing photographs of his trips, which you can visit at <http://www.gafcon.com/gaffenfamily/index.htm>, log in: gaffen, password: bubba

As many of you know, there had been a running argument between the Latvian Jewish community and a commission appointed by the Riga municipality about the wording of text on a monument the Jewish community planned to erect commemorating the mass murder of Latvian Jews during WW II at Rumbula. The Jewish community had asked that the text mention the Latvian volunteers who participated in the

killings, which the commission refused to approve. Our coverage of the dispute is based on information gleaned from articles describing the events as well as first-hand commentary from a Latvian Jew.

While the massacre at Rumbula is well known and documented, the massacre at Auce is not. Gerald Kahan discovered the facts of the massacre while searching for information about the liquidation of his mother's family and the other Jews in Auce. Based on transcripts of the actual trials of local residents who collaborated with the Nazis, Gerald describes, for the first time, the details of the massacre that occurred in Auce more than four months before the much larger massacre in Rumbula.

For those of you who have wondered how and why Jews settled in Latvia, Martha Lev-Zion provides a detailed account of the migration of Jews across Europe from the 14th century on, in the "Origins of the Courlander Jews." She does so within the larger context of the political, social, and economic conditions of central Europe that provided the impetus for expelling Jews from the west, while welcoming them in the east.

In searching for information about families known to have lived in Latvia, e.g. Courland, Riga, and Libau, researchers have found that the names of family members actually were found in Lithuanian databases, some with references to Jews who had been expelled from Latvia. In response to inquiries about these references, Rita Bogdanova, of the State Historical Archives in Riga, explains how that situation arose.

Latvia SIGers in the New York area had a chance to visit the Center for Jewish History in October to discuss genealogy research in Latvia. Rachel Fisher, director of the Genealogy Institute at the center, was kind enough to provide us with an overview of that presentation and discussion.

Nickolai Butkevich, a frequent contributor to this newsletter, conveys disturbing information about the exuberant reception Jurgen Graf, a Swiss historian and Holocaust revisionist, received at a presentation he gave in Tallin, Estonia. Unfortunately, the anti-Semitism and fascism displayed at

the presentation is not an isolated event. A recent review of the movie *The Pianist* written by an American reporter living in Germany makes it clear that the Nazi threat may still be alive in that country. The reviewer, William Grim, saw the film at a theater in Munich along with "a group of Germany's best and brightest: educated, middle class, sophisticated denizens of a major cosmopolitan city." This audience laughed aloud at numerous scenes of Nazis torturing Jews. As described by Grim, "when several Nazi thugs force some elderly Jews, weakened by malnutrition, hobbling on crutches, riddled with heart and lung infirmities to dance at an increasingly faster tempo, with many of the Jews falling to the ground in sheer agony, the audience laughed at the torture." (Visit <http://www.zcpportal.com/2002/1202/pianist.asp>, for William Grim's complete review.)

While many genealogists are interested in the origin and identity of Jewish given names, there seems to be some difference of opinion among scholars. When Eric Benjaminson asked whether his relatives from Goldingen, whose given names were Benes (sometimes also spelled Beines), could be related to Benjamin/Binyamin Martha Lev-Zion responded that Alexander Beider's explanation in his *Dictionary of Ashkenazik Given Names* argues that Benes/Beines does not relate to Benjamin, but sees the derivation scheme running from Benedickt to Benesh/Beynes/Benish; probably the equivalent Hebrew name would be Baruch. Professor Esterson offers an alternative explanation in this issue.

As Martha indicated in her report we are expanding our scope to include Estonian genealogy and related material, and we continue to look for articles of interest to the Latvia SIG membership. We can only provide that service when you do your part by identifying and submitting suitable material. This newsletter is your newsletter, so please submit articles, comments, ideas, features, news of events, etc. that you think would be of interest to the SIG. You can send articles or inquiries via e-mail to me at barry.shay@ieee.org or to Mike Getz at mgetz@erols.com.

Rosh Hashanah in Riga

by Arlene Beare

I received this heartwarming letter from Rabbi Glazman who was happy to share the High Holy Days with us. Whatever one's religious beliefs, we can all rejoice that the Jewish community in Latvia celebrated Jewish holidays in the traditional way. This is reproduced with the permission of Rabbi Glazman.

Dear Mrs. Beare,

This year, our Jewish Brethren all over the world celebrated the High Holidays. All beseeched G-D for a year of peace, love, joy and success. The Jewish Community of Riga was no different. Read on to find out how these festive days were celebrated in the heart of the Baltics.

This month, Chabad in Riga was most active. The month's many holidays supplied the enthusiastic Jewish Community of Riga with a never-ending amount of activities and sense of accomplishment. A major mailing comprising of a beautifully designed Shabbat candle lighting timetable was sent out to over 2000 Jewish families in Latvia!

Jews of Riga celebrated the holiday of Rosh Hashana in an atmosphere of holiness, awe and Jewish pride. Everyone joined together in heartfelt prayer for a happy, healthy and sweet new year. On the second day of Rosh Hashana, the multitude of Jews quickly filled and packed Riga's large synagogue in excitement and readiness. Two inspiring programs had been organized to cater to adults and children's individual needs. All learned about the sanctity and importance of the holiday of Rosh Hashana. An eye-catching and creative Jewish calendar was distributed through the aid of the JDC to the countless participants who attended this exceptional program. In a powerful symbol of Jewish unity, all then gathered together and walked to the Daugava River to perform the ritual of Tashlich. In unison, everyone recited the prayer aloud and then listened to the powerful blasts of the Shofar being sounded outside and in broad daylight in the streets of Riga. The powerful and breathtaking effect of this successful assembly could be seen

in the expressions of many participants.

Besides the Holidays, Jewish residents of Riga were treated to a special surprise this month. The opening of a kosher coffee shop – Lechaim! Jews can now gather together and dine in an ambiance of elegance, class and style. A wide-ranging menu of delicious kosher food is offered. Choices vary from the traditional gefilte fish to the all Israeli pita and falafel. Situated in close proximity to the Jewish Community Center, it greatly facilitates access for all of Riga's Jews and tourists too! Most important, Lechaim! is a one-stop shop that offers everything a Jew would require in Judaica and Jewish reading material: Mezuzot, Kippot, the Torah in Russian, Jewish musical CD's and much more.

The holiday of Sukkot, a time of great rejoicing, was also celebrated here. Chabad organized a day of festivities and entertainment in Riga's main park. Over 500 people participated in this grand event. The crowd was treated to a special program: the musical performance of an original Jewish band, a carnival comprised of diverse entertainment booths and a children's dance performance. The intense happiness and jubilation expressed by all, was so powerful that it attracted many a passerby to come and check out this momentous event. Most important, all those who partook in the festivities had the opportunity to perform the mitzvah of "Lulav and Etrog," which for many was the very first time! A large Sukkah was erected as well and all participants were invited to enjoy a snack inside. The event was brought to a close with a grand raffle with special prizes such as a camera, a watch, a stereo system, and other grand rewards.

At "Ohel Menachem," the Chabad Lubavitch Day School in Riga, many diverse and stimulating activities were organized for the students on each day of Chol Hamoed. To name a few: a magnificent Sukkah building contest, Sukkah decorating, dining together in the Sukkah and so on. Thus, the students were able to learn about this holiday in an enjoyable and productive manner.

After long months of preparations, planning and building, a long time dream of the Jewish community has come true. Chabad Lubavitch opened

the doors of a state of the art women's Mikvah beautifully designed to fit the needs of all. It is strategically situated in a quiet area in the center of the city rendering it easily accessible in privacy and confidentiality. Those wishing to lead their lives in purity and sanctity are now able to do so in comfort and elegance. Chabad cares for the people of today and is preparing for the generation of tomorrow.

Rabbi Mordechai Glazman

Riga Visit October 2002

By Arlene Beare

Riga is a beautiful city, which I have visited on many occasions. I have seen it in spring and summer but this was the first visit in autumn and it was cold and wet. Cities do have a charm in all seasons and although I prefer to walk in the park in summer and enjoy the long hours of daylight, I found a lot to appreciate that I have not previously noticed. There were few tourists in the streets and one was able to get a better impression of Riga as it is without them.

There have been a great number of changes since my last visit and notable amongst them was the excellent modern airport terminal. The bookshop that is near the hotel and which was just a small room is now on three floors. The books are in Latvian or Russian but there are a few English language books on the shelves and cheap paperback editions of the classics can be found for less than a dollar.

The main purpose of my visit was as ever to further the interests of the Latvia SIG and to acquire new data for the All Latvia Database. I spent time in the archives, archival libraries, Center for Judaic Studies and the Jewish Museum. I came back with telephone directories for Riga for 1909, 1911, 1935 and 1939. There are also some directories for other parts of Latvia. These directories form part of the holdings of the Latvia SIG and we will, in time, try to get them into a format that researchers can access.

Aina Antane at the Center for Judaic Studies has been in charge of the Oral History Project on behalf of the SIG. We will publish a full report of this in a subsequent newsletter. She has tape-

recorded interviews with survivors, some of whom were born in Riga. Interviewees are from Riga, Liepaja, Rujiena, Lipeck, Russia, Daugavpils, Jelgava, Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg), Rezekne, Druja (Poland) and Krustspils. This gives us some idea of the wide variety of places that are represented and as their spouses also come from all over the Russian Empire we have developed an excellent picture of their lives.

Each interview has a recorded audiotape in Latvian or Russian and there is an English summary of the interview. A photo of the interviewee is attached to the typed record. I have asked that all the interviews typed from the audio tape should be in Russian as it is easier for us to find Russian translators should we wish to have the full text in English.

We will be receiving data from 1905 family lists of smaller communities in Livland, such as Limbazi, Valmiera, Cesis and Rujena as well as family lists for 1897 for Dagda, Preili, Livani, Viski and Talsi. There were small numbers such as 100-200 families in these places. We feel that it is important to give as wide a distribution of data as possible and not to confine ourselves to the larger shtetlach. I cannot give any time frame for the acquisition of this data so please be patient and you will have a lot of excellent data to further your research.

I was given access to the photo archive in the Jewish Museum by Mr Margers Vestermanis who very generously said I could copy names from the back of photographs. I copied the names as they were spelled but did not manage to write down all of them. This was time consuming for me, as I know no Latvian and had to constantly ask for help.

I am documenting a few names that appear on the photos and apologise for any inaccuracies. If there are any ancestor's names that you feel may belong to you and wish to contact the Jewish Museum, Mr Vestermanis has said that he will be happy to show you the photos when you visit Riga. I have the numbers that correspond with these photos. There are other names and details on the back, which I could not read accurately and so I have omitted them.

Photographs found in the Archives of the Jewish Museum in Riga	
Dagda	Hana Rachele Joffe and Elijahu Kagans
Dagda 1930	Rebeka Steina emigrated to London
Dagda 1938	I Marks, Astreks, Vulfs Steins (died 1941 in Russia) Schlosman Taube, Asteks (father) Sorkina Riva, Paikins Mihaels, Spolina Riva (died Riga Ghetto 1941) and Hava Aron
Daugavpils 1920	Lubova Starobina (B Msijerra 1989) died in Rumbula 1941
Daugavpils 1920	Mendel Haplerin
Daugavpils 1934	Merija Hirshorna (emigrated to Palestine)
Daugavpils 1936	I. Halperin
Daugavpils 1936	Ester and Lija Halperin
Daugavpils 1938	Davids Rebeka and Marja Garhi
Daugavpils 1939	Drija Halperin and Skolneices Luba Munica (pupil)
Karsava 1930	Gorinu family(donated by Golda Davidovica)
Karsava 1938	Hane-Beila Stenlova (donated by Golda Davidovica (Israel))
Karsava 1940	Golda Davidovica (family)
Kraslava 1926	Minna Fridman
Kuldiga 1930	Nuriky family Bergmanis
Latvia 1924	Family Grun archive Fanny Fela Grun
Leipaja 1928	Feldblum family
Leipaja 1928	Tania Feldblum and Roberts and Roza Sigalski
Leipaja 1930	Riva Abramson (born Bluma)
Leipaja 1938	Aters and Abrams Hirshorn
Liepaja 1920	Olga Levina
Liepaja 1920	Sonia Levina
Liepaja 1941	Olga Levin (Oren-Berga 1920)
Madona 1930	Borodarno family
Palanga 1927	Ferla Hermer sent to uncle Aron Hermer
Preili 1930	Nohums Grams from Preili taken in South Africa
Preili 1930	I. Gutmans Grams Frida Gram. Leib Dors Mara Malka. Roha Cunilova Mara Cunilova

Photographs found in the Archives of the Jewish Museum in Riga	
Preili 1930	Gitmans Grams
Riga	Grun / Swerdin family
Riga 1920	Haima Vilkormista Bar Mitzvah
Riga 1920	Abramovic family
Riga 1924	Lija Hirshorn (born 1899 Daugavpils, died Riga)
Riga 1925	Pinkus family emigrated to South Africa Tant Lubja, Vintors Pinkus, Rudi, Misa and Alyn Abramovic
Riga 1929	Jacob Alterman(1897/8) Vilanos
Riga 1930	Smuels Gurovics with wife and children
Riga 1930	Sonia and Len Halperin
Riga 1930	Treskunova family
Riga 1934	Hilda Gersoni and Bernhards (their wedding)
Riga 1934	Koller Haya Paul, Rabina Paula and Rabina Nuroka
Riga 1937	Zalmans Sitlovskis and Tania Feldblum
Riga 1938	Zalmans Gitlovskis with his wife Tania Born Feldblum
Riga 1939	Taube Gruzina (born Klokina)
Riga 1939	Jacob Alterman and Ester
Riga 1940	Nadelman Lena and Juniga Masu
Riga 1941	Lena Leibovica, wedding 1941 (Georges, Cora Sonia and Israels at the wedding)
Riga 1941	Lija Hirshhorn and Adlofs Hirshhorn with group
Tukums	Haims Ferbers and Fanja Ferber
Tukums 1930	Ulrich Kramers and Gite and Judith
Varaklani 1920	Nosens Ferbers and Fanja

Latvia/Lithuania Reminiscences

By Yehudi Gaffen

Six months have now passed since my second visit to the birthplace of my parents and grandparents. The time has allowed me to integrate the emotions of the experience, and to answer for myself frequently posed questions: Why did you go? What did the trips mean to you? And why did you return for a second time?

One thing for sure, these trips were different than any other travel experience I have ever had and have been indelibly imprinted on my soul: from meeting and talking to my 80 year-old cousin who survived the Riga Ghetto, Kaiserwald Concentration Camp and the Soviet Army and still now lives in Riga, having a Russian steam bath and BBQ at his son's home in Riga, standing in silence with my son and brother at the mass graves of our relatives, walking with the ghosts through the medieval streets of Riga and Vilnius, talking to Latvian peasants who witnessed my relatives being led to their death and wondered aloud why they went so quietly, eating caviar in the most exclusive hotels in Riga and Vilnius with prostitutes loitering about hoping to pick up an American tourist, visiting with a Jewish woman (a distant relative) who lived in my father's shtetl and married a non-Jewish Communist to "get ahead." He suffered a massive stroke eight years ago and now she provides full-time care for him. All this is a collage of colors, smells, sounds and conversations never to be forgotten!

If there is one predominant impression that these two trips left with me, it is the importance of Israel in the life of every Jew to whom Judaism and the history and traditions of our culture have meaning. As much as I am troubled and distressed about what is going on in the Middle East, I am at the same time incredibly proud and comforted to be Jewish knowing that we have a protector in these turbulent and dangerous times.

When a suicide bomber attacked us in Mombassa, Kenya and ambulances took two hours to respond, it was our Israeli Government who came to the aid of our people and chartered a plane to bring them home and swore to bring justice to

those who perpetrated the killing. I felt such a sense of pride seeing the amateur video filmed from the plane that was targeted by ground missiles on that same day. It showed the Israel Air Force's F-16's checking the plane for damage and escorting it home.

In the past two years there have been over 14,500 terrorist acts against Jews; it is surprising that more of our brethren have not been killed! Contrast this with what happened a short 60 years ago when over six million of our people were mercilessly and methodically murdered while the world looked on. I know that today this will not happen because we have a strong Israel. They may be able to kill a few us but not without immediate consequences!

Another aspect I have also become more aware of is the insidiousness of anti-Semitism and the importance of counteracting this age-old scourge. The September 11th attack and the second Intifada have provided a bonanza of fodder for our enemies. Even in America, anti-Semitism is on the rise, especially among the African American and Hispanic communities. We cannot be complacent! We must mobilize all resources to educate the younger generation of both Jews and Gentiles, to teach them the values of tolerance, acceptance and celebration of our differences.

I return to the cemetery we call Eastern Europe because it was the birthplace and last resting place of my family since at least the early 1700's. I also return to my birthplace South Africa, every few years, primarily to visit the graves of my mother and father. I feel a kind of closure, peace and closeness. When I visit their graves I can have conversations with them that I could not have anywhere else, and that is the same feeling I have when I enter the green forests that hide the mass grave sites that seem so peaceful but harbor so much pain! After all, I owe all I am to my parents and grandparents and being close to them makes me feel proud to be a symbol of Hitler's and his henchmen's failure.

(Please visit <http://www.gafcon.com/gaffenfamily/index.htm>, log in: gaffen, password: bubba, to see photos of Yehudi's trip.)

Dispute In Latvia Over Text On Monument

The monument was scheduled to be dedicated on November 29th at Rumbula, where on November 30th and December 8, 1941, Nazis and Latvian collaborators murdered approximately 30,000 Latvian Jews. The Jewish community insisted that the words “local helpers” be included on the monument, whereas the municipality argued that people from Ukraine and other countries joined the local people in committing the atrocities. Efraim Zuroff, Israel director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center personally appealed to Latvian President Varia Vike Freiburga for her intervention and asked the president to ensure the historical accuracy of the inscription.

“It would be unthinkable not to include mention of the local Latvian Nazi collaborators in any inscription of a monument dedicated to the victims of Rumbula,” said Zuroff. “Given the active participation of the Arajs commandos and the Latvian forces in this mass murder operation, such an omission would border on denial,” he continued.

Since the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia gained independence in 1991, they have been encouraged by Western governments to confront their Holocaust histories. In Latvia and Lithuania, more than 94 percent of local Jews were murdered at the hands of Nazis and local collaborators. Historians say the number would have been far lower had ordinary citizens not participated in the killings.

Finally, the Riga municipality reversed itself and agreed to note in the monument’s inscription that members of the Latvian security police participated in the slaughter. The unveiling of the monument occurred on November 29th at the mass murder site in Rumbula and in the presence of the Latvian president and prime minister along with about 100 other attendees.

U.S. Ambassador Brian Carlson also addressed the crowd at the ceremony. He said, “Eyewitnesses and historians agree on what happened. In the Rumbula forest on November 30th and December 8th, 1941, 1,700 executioners mur-

dered more than 25,000 Jews. Of those 1,700 killers, between 1,000 and 1,500 were residents of Latvia who worked for the security police, and some 100 were Latvian ghetto guards.”

Carlson also expressed his disappointment in Latvian society today. “Some people say that not all the Latvians were there voluntarily. Some say nothing done in those times under Nazi occupation was voluntary,” he said. “Some say those were complicated times. Some say that we should forget about the Latvian participation. It is uncanny that some people are adopting the Nuremberg defense used by the Nazis at their postwar trial,” he continued. “They too denied responsibility for their actions, saying they were ‘just following orders.’” He added, “How sad that anyone in today’s free and democratic Latvia would excuse this kind of crime by saying, ‘it was a complicated time’ or ‘the executioners were not volunteers.’”

The Simon Wiesenthal Center expressed its “deep relief” that an agreement was reached to change the inscription. Zuroff said, “It is extremely upsetting, to put it mildly, that such a debate could even take place in a country which has been invited to join NATO.”

The final inscription, in English, German, Hebrew and Latvian, reads: “Here in the forest of Rumbula on November 30th and December 8th of 1941, the Nazis and their local collaborators shot dead more than 25,000 Jews, the prisoners of the Riga Ghetto, children, women, old people, as well as around 1,000 Jews deported from Germany. In the summer of 1944 hundreds of Jewish men from the concentration camp Riga-Kaiserwald were (also) killed here.”

The memorial was financed by donations from Latvia, Israel, the United States and Germany, as well as private individuals.

A more personal account of the controversy was sent to Arlene Beare from a Latvian Jew who attended the ceremony. His comments follow. Ed.

A memorial was opened on Friday in Rumbula. In the morning there was a meeting at the Jewish Community Centre on Skolas Street where our Prime Minister Einars Repse spoke.

He said, "...Jews were killed just because they were Jews. They were our inhabitants who lived in Latvia for hundreds of years and participated in all areas of our lives. Of course it was not the state of Latvia who was guilty, it was the Nazi regime that did it. One occupation regime substituted the other and only now in the independent Latvia are we able to speak free about the past. We have to go through this process and analyze in an honest way history and its unpleasant moments. We cannot keep silent. The people of Latvia are sorry for the victims. We honor the people who had courage as Janis Lipke, to save people, to save and protect freedom and dignity..."

After this meeting all the participants were taken by the buses to the memorial in Rumbula. It is very impressive and very simple. Instead of the old stone there is a new one with the inscription: "Along this road in November / December 1941 Nazis and their local collaborators drove to death in the Rumbula forest thousands of Jews from Riga ghetto prisoner..."

There were huge debates till the morning of November 29th on how to indicate that the Latvians also participated here. The Latvian memorial commission and the historian Ilga Kreituse were against stating the words "local collaborators" as if it would be a reason for problems between the nationalities and that it is time to stop talking about it, but this inscription made by the Jewish community seems to be very appropriate and it is good that the Jewish community had enough force to persuade this commission.

From the entrance there is a road in. Then are two more stones that are made in the form of a gate (I do not remember the inscription as I have made a picture). Then on the road are four places like mass graves 5x5 meters with one big stone on each. In the middle of the road is a place not very big with small stones with inscription of the names and stones with the ghetto street names. In the middle is a big menorah constructed like a tree with roots.

Here in Rumbula was also our president Vaira Vike-Freiberga, who marked these days of 30 November and 8 December as the black days in the Latvian history and our task was to retain in

memory the innocent victims and to teach our children so as to ensure that nothing like that happens again.

Among the speakers there were S. Springfield, President of the Latvian Survivors in the USA, President of the Society of the Former Ghetto and Concentration Camps Prisoner Alexander Bergman, new leader of the Jewish community Arkady Sukharenko etc.

The Massacre of the Jews in Auce

By
Gerald Kahan

I was born during the worst possible time in my parents' lives. Hitler had overrun Europe, and World War II was raging. Although my mother wasn't certain, her family had already been murdered a year earlier. My father's family was still alive, but in another two years they would all be taken to Auschwitz and most would never return. Whatever momentary joy my parents might have had from bringing a son into the world was soon overshadowed by revelations that would forever change their lives.

Samuel and Vera Kahan were extremely lucky to be in America. My father left his hometown of Chust, Czechoslovakia and went to Palestine in 1933. He was 22 years old at the time. His older brothers had divided the family business among themselves after their father died in 1929. With little to look forward to, my father decided he had no reason to stay in Europe. My mother left her hometown of Auce, Latvia and went to Palestine in 1934. As a teenager, she was swept up by the Zionist movement and was determined to escape the anti-Semitism in Europe. My parents met and married in 1936. My sister Ziona was born in Tel-Aviv in 1938.

When my parents married, my mother's aunt, Anna Shalit and her husband Isidor, sent them papers to come to America for their honeymoon. Although they never went on a honeymoon they kept the papers. When the war broke out in 1939, the American Consulate in Jerusalem contacted them and said that they were going to withdraw the opportunity to go to America unless they acted immediately. My parents decided they would have an easier time getting their families

out of Europe if they moved to America. My mother was also fearful of living through another war having already experienced the First World War in Latvia. In two frantic weeks they sold their home and business and set sail for the United States. They arrived in February 1940 having crossed the Atlantic on an Italian ship, Conte di Savoia. At the time, U-boats had complete control of the North Atlantic, but the Conte di Savoia, flying an Italian flag, was left untouched.

After arriving in the United States, my parents opened a small corner grocery store in Baltimore. They did well with their business, and by early 1942 my mother was pregnant. During her pregnancy, stories appeared in the Yiddish newspaper, the "Jewish Daily Forward," about Jews being murdered in countries occupied by the Nazis in Eastern Europe. My mother collapsed when she became aware of these articles and spent several days in the hospital. As the war dragged on, reports in the Forward grew more and more ominous as word leaked out of Europe. Finally, with the war over, the grim news became known to the entire world; the Nazis had killed a staggering six million Jews.

My father lost his mother, 5 brothers, and dozens of nieces, nephews, in-laws, and cousins spread out over three generations. Altogether, almost 100 members of his family were murdered. Most had lived in the town of Chust, the family residence since the late eighteenth century. Those members of his family who survived Auschwitz and other concentration camps told my father how most of the others had died.

My mother lost her entire family with the exception of a younger brother, Aaron, who had joined my mother in Palestine shortly after she arrived there in 1934. The only thing my mother knew was that her parents, Sheina and Leibe Michalovitz, and two sisters, Hannah and Leah, and Leah's son, Berel, were killed. Also killed were her oldest brother, Abraham, and his wife and two sons who had lived in the Latvian town of Mitau (today known as Jelgava).

In 1949, my mother learned from a survivor that during the Nazi invasion of Latvia an airfield near

Auce was bombed and some Russian airmen were wounded. The airmen were put into a railroad boxcar for transport to Leningrad (St. Petersburg). The Russians wanted a doctor to accompany the transport, but none was available. My grandfather was a druggist and a man the townspeople had always called "doctor." With no other choice, the Russians forced him to accompany the wounded to Leningrad. He was never heard from again.

What other facts my mother could learn about the fate of the Jews in Auce were all very general in nature. The story that took shape was typical of those told by survivors from towns all over Eastern Europe. The Jews were rounded up, forced to dig a large grave, and then summarily shot by members of the Einsatzgruppen ("action commandos"). She never knew when her family died, nor did she ever know with any certainty the circumstances surrounding their death.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, documents about the Holocaust in Latvia suddenly became available to historians all over the world. In 1996, Dr. Andrew Ezergailis, a professor of history at Ithaca College, wrote a book entitled, "The Holocaust in Latvia 1941 - 1944," which to a large extent was based on information contained in these documents.¹ Many of the documents were held in the Latvian State Historical Archives in Riga.

In his book, Dr. Ezergailis described what happened to the Jews of Mitau, Latvia. On August 2nd and 3rd of 1941, 1600 Jews that lived in or around Mitau were rounded up and systematically shot to death. I assume that my uncle and his family were included in that massacre.

Finding nothing in Dr. Ezergailis' book about Auce, I got in touch with him and with his help was able to obtain documents from the Archives that provided never before published accounts of the massacre of the Jews in Auce². The documents are transcripts of trials of town residents who were tried by the Soviets for collaborating with the Nazis. Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Israel, was also able to provide transcripts they had obtained from Archives in Moscow³. Together these transcripts paint a more de-

tailed picture of the events leading up to the murder of over 100 Jewish residents in and around the town of Auce.

The Nazis launched their invasion of Russia on June 22, 1941. The Russian Army, which had occupied the country for a year, was no match for the German blitzkrieg, and the country quickly fell into Nazi hands. Within a few days, the extermination of the Jews of Latvia began in earnest. The little town of Auce was an easy target.

After the arrival of the Nazis, Self-Defense Teams formed in towns like Auce. Members included Nazi sympathizers and were easily recognized by their red and white armbands. In Auce, they were divided into three groups - a battle group, guard group, and first strike group. They met regularly in what was called the "Red House." Generally speaking, they could best be described as a paramilitary organization loose on discipline and military rigor.

Participants included young men who lived in and around Auce. They came from various walks of life and varied in their enthusiasm at the prospect of killing Jews. A reluctant Zhanis Pilitcki was forced to join the Self-Defense Team when Self-Defense members threatened to take his motorbike. Augusts Balodis was a willing participant who later liked to boast that he even killed small Jewish children. Z. K. Klayvinsh had no desire to kill Jews, but with a few threats from other Self-Defense members and a little alcohol he managed to dispatch two little girls. A carpenter, Ludwig-Robert Martinson, was a Nazi policeman throughout the war, but, oddly enough, a reluctant participant in the massacre. Arnold Kreshevitch Ramsha actually tried to save the life of a Jewish acquaintance during the massacre, but was handed a rifle and forced to join the shooting. He fainted and was dismissed. Otto Indrikovich Khekhalovskis was a ready participant. The day after the massacre he helped find and kill the town's Jewish doctor (and the doctor's wife and daughter) who had managed to escape a few days earlier.

Two members of the Self-Defense Team spoke German and became translators for the Nazis. One of these men, Peteris Medens, quickly as-

sumed a position of leadership. The other, named Rudzuroga, a teacher and former Latvian Army captain, became the main contact between the Latvians and Nazis. The leader of the Self-Defense Team, Oswald Edurdovitch Ezers, was a strong supporter of the Nazis. From August to December 1941 he worked for the local Nazi newspaper, Zemgale. Later he fought with Russian partisans in Belorussia.

The order to expel the Jews came in the form of notices pasted on buildings all over town. In the middle of the night, several days before the massacre, the Jews were ordered to move outside of the city limits. For at least one night, they slept without a roof over their heads. They were then arrested and taken to a barn that belonged to the local Agricultural Academy. They were forced to sleep on straw that had been spread out on the floor and were guarded around the clock by members of the Self-Defense Team. They endured this condition for at least a few days and possibly as long as a week. The Pastor of the town, a man by the name of Turks, assumed responsibility for collecting Jewish valuables after the Jewish families were rounded up.

At about 10 AM on the morning of July 11, 1941,⁴ a car and truck with about 10 Germans and two SS officers drove into town. They went to the Red House where they spoke to the two translators Medens and Rudzuroga. After their conversation, Medens ordered all members of the Self-Defense Team to get their rifles and line up for further orders. About twenty men were quickly assembled and marched off to the barn.

Upon entering the barn, the Germans ordered the Jews to stand up and started to beat them with rubber truncheons. They found a Jew called "Big Kalkis" and demanded that he identify the rabbi. Kalkis pointed to Rabbi Kaufman and the Germans beat the rabbi. When a man named Fuchs rushed to defend Rabbi Kaufman, the Germans gave the rabbi and his would-be defender truncheons and forced them to beat each other. The Nazis then selected 8 or 10 big men and ordered them to strip to their underwear. These men were taken to Putni Woods located about 4 kilometers northwest of town and about 150 meters beyond an old German cemetery. It was a swampy place,

filled with brush and small trees. There they were ordered to dig a mass grave about 15 meters long and two meters wide. These men were the first to be shot. The Germans killed them to show the Self-Defense men how to do it efficiently. Two shooters were assigned to each person. One shooter would kneel in front of the other who remained standing. The man in front aimed at the heart, while the man in back aimed at the head.

Next, the remaining Jews were killed. About 20 at a time were ordered to climb into one of two trucks. One truck was driven by Self-Defense man Dombrovski, and the other by Self-Defense man Zingis. As the victims took their turns getting into the truck, the Germans stood by and beat them with sticks. When they arrived at the killing site and got out of the truck, they were first ordered to put their money and valuables into a cloth that had been spread out on the ground. Next, they were ordered to strip to their underwear and face the pit. They were shot about six at a time. Self-Defense man Caune issued the orders to fire.

The entire massacre took place between 2 PM and 7 PM. About 15 Germans were present at the killing site along with the Self-Defense men. To facilitate the grisly business, generous quantities of vodka were made available to anyone who needed fortification. About 100 Jews were killed, including approximately 10 children and 20 elderly men. When it was all over, everyone went back to the Red House for a drinking party.

To make the day complete the Jewish Synagogue in Auce was burned to the ground while the Jews were being slaughtered in the forest.

The next day household furnishings that had been removed from Jewish homes were taken to the local movie theatre where the Self-Defense men and Germans took some of the bounty; remaining personal effects were turned over to the Nazi occupation forces.

As to the fate of the Latvians who participated in the massacre, the record is incomplete. However, it is known that during the war Z. K. Klayvinsh was arrested for desertion from the German Army and sent to Germany. Captured by the Russians,

he was tried and sentenced to 10 years in prison. He was released in 1954 and returned to Latvia in 1959. The carpenter and policemen, Ludwig-Robert Martinson, was sentenced to 25 years in a Russian Labor Camp. Arnold Kreshevitch Ramsha, spent the war years in the German Army. After the war he was captured and received a death sentence from the Russians. Otto Indrikovich Khekhlovskis joined the German Police. He too was captured by the Soviets and sentenced to death. Oswald Edurdovitch Ezers managed to avoid a death sentence, but did receive 25 years in a Soviet labor camp. No record exists of the fate of Pilitcki, Balodis, Medens, Rudzuroga, and others mentioned in the trial transcripts.

According to a census, 94,000 Jews lived in Latvia in the year 1935. About 4,000 Jews left Latvia before the Soviet occupation in June 1940. After the Soviet occupation, about 2,000 Jewish leaders and other influential Jews were deported to Siberia by the Soviets⁶, and about 15,000 managed to escape to the Soviet interior ahead of the advancing German Army⁵. Of the remaining 70,000 Jews in Latvia at the time of the Nazi occupation⁵, it is estimated that not more than 1,500 survived the war⁶.

Postscript

My mother never learned of the facts and circumstances described in this article. Well before I was able to finish my research, she developed dementia and died in March of 2002 at the age of 89. This article is dedicated to her memory and to the memory of the Jews of Auce who perished in the Holocaust. Not all of their names are known, but according to records from Yad Vashem³ they include members of the following families: Kahn, Spungin, Fingerhut, Hellman, Fuchs, Armerman, Zeldovich, Feiner, Mushkat Pralgoter, Nasenberg, Wolfson, Pisetsky, Zalman Jacobson, Gushman, Kalka, Isakovich, and Kanashpus.

End Notes

1. Ezergailis, Andrew, The Holocaust in Latvia 1941 - 1944, Riga: The Historical Institute of Latvia, 1996.
2. KGB trial files from Latvian State Archive (LVA). For reference numbers see No. NKVD lidz KGB: Politiskas pravas Latvija, 1940-1986,

Riga 1999

3. M33/1063, Dov Levin, *Auce from Pinkas Hakehilot Latvia and Estonia*, Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988. Originally from the GARF archives in Moscow.

4. The date of the massacre, July 11, 1941, appears in a KGB trial transcript (see note 2) reporting the sentencing of Ramsha, Khekhlovskis, Martinsons, and Ezers. This particular document is unequivocal about the date. However, witnesses in other documents are less certain about the actual date, and there are reasons to believe that the massacre may have taken place on the 12th, 13th, 14th, or even as late as the 15th. All witnesses agree that the massacre took place no later than the 15th.

5. *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, vol 3, Israel Gutman ed, Macmillan Publishing Co. 1990.

6. Dr. Edward Anders, Professor of Chemistry, University of Chicago, private correspondence

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I especially wish to thank Dr Andrew Ezergailis who translated the Latvian documents, and patiently led me through the tedious and lengthy process of interpreting the documents. I could never have completed this project without his guidance, advice, experience and considerable insight.

Origins of the Courlander Jews

By Martha Levinson Lev-Zion

With centuries of expulsions, pogroms, plagues, being burned at the stake, being forced to convert or die, state-mandated anti-Jewish laws, if you want to understand the life of our peripatetic Jewish ancestors, it is vital that you understand the historical events that both uprooted and settled them.

The first evidence we have of Jews in Courland comes from graves dating from the 14th century. However, it is possible that these Jews died while

passing through Courland since, with rare exceptions, there was a prohibition against Jews living in the region. The first incontrovertible written evidence of the Jews in Latvia dates from a journal written in 1535. Where did the Jews come from and why? I would like to suggest that one might form a firm hypothesis about the origins of the Courlander Jews by taking into account the events in central Europe at that time. Those of you who heard my talk on the Jews in the dorf are somewhat ahead of the game!

It is always hard for me to give an historical assessment about a specific area since I never see history in particulars, but rather as an interconnecting part of the broader picture of the Western world as a whole. The history of one area does not happen in a vacuum, separated from events in other areas.

The 14th century in Europe was a time of terrible persecution for the Jews. You will recall that during the time of the Black Death, in the mid-1300s, not only did Jews contract and die of the disease, but they were also accused of causing the disease and were subsequently tortured, pilloried and burned to death. They were accused of poisoning wells and were massacred. Because they were a literate people, they were looked upon with suspicion and many were considered witches and condemned to burn at the stake. At various other times, they were merely driven out of different areas, expelled from certain territories and forced to wander once more. Lest you think that the Inquisition ended with the auto-da-fé and the great expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal, let me assure you that it was an ongoing persecution and the witch-hunt for Conversos, or hidden Jews, and insincere "new Christians" was constant. Not only that, but the Inquisition inspired similar persecutions in zealous churchmen in other areas of Europe.

Where were these banished Jews to go? It is an interesting phenomenon that as one state expelled its Jews; another was there on the sidelines encouraging them to come. In general, the movement of migration during the 14th to the 16th centuries was in an Easterly direction. The Iberian Jews spread out across Europe. They settled in France, parts of the Holy Roman Empire, in Am-

Expulsion of Central European Jews		
Year	City/Province	Instigated by
1421	Vienna	City
1424	Cologne	City
1430	Dresden	City
1440	Augsburg	City
1442	Upper Bavaria	Regional representative assembly
1450	Lower Bavaria	Regional representative assembly
1458	Erfurt	City
1470	Mainz	City
1478	Bamberg	City [Archbishopric]
1490	Heilbronn	City
1492	Duchy of Mecklenburg	Regional representative assembly
1493	Duchy of Pomerania	Regional representative assembly
1493	Magdeburg, Halle	City
1496	Styria, Carinthia, & Lower Austria	Regional representative assembly
1498	Werttemberg & Archbishopric of Salzburg	Archbishopric
1499	Imperial city of Nuremberg	City
1499	Imperial city of Ulm	City
1512	Colmar, Mulhouse, Obernai	
1519	Regensburg	City
1521	Werttemberg	Regional representative assembly
1537	Electoral Saxony	Lutheran agitation
1553 & 1557	Duchies of Hanover, Brunswick, & Lneburg	Duchies due to Lutheran agitation
1543	Zwickau	Lutheran agitation
1555	Schweinfurt	Lutheran agitation
1559	Nordhausen	Lutheran agitation
1561	Ansbach	Lutheran agitation - Margrave
1510 & 1571	Electorate of Brandenburg	Lutheran agitation
1572	Berlin	Riots leading to re-expulsion
1614	Baden	
1614-15	Frankfort am Main	Riots & temporary expulsion.

sterdam, in Turkey and beyond. Almost always, the local burghers, or merchants, were against Jews settling in their area because they did not want the commercial competition. On the other hand, the landed gentry, petty landholders and local potentates were interested in encouraging the Jews to settle in their jurisdictions in order to promote trade, bleed them to the maximum in order to fill their own treasuries, and to use them as negotiates for the importation and exportation of goods. The greatest opposition to the settlement of Jews in any area came from the various guilds. The local rulers charged Jews for their movements in and out of the territory; charged them and their families a head tax for every Jew settled in the area; extorted large sums for a *Schutzbrief*, or a letter of protection; and charged them taxes on their goods. In short, the Jews had to pay for just about every aspect of their lives except for breathing.

In addition, during the Baroque era, European Jewry had a generalized system of interlocking and autonomous judicial, fiscal and welfare institutions, so the better-off Jews were also responsible and taxed to support the community at large. The elected Council of the Lands in Poland-Lithuania had no equivalent in Central Europe. In Germany, whose Jewish communities tended toward autocratic oligarchies run by the wealthy, self-government became a mix of autonomous centralised communities, like Frankfort am Main and Fürth for example, and territorial entities called *Landjudenschaften*, which organised the affairs of the numerous small rural congregations. The *Landjudenschaften* were open to all householders living in that principality and not just to elected delegates.

I am going into such detail because it is vital to comprehend the importance of community to the continuing survival of Jews and their practicing of Judaism. No Jew lived in a vacuum. He counted on his brethren for his survival and his brethren could count on him. Traveling Jewish merchants covered great distances and served as a sort of telegraph system spreading news among the various communities, both news of the Jews and news of the Goyim. They related how different principalities treated the Jews, where it was easier to eke out a living, what products were

wanted where, what the needs were of various Jewish and non-Jewish communities, the general state of affairs, and so forth. We have documented evidence of the great distances the Jews would cover in a month on the road. I read the detailed account of Manus of Steinhaus, a Jew from a village near Fulda. He married the daughter of another villager in Frankfort am Main and then spent the month of July in 1571 on the road. Because he was giving a judicial deposition, we have his exact route and what he did in each place. In the end, Manus walked over 400 miles in 31 days. After the printing press was invented, books were made widely available in both Hebrew and the vernacular. There were guidebooks in Yiddish for Jewish merchants and travelers to various countries, even to Spain, where few Jews remained.

By 1550 the Jews had nearly been eliminated from the economic life of west and central Europe. There remained in Northern Italy and central Germany some Jews who were involved in pawn broking and money changing, but that was it in the main. Central European Jews were being chased from their homes in the Holy Roman Empire, as you can see in the accompanying table.

Coincidentally, Poland-Lithuania was in the process of stabilizing its regime and had an interest in expanding trade and settling the nether areas of the territory. Although the Catholic Church and the burghers continually pressed the Grand Dukes to disallow the Jews privileges and rights, the Dukes were generally religiously liberal and saw in the Jews the advantages of a loyal and knowledgeable citizenry. Even when they were forced to give in to the pressures of the Burghers and the Catholic Church, the Dukes ignored the resulting charters that were agreed upon and encouraged the Jews to settle in their area. They appointed the Jews to important economic positions such as brokers for the Court, tax collectors, negotiates, and so forth.

So just as the Jews were being forced out of western and central Europe, they were being encouraged to settle in Eastern Europe. These same Jews were later made up the bulk of the permanent Jewish settlers in Courland. Because of the primi-

tive state of the economy of Poland-Lithuania, the Jews were able to enter into areas where in the Holy Roman Empire they had previously either been severely limited or excluded entirely. The vast expanses of Poland-Lithuania, just like the Ottoman Empire, were grossly under populated. The rulers welcomed the Jews who were needed for their advanced economic know-how, their skills and their wealth, to help populate the vastness of their kingdoms.

The Jews developed commerce on a grand scale and became experts in managing the exports of grain and timber. There were no powerful guilds in Poland-Lithuania, which thus allowed the Jews to become artisans and craftsmen. In the nether territories, they were even given land and were able to till the soil, market the produce, manage large estates and develop their skills in animal husbandry. Jews were given brewing and distilling rights. In short, they were able to develop their skills in all areas, including their own community life and yishivot, so much so that in the 16th century it became customary for great numbers of German Jewish youth to trek to Poland-Lithuania for higher studies. Salo Baron, the social historian, saw the 16th century expansion of Jewish life in Poland-Lithuania, which was fed by immigration of Jews from central Europe and Italy, as nothing short of "astounding." (see Baron, Salo: A Social and Religious History, xvi: 207, 414)

All the while, the Catholic Church was clamouring for the Jews to be expelled. They propagated blood libels and incited pogroms. Their efforts were not without success and Jews fled into the neighbouring area, into Courland. The Bishop of Pilten had been welcoming Jews for sometime, seeing in them an economic advantage. Since the area was an independently owned bishopric, it was the Bishop who decided who was allowed to reside in his estate.

Pilten, which included the districts of Grobin, Hasenpoth [Aizpute of today] and part of the district of Windau, was sold by the Bishop to King Ferdinand of Denmark, who promptly made a gift of the province to his brother, Duke Magnus of Holstein. The province was finally sold to Poland in 1585, 26 years later. So while the status of the

whole of Courland was an independent Duchy under the protection of Poland, Pilten became a separate entity directly under the control of the King of Poland.

This led to completely different rules and practices regarding the Jews. In Pilten, the fate of the Jews was determined by the Polish Sejm, [lawmaking body] while in the rest of the Duchy of Courland, their fate was in the hands of the duke and local nobility. Later, when Courland was annexed by Russia in the third partition of Poland in 1795, the Jews of Pilten retained their right to register as merchants in the guild of Hasenpoth and to vote, but not to stand for municipal elections. It was not until 1817 that the administrative practices of the two entities were brought in line, to the detriment of the Piltenes.

Going back to when Poland-Lithuania acquired the area after the defeat of the Teutonic Knights, Courland became a sort of semi-independent Duchy, under the nominal protection of Poland-Lithuania. The official ban on Jews in Courland ended with the end of Teutonic rule in 1561. The most famous Duke of Courland was Jacob Kettler also known as Duke James. He ruled the Duchy from 1642 to 1684. During his reign, conditions for the Jews not only improved, but he welcomed successful Jewish merchants into the Duchy. Jacob was a great believer in mercantilism and travelled the world to learn more about how the great powers prospered. He was particularly impressed with the Netherlands, whose liberal policies allowed Jews to manage huge influential shipping routes and colonial trade as well as become industrialists and international bankers.

When Duke James went to visit his cousin, the Great Elector Frederick William Hohenzollern of Brandenburg-Prussia, his cousin informed him that he had given asylum to Jews exiled or fleeing from Poland-Lithuania, Austria, Bohemia and neighbouring areas because of their commercial abilities and economic advantages. When the Prussian merchants complained about the competition, Frederick William told them that he believed that the Jews were useful to the land. Not only that, but Frederick William invited Jewish merchants to settle in the port of Memel, which he hoped to use as a counterweight to Königs-

berg, whose townsmen and nobles spearheaded the opposition to the Great Elector's mercantile plans to introduce Jews into the area.

Noting his cousin's successful mercantile policies, as well as those of other countries, Jacob introduced industries such as sawmills, manufacturing enterprises for glass, soap, weapons, gunpowder, paper and textile mills. He even went in for armed merchant ship building in such a big way that it was said that there were more ships in Courland than in neighbouring Denmark and Sweden! (see Levinson, Isaac: *The Untold Story*, Kaylor Publishing House, Johannesburg, 1958. P. 76) It was not just in port cities such as Libau and Windau that shipyards were built, but also in land-locked but-on-the-river Goldingen as well. Even England and Venice ordered ships from Courland! The Duke's ships plied the colonial trade and brought in goods such as sugar, coffee, spices and tobacco that were then sold in Courland, Livonia and in the neighbouring countries. In fact, the Duke had his own colony when in 1645 he purchased the West Indian island of Tobago. He then collaborated with a group of Dutch Carribean Sephardi families to develop sugar and tobacco production on the island.

With the end of Duke Jacob's modern reign, the burghers constantly pressured the new authorities to expel the Jews, which was finally agreed upon in 1692. But only in 1714 did the reigning Duke Ferdinand Kettler II issue a decree giving the Jews 6 weeks to leave the Duchy. But it didn't happen. The Jews were able to pay an annual sum for a *Schutzbrief* that would enable them to stay. But this is what characterised the history of the Jews in Courland right up to their expulsion in World War I: The merchants constantly decried them to the authorities and clamoured for their banishment; the nobles, who were interested in the economic advantages that the Jews could arrange for them, opposed the burghers. When Russia took over the area, their long history of anti-Semitism continued as they made decrees against continued rights of Jews and Jewish settlement, which were rarely carried out because the estate owners protected them. Proof of this is that we read the same law being enacted and re-enacted time and time again, which certainly would not have been necessary, should it have been en-

forced the first time around.

Just as a quick aside, it is interesting to note that Moscovy, now called Russia, had an almost mystical hatred of the Jews and kept most of them out of their territories. Ironically, when Poland was partitioned, Russia suddenly inherited multitudes of Jews living in the former Kingdom of Poland! I have always enjoyed this little piquant slice of poetic justice!

I hope that by this short introduction to the subject, I have been able to open your horizons to see the history of the Courlander Jews in terms of the larger context of greater Europe. So in conclusion, from where can we say our Courlander ancestors came? In the case of the Ashkenazim, I would say that it is safe to assume that these were the same Jewish families who originated in the Holy Roman Empire, who through vicious attacks, murders, pogroms and expulsions, made their way eastward where they were given a wider range of economic activity. When things began to sour for them there, they turned westward once again, looking for new opportunities just at the time that mercantilism was predominant and they were welcomed for their talents. In my own Levinson family from Goldingen, my grandfather said that they had originated in Memel. I like to imagine that when the Great Elector brought them from Germany to Memel, my Levinsons then travelled on with Duke Jacob to Courland!

Riga Expulsions

By

Rita Bogdanova

In 1882-4 many Lithuanian Jews - mostly from Kovno province - were adopted by Jewish families of Riga as adults, most with families of their own. It is not known whether these Jews were already living in Riga or were coming from Lithuania. After the adoption, these "children" were listed by the Riga Tax Administration as also belonging to Riga, thus providing them with equal rights.

Early in the 1890's the government was worried about the increasing number of Jewish inhabitants in Courland and Lievland and decided to examine the population and to expel all the Jews who were

not listed in the revision list of April 3, 1880 as living in Courland or Lievland. Consequently, the adopted families were removed from the family lists of Riga Jews and sent back to Lithuania. It is not known whether they all went back to Lithuania or stayed in Riga since some of these families were found to be living in Riga up to 1900.

The Jews on the lists from Courland for 1890-1893 who did not originate there were also checked to determine which of them had the right to live there.

It should be noted that the Lithuanian Jews who were adopted did not change their family names, so Lithuanian Jews listed as living in Latvia are probably listed under their original names.

Preservation of Jewish Heritage

Contributed by Nickolai Butkevich

Michael Avrutin sent the following note to Nickolai.

Two days ago our bureau was invited by the Ambassador of the United States of America to the meeting with Warren L. Miller, Chairman of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad at the Embassy of the United States. The subject that was discussed was the preservation and protecting the victims of the Holocaust and also about the preservation of other valuable heritages, like protecting and preserving monuments, historic buildings, cemeteries and other important property. I would like to note that also agreement between USA and Latvia was signed, concerning the cultural heritage between these countries, to reinforce preservation of cultural heritage. They will also facilitate friendship, sagacity, and tolerance between all the nations, races and religious groups.

The thing that I would like to stress is that above-mentioned agreement is the great merit of our Ambassador in Latvia, Brian E. Carlson; he did a lot to make this agreement to be realized. We are really happy for this, that this agreement was finally signed. This is really a great victory!

Genealogy: Reality and Fantasy, A Discussion with Blake Eskin

By Rachel Fisher

When Blake Eskin's family met the author of the award-winning Holocaust memoir *Fragments*, they thought Benjamin Wilkomirski might be a long lost cousin. But within a year, Benjamin was accused of being a gentile imposter. To find out how Benjamin got entangled in his family tree, Eskin traveled to Riga, Latvia to trace his own roots. He shares his surprising discoveries about family members, real and imaginary, and about how genealogy shapes identity in his book *A Life in Pieces: The Making and Unmaking of Benjamin Wilkomirski*. On Wednesday, October 2 at the Center for Jewish History, Blake Eskin shared the story of his family history research and the story of Benjamin Wilkomirski, and how the two became entangled. Rachel Fisher, the director of the Center Genealogy Institute, and the audience joined Eskin in a discussion of the ways family history is shaped by facts, memory, and imagination.

Eskin's mother was a descendant of the Wilkomirski family from Riga. This history was documented in family photographs and research Mrs. Eskin had conducted herself. Most importantly, living cousins who had grown up in Riga and escaped the Holocaust, but who remembered the family that had been left behind, remembered the family history. Benjamin Wilkomirski, the author of *Fragments*, recalled that he was a child survivor, that his name was Wilkomirski, and that he had been born in Riga. In contrast to Eskin's family, he had no documentation of his life in Riga.

Yet when Eskin and his family met the author of *Fragments*, some of them embraced him as a cousin. He was a survivor, a European. He had been to Riga, a place Eskin and his mother had heard about but never visited. The popularity and critical praise his book was receiving conveyed upon him a certain authenticity. But when Eskin and his mother traveled to Riga, they found increasing evidence of their own family's presence there, and no evidence that the author of *Fragments* was a relative.

In Riga, Eskin and his mother visited the Latvian

State Historical Archives, the Registry Department, and other repositories in Riga. They located city directories, rabbinical records, and birth records. The archivist at State Historical Archives even drew them a family tree based on the records she had found about their family. Later, Eskin traveled to Israel to meet a genuine cousin whose existence he had discovered in the documents in Riga. Meanwhile, other researchers were exposing the author of *Fragments* as the adopted child of a Swiss Christian family, and they have identified his birth parents—also Swiss Christians.

The reasons the author of *Fragments* concocted his story may never be known, and his case is no doubt a highly unusual one. But Eskin's story reveals that it is important for all genealogists to consider their own standards of evidence: how one's standards can be compromised by the desire to find a long-lost relative or the fantasy of descent from a prestigious rabbi. After all, family history research is a search for completeness: a complete family tree, complete knowledge of origins, a complete identity. While the illusion of completeness is tempting, most family historians realize that completeness will never be achieved, that it is the quest that counts. Eskin's tale recounts his journey to Riga and his discovery of that truth.

Rachel Fisher is Director, Genealogy Institute, Center for Jewish History, located at 15 West 16th Street, New York, NY 10011, (212) 294-8318. The Genealogy Institute helps new and experienced family history researchers learn about the world of their ancestors. It provides reference and educational services, and creates programs on family history and its connections to Jewish history. For more information about the Genealogy Institute go to CJH website at: <http://www.cjh.org/family/>.

Estonia Finally Has A Home

Contributed by Martha Lev-Zion

Last year, the Latvia SIG decided that it would include Estonia in its area of research and interest, but nothing more was done about it. Because there were few Jews in Estonia, those interested in the area were more or less "orphaned" and left to fend for themselves. I contacted some of the

researchers whom I knew were interested in Estonia and asked each of them if he or she could be responsible for that aspect of the SIG. I am happy to announce that Adam Katzeff has agreed to take on that responsibility! Anyone interested in furthering his or her research in the area of Estonia is encouraged to join the discussion group of the Latvia SIG and Estonia and to get in touch with Adam at: adam.katzeff@mail.bip.net

We will begin to create a database of sources we have available as soon as we know that a working group has been formed.

A Note from Adam Katzeff, Malmö, Sweden

I'm glad that the Latvia SIG is finally going to include Estonia. Even if the Jewish community of Estonia was never large, its history is an important part of pre-WWII Eastern European Jewish history!

When studying the Jewish families of Estonia, one quickly finds many connections to the Jewish community in Latvia. Most of the Jews in Estonia came there in the late 19th and early 20th century from many places inside the Pale of Settlement. A huge group came from what is today northwestern Lithuania, then parts of Kovno (Kaunas) guberniya. In the same period, lots of families from northwestern Lithuania also settled in today's Latvia.

Just as in my family, other families may find some branches that settled in Latvia while others settled in Estonia. Through this newly established group I hope we will be able to research the story of these families!

There is so much work that can be done, so to make it happen many people will have to help with projects of all kinds. I myself will concentrate on two things: keeping a net of contacts with people interested in Estonia and starting different database projects for Estonia.

A main database I hope we can create rather soon will contain information from the Jewish vital records for Estonia that are available on LDS-films. At a later time I will describe this project in more detail. Another interesting project could be creating ShtetLinks for the main Jewish settlements in

Estonia: Tallinn, Tartu, Pärnu, Narva, Rakvere, Viljandi and Võru.

Some of you may have other good ideas for projects that can be started. So, I'm very interested in getting in touch with anyone interested in Estonia. Hopefully, we can initiate many interesting projects together!

Holocaust Revisionist Speaks to Packed House in Estonia

Contributed by Nickolai Butkevich, Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union

Swiss Historian Jurgen Graf, whose work minimizing the number of Jewish victims of the Holocaust resulted in criminal charges being filed against him in his native country, spoke to a packed house in Tallin, Estonia on November 25, according to a November 27, 2002 article in the Russian-language Estonian newspaper "Molodyozh Estonii." Around 350 people, including young skinheads, elderly people, and at least one politician, Kajdo Nymmik-head of the Estonian Independence Party-filled the former hall of "Estonproekt" to hear Mr. Graf; many were not able to get seats. The speaker presented the brand new Estonian-language translation of his book "The Holocaust Under a Magnifying Glass," which purports to show that the number of victims of the Holocaust has been exaggerated by six times and that Treblinka was not a death camp.

Mr. Graf began his presentation with a short introduction read in Estonian in which he declared that he was happy to be in a free country like Estonia, where people can openly discuss the Holocaust, unlike Switzerland. This statement marked the first of many times that he was interrupted by applause from the audience.

The author of the article summed up the reading in the following way:

"It is difficult to imagine that everybody who gathered in the hall was really that interested in a correction to the historical record-how many Jews died during the war? More likely, they were attracted there by a common ideology, which is called xenophobia, anti-Semitism and fascism. Unfortunately, it is no longer possible to call this

phenomenon marginal and non-existent. Its existence in our society needs to be recognized."

Identification of Given Names

Contributed by Prof. G. L. Esterson
Ra'anana, Israel

As Martha indicated in her response to Eric Benjaminson's question, Dr. Beider does indeed derive the name group Beynish from the root name Benedikt. In his introductory discussion of these names, he does mention in passing that Benesh "was used as a Kinnui for the Biblical Benjamin," but he does not follow up on this observation. On the other hand, my own reply to Eric's question emphasized this connection between Benesh. and Binyamin as being primarily from the fact that Benesh was a kinui for the Hebrew name Binyamin, as defined by the rabbis. For a man having both of these names, his legal name for use in a Get became Binyamin hamechune Benesh.

These differences in interpretation come about because Dr. Beider and I take different approaches to linking Jewish names to one another. His approach is based on setting up theoretical hypotheses of how names developed over time and he used phonetic transitions between names to develop his hypotheses. Other researchers have also adopted this.

My approach is based on the use of the Jewish law books of Hilchot Gitin written by prominent rabbis of previous centuries. These rabbis' books were intended as guidebooks for divorce rabbis to use in writing legal Jewish Gitin (divorce documents). This was and is an important document for divorcing men and women, because if the document was later declared to be invalid for any reason, the children of post-divorce re-marriages would have a very undesirable status under Jewish law, and the rabbis wanted to prevent this from happening.

The rabbis' approach to developing their Jewish name groupings was basically empirical. They collected the Jewish and secular names used by men and women involved in divorces, recorded them, analyzed them in a quasi-statistical way, and then grouped them based on these field data; the results of this process then became Jewish

law. Such empirical data do not always agree with the schemes developed using hypothetical/theoretical ideas, but they do have the advantages of being in accord with the name groupings that people actually had in previous centuries in Europe, and of being in accord with Jewish law.

Anne Brest of South Africa posted the following:

“My ex father in law’s name was Baines Naphtali BREST. The Hebrew spelling was Bet, Nun, Vav, Sin (shin). Sometimes I heard my mother-in-law talking about him as “Bainash” but mostly Baines with the “s” sound. He came from Bauska, Latvia and I never knew the origin of his name. I see now that it is Binyamin.”

There were many variant pronunciations of these names. Still, the rabbis distinguished that those names (like Beynish), which were to be used as kinuim, were kinuim only for Binyamin, not for any other Hebrew names. So, the likelihood is that Binyamin was the Hebrew name linked to her ex father in law’s Yiddish name. However, there were some cases where Yiddish names like this were given as accompaniments to other Hebrew names, or just as additional names used by some people. This did happen.

Membership Fees via PayPal

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 now accepts payment via PayPal. PayPal is a web-based service that facilitates paying bills and fees via email.

With PayPal, you can send money to anyone with an email address by simply signing up for a PayPal account. To do this go to the PayPal web-site, <http://www.paypal.com>, and follow the directions provided to create an account. Once you have an account, log into your account and click the Send Money tab. Now enter the Latvia SIG email address, which is mgetz@erols.com, and enter the amount you would like to send. To fund the payment, add a credit card to your PayPal account by entering your credit card number as instructed.

After reviewing the details of your payment, click the Send Money button. The Latvia SIG will im-

mediately receive an email explaining that it has received a payment from you through PayPal.

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.

Latvia SIG Membership Questionnaire

NAME:..... PHONE:.....
ADDRESS:..... FAX:.....
CITY:.....STATE/PROVINCE:.....
ZIP/POSTAL CODE:.....
COUNTRY (if other than U.S.):.....
email address:.....

Whom are you researching? (Latvian cities only) Please use location names/spellings as found in *Where Once We Walked*.

NAME:..... LOCATION:.....
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NAME:..... LOCATION:.....

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)

I would be willing to volunteer for the following activities:

Please return your completed questionnaire, along with a check for U.S. \$20 (U.S. and Canada, \$30 for overseas members) payable to Latvia SIG, to:

Latvia SIG
5450 Whitley Park Terrace, #901
Bethesda, MD 20814-2061