Latvia SIG
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President’s Report
Shalom Chaverim!

Latvian Jewish interests are going to be well represented at the 24th IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy in Jerusalem the week of July 4-9, 2004! There are a number of lectures that will have Latvian content and we will have the great honor and privilege of having one of the archivists from Riga present a paper at the conference. In addition, I am in contact with the Association of Latvians and Estonians in Israel and we are cooperating to make your visit to the conference a successful research trip. The archives are preparing a special pamphlet to help you utilize the archives at Shefayim with the greatest efficiency and they are going to put on English speaking volunteers during the conference so that you will be able to get the most out of your visit to their archives.

There are an enormous number of Israelis of Latvian ancestry. Latvians founded some of the well-known kibbutzim in the country. There are many new immigrants from the former Russian Confederation and they are looking forward to discovering and meeting their relatives who will be coming to the conference. I have had many calls from people eager to meet you! Things are presently in full swing regarding organizing the conference. There were about two and a half times the number of lectures proposed than we have space for, so the quality of the lectures is going to be very high.

The SIG might have new databases to present at the conference, but I cannot guarantee that since I, for one, am busy with the excitement of organizing the conference and will not have time to push for new databases.

I hope as many of you as possible will try to attend the Jerusalem 2004 Conference. The archives in Israel are unique and you will not be able to find such sources elsewhere! If you have an Internet connection, check out the conference website: http://www.jewishgen.org/jerusalem2004 and make your plans early!

I look forward to seeing you in the Homeland!

Martha Levinson Lev-Zion, President
SIG Latvia
martha@bgumail.bgu.ac.il

Editor’s Comments

As in the previous edition of the our newsletter, this issue includes a number of articles about personal visits to Latvia. Such articles continue to reinforce the importance of visits to the land of our ancestors and highlight the emotional aspects of genealogy research, especially for those trying to connect with family members directly affected by the Holocaust.

Rochelle Kaplan’s contribution provides a moving account of her meeting Latvian family members for the first time and learning about the heroic efforts of her cousin Saul Gerson, a Holocaust survivor liberated from Buchenwald. Betsy Thal Gephart also writes about a similar experience meeting an entire branch of her family for the first time. She and Rochelle provide interesting views and describe trips to Latvia that neither will ever forget.

Brad Elterman’s trip to Daugavpils and Griva is personalized by discovering a cemetery in Griva in which his great grandparents may be buried. A highlight of Brad’s trip is the reading of the marriage contract, written by his great grandfathers — both rabbis in Griva — and read by Mr. Zalman Jakub.

Lavi Soloway’s trip to Rezekne is also the story of a remarkable journey in search of Jewish ancestors in Latvia. His description of the Jewish cemetery where his great-great grandparents may be buried is particularly moving. Lavi’s interest in restoring the old synagogue in Rezekne is a theme that has been expressed in this newsletter before. We hope that SIG members with similar interests in restoring the synagogue can cooperate in that endeavor and make it happen.

Mike Getz’s account of his recent visit to Israel and to Yad Vashem is highlighted by the Latvia Testimonies he has provided. The importance of these testimonies becomes apparent when you read the moving stories told by Rochelle, Betsy, Brad, and Lavi of their visits to killing fields and
On a personal note, I have been trying to get an idea about what life was like for my father and his family when they lived in Dvinsk during the early part of the 20th century. It is clear that life under Tsar Nicholas II was, to say the least, difficult for the Jewish working class within the Pale. In response to the Tsar’s oppressive regime a group of Jewish Social Democrats formed an organization called the Bund. Although founded in Vilna, the Bund was very active in Dvinsk and supported the goal of destroying the Tsarist regime while embracing Marxism as the path to building a democratic socialist society.

I knew that my father was a socialist and that he may have participated in the events leading up to the Russian revolution of 1905 as (possibly) a member of the Bund. That was about all I knew until I discovered the photo of my father and his “comrades,” one of whom is the mystery man I have tried to identify and is the subject of the article, Mystery Man, which appears later in this issue. If my conjecture is true, I have much to learn about my father’s life in Dvinsk and I need all the help I can get, so please respond.

Barry Shay, editor
barry.shay@ieee.org

Chabad Lights Up Latvia

The beautiful letter that follows was kindly provided by Arlene Beare and was written by Rabbi Mordechai Glazman of Riga. I am pleased to include it in this newsletter. Ed.

In the weeks before Chanukah, preparations for the Holiday were well underway. Café L’chaïm was busy selling Chanukiot, candles, dreidels and greeting cards and taking orders for doughnuts and latkes. Colorful booklets with all pertinent information about the special holiday traditions were printed and distributed throughout the country. Chanukah kits were made available at a discount price for all who needed, including the local Jewish schools, which supplied over 400 children with their holiday needs.

In addition to the ongoing classes in Judaism that prepared participants for the upcoming Holiday, a special guest lecturer was invited from Moscow. The Rabbi of the popular website <http://www.jewish.ru/> had a crowd of 150 people listening attentively as he explained the inner meaning of Chanukah and its relevance to every individual in all times. Late into the night, questions were answered and inner conflicts discussed as the crowd thirsted for more and more.

As in previous years, a giant Chanukah Menorah was set up near the Chabad School in the middle of a very busy intersection. A second 5-meter menorah stood and was lit each night near the House of Congress in central Riga. Though a terrible snowstorm struck, nearly 300 people showed up on the 4th night of Chanukah as Rabbi Mordechai Glazman, the Israeli Ambassador to Latvia Gary Coren, and the President of the Jewish Community Arkadi Sucharenko were lifted up in a cherry-picker to light the lamps. Special Chanukah-themed fireworks were enjoyed, as were the hot donuts and Chanukah balloons for the kids. Latvian Television filmed the event and aired it during the evening news. It was a great Kiddush Hashem.

On the night of the second candle, 50 families gathered for an interesting evening with discussions, contests, music, and of course plenty of good food. Similar gatherings were organized on further nights too. The Liepaja Jewish Community enjoyed a special holiday program run by Rabbi Shneor Kot. Sunday was Kids Day as Chabad joined with the Riga Jewish Community and the Sochnut for a day filled with fun for all. It started with a concert performed jointly by the two Jewish schools of Riga. With professional song, dance and drama, all felt the message and spirit of Chanukah. Following that, the children received tickets to enjoy the rest of the events.

Holiday themed games were set up for all ages. Three attractions were rented for the day, and the kids jumped and played to their hearts content as if in a full-fledged amusement park. Each child had a chance to form and fry a fresh doughnut, to make colorful holiday decorations and paint their very own wooden dreidel. The day ended with a lottery. As a huge dreidel spun around, candy-filled dreidels and chocolate coins were distrib-
uted to all. It was almost certain that as a result, children would be celebrating the rest of the Holiday and lighting their very own candles in homes throughout the country.

The old and disabled were not forgotten either. All week, the soup kitchen served holiday treats to all participants. Latkes, donuts and candles were delivered to the home-ridden along with their meals-on-wheels. Children of the Ohel Menachem Chabad kindergarten performed for the elderly and distributed fruits that were bought with money the children collected - penny by penny each morning. Though the wind blows and the snow falls in the Latvian Republic, Chabad succeeded in bringing the warm light of Chanukah to the hearts and homes of Jews countrywide.

Visit to Israel
by Mike Getz

Hilda and I had not visited Israel since 1997 and arrived there on Monday Oct 27th of last year. The changes we observed were not entirely what we expected. Security was in place at Ben Gurion, but clearance was not onerous and less frenetic than at Chicago and Zurich en route. A large number of Yeshiva candidates and incumbents from a number of traditional segments were also being processed. Our passage through customs was routine.

The ride to our hotel on Hayarkon in Tel Aviv had its own surprises – considerably improved roads with prominent and clear signage reminiscent of the US. Security was prominent at entrances to all buildings but not intrusive. Hotel occupancy was low, facilities were generally in good shape and service appeared to be somewhat improved. Our cell phone for use in Israel, set up in the US, proved marvelously useful. It was well supported by service locally.

An important highlight of our stay in Tel Aviv was meeting with Martha, our president, who traveled up from Beersheva by train. We discussed SIG matters with a focus on the IAGS Conference in Jerusalem during July 2004. Martha has addressed these matters in this issue.

We saw a number of friends and visited old haunts. Ben Yehudah Street was in transition. Economic conditions and a change of shopping habits had eroded its particular vitality.

A train ride to Akko was smooth and pleasant. Aviva met us at the station for the ride to Manof where she lived. Aviva’s mother and my mother were close friends in Subate. Our visit, in addition to meeting South African friends living in Manof, included some Latvian genealogy updates. Our return trip from Akko was enlivened and enriched by a number of young men and women of the IDF who were on the train as well.

Jerusalem was a key destination and we traveled there for Shabbat. We planned to meet Rose Lerer Cohen, our hostess in Jerusalem, as well as mentor and friend Dov Levin and importantly, to visit Yad Vashem. Hilda and I visited the Kotel and participated in its range of devotions, candle lighting, fervid prayer and songs to the Bride of Shabbat. As always it was a moving experience completed by a wonderful discursive meal with Rose and Ron Cohen and their family.

Highlights of Shabbat itself included shul at Heichal Shlomo; thereafter we strolled through our neighborhood. Our hotel, the Inbal is close to the Renaissance—venue for the IAGS Conference in July. We saw the rapidly rising Begin Center with a briefing by Harry Hurwitz, an old friend and fellow Betarnik. After Shabbat we visited Ben Yehuda Street for some shopping and to watch young Yerushalmis hang out. The evening was rounded off with drinks at the King David.

On Sunday, we traveled with a local Ben Gurion University group and accompanied them to Gilo. Palestinians in the valley below had fired on its inhabitants who were now protected by a decorative wall. We made a quick visit to Yad Vashem, which was teeming with new construction.

Accompanying Rose to Yad Vashem, later in the week, was a highlight of our visit. Dov Levin had suggested that I ask for the help of Bella Noham, originally from Riga, particularly on Pages of Testimony related to Latvia. After experimenting with Ivrit and English we found common ground in Yiddish – a language she spoke with color, warmth and veracity. As we toured the Pages, town-by-town and shtetl-by-shtetl of Jewish Lat-
via, the full implications for our genealogy became very clear. Europe’s Jews are linked to Holocaust victims and survivors and to those who preceded them to Israel. It was a moving experience when I encountered my own submission, in English, for an uncle, Meier Getz. He was killed during 1941 with his family in Akniste. I noted a separate entry for the same name in Hebrew, submitted during 1977 by a Krom family member in Israel. My uncle was married to Gittel Krom, of that family, in Akniste.

Bella was wonderfully helpful and encouraging. I undertook to urge our SIG to submit Pages of Testimony for family members or other victims of the Latvian Holocaust. This action is important to restore the unity and identity of families devastated by the Holocaust, in which almost 90% of Latvian Jews died. I have put together in an Excel format a list of locations, towns and cities where Latvia’s Jews lived, mostly around 1935. Against each location, Holocaust victims and the number of Pages of Testimony are also recorded.

A subsequent visit to Dov Levin at the Hebrew University introduced me to his historically important research. His records include interviews with survivors and their accounts that are uniquely valuable. Over the years, Dov has helped to shape our perspective and our knowledge of pre WWII Latvia. He wrote authoritatively about the Jewish experience during the Soviet occupation, and the role of Latvians and Nazis in the Holocaust and authored Yad Vashem’s Pinkas on Latvian and Estonian Jewry. Some of his important works in Hebrew have not yet been translated into English. Dov will be an important speaker at the Jerusalem Conference.

My first visit to Beth Hatefutsoth in Tel-Aviv during the 1980’s was to see its exhibits and materials. Limited enquiries into material on Latvia, its Jewry and genealogy signaled a number of intended projects. During subsequent visits I was able to copy information on Jewish population centers and some accounts of Holocaust events related to Latvia. These seemed to match with other published materials including some in State Department records at the US Archives dated shortly before WW11. Dov Levin was kind enough to supplement these from time to time. In 1993 we handed in the video record of our family visit to Subate.

The names of Latvian cities and towns have been reconciled with locations in current maps of Latvia. Not all the details in my possession related to Holocaust dates, victims, sites and mass graves appear in the following pages. I have added the number of Pages of Testimony on record at Yad Vashem for each town or city as these appear on the website – Bella’s guidance and help made it possible. Those who wish to communicate directly, and possibly make enquiries should do so to the following address:

Yad Vashem,
Hall of Names
P.O.B. 3477
Jerusalem

We can make Pages of Testimony available to members and others who wish to add to the record as it presently stands. Liepaja (Libau) seems to have a relatively low number of entries, as do Bausk, and Ludza compared with estimated victims.
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Latvian Testimonies at Yad Vashem

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My Genealogy Journey to Latvia  
By  
Rochelle Kaplan

Belle Yang writes, “To swallow your voice, to keep stories buried deeply beneath layers and layers of silence, is to live in a state of bondage.” And so I’ll tell the story of the genealogy journey my mom and I took to Latvia this past July.

Davis and his son Gatis Gersons, our never-before seen cousins, greet us at the Riga train station with a KAPLAN sign and take us to Hotel Gutenburgs in the center of the old town. Davis’ father was Saul; Saul’s father was Chaim Solomon; Chaim’s father was Itzik, the elder brother of my great-grandfather, Shmul Gerson. Shmul became Samuel Herson in New York. Since Davis and I share the same great-great-grandfather, Jossel Gerson, we are third cousins. JewishGen Family Finder led me to our cousins, though I’ve never met the Moscow-raised cousin, - now living in Seattle - who gave me the information about our cousins in Latvia.

We enter Vecriga (old Riga) through the Swedish Gate, from the 1600s. Usually folks can’t drive in this part of town, but since we have luggage we are waved through. The hotel is charming, with wooden beams, odd angles, photos and prints of old Riga, and antiques. There is neither ventilation nor air-conditioning and this is in the midst of Europe’s heat wave. I don’t want to leave since Gatis recommended this hotel, so we make do with a fan and showers each night. It’s a great location, just off the square with the Dome Church and its big clock, and only a block from the parking lot outside the gates of the old city. And both the open rooftop restaurant and the breakfast buffets downstairs are superb.

Gatis agrees to meet us later to show us around the city. My mom prefers to relax at the hotel so Gatis and I wander off, first to Freedom Square, with its 1935 monument inscribed, “For Fatherland and Freedom”, built where a statue of Peter the Great once stood. Two soldiers parade stiffly in front of the statue. Latvia was independent briefly, from 1920 until 1940.

Later, Davis treats us to dinner at the hotel and we are introduced to his family – Davis’ second wife Irina, his three children by his first wife - Gatis, the oldest, almost 23, Valdis, 20 and Indra. Indra has a pierced chin, a great conversation starter. I’m glad she and Irina speak some English. Gatis and Valdis speak English fluently. Davis can say thank you and please. And from earlier that day, I know dauga (big) and ava (water). Not too useful over dinner - well, perhaps ava. I’m glad I sit next to Gatis. We’ve been emailing each other for a few months and I’ve spoken to him once by phone. I depend on his translation skills. He’d already explained a rule of Latvian grammar. Male names add an “s” so Gatis’ surname is Gersons, while female names add an “e” so his grandmother Guna has the surname Gersone. This explains the Hotel Gutenburgs. We learn that paldies (pol-DEE-ez) means thank you, ludzu (LOO-dzoo) is please and sveiks (svayx) is hi. Latvian, Lithuanian and the extinct Prussian belong to the Baltic group of the Indo-European family of languages. Latvian uses no articles; adjectives, nouns, pronouns are declined in six cases, with endings changed according to gender, number and case. Most words are stressed on the first syllable. The language has distinct rising and falling tones and vowels can be elongated, so that the language sounds almost musical.

Valdis, a student of engineering and technology at Riga’s Polytech Institute looks like a younger version of his dad. Valdis speaks excellent English. Davis owns and manages Skilla D, a wholesale women’s clothing and finished textile firm in Riga. His wife is an economist, now working for Davis’ company. I think the American equivalent of a Latvian economist is a financial analyst. Davis trained as an economist, then worked for two years for the Russian military. When the communist system collapsed, he lost his job. He then grew roses in Jurmala and sold them by the roadside. Then with savings and loans from friends, he began his importing business. At the time it was impossible to obtain a bank loan in Latvia. Davis employs his mother, Guna, an economist, part-time. She loves to work and must be about seventy. We’ll meet her in a few days. Although the dinner is fine, I’m too excited to eat; it’s thrilling that genealogy has taken me this far. I have so many questions and we’ve got to
plan the week. Everyone else eats heartily; Indra and Valdis request ice cream so I learn the word saldejums. We arrange to meet again in two days.

The next day we have planned to hook up with Aleks Feigmanis, the Latvian genealogist I hired months ago to research the Gerson and Zaks families. My paternal grandmother was a Gerson whose mother’s maiden name was Zaks. My great-grandfather changed the spelling from Ger-son to Herson in the U.S. because he feared folks would pronounce the name Jerson. We’ll do a walking tour of old Riga, especially Jewish Riga. And we’ll figure out our schedule for the week. Davis enthusiastically offered a car and driver.

The next morning, we are pleased by the bountiful breakfast buffet in the dining room. The spread is repeated each morning, with a blonde pianist sporting a gold earring playing show tunes and jazz standards. Once he plays Over the Rain-

bow, my parents’ song.

We meet Aleks in the hotel lobby. He’s short, blonde, youthful and smart; he knows Hebrew, Latvian, Lithuanian, German, English and Russian, the history of the region and Jewish history. He has lots of energy and keeps us walking fast, for hours. My eighty-three year old mother keeps right up and I’m glad she wears flat shoes on the uneven cobblestone streets.

Before the 18th century, Riga had fewer than a thousand Jewish residents; the right to live in Riga was granted to wealthy Jews. In 1725, Jews were granted permission to build a Jewish cemetery in Riga. Before that Jews had to be buried at some distance from the town. In the late 18th century, restrictions were lifted and Jews were freer to live in other parts of Riga besides the Moscow suburb, site of the Riga Ghetto in the early 1940s. That’s how come we get to see where Ericka Gerson’s family lived, on Marienstrasse, now Marjās iela. Iela (YEH-luh) means street in Latvian. One building where Shmul’s family lived remains; it’s a stately looking apartment building. Ericka recalls on a videocassette, made when she was almost 88, that the apartment had six rooms and a piano. Her mother played beautifully and Grandma said she still has some of the sheet mu-

sic.

We walk to the site of the old Choral Synagogue, called the Gogol Shul. Only some parts of the stone walls remain. A plaque notes the date July 4, 1941, when the Nazis herded three hundred Jews into the synagogue, locked the door and set the shul aflame. The Jewish cemetery buildings were also burned that day. In the Soviet era, Russians razed the old Jewish cemetery, and used the gravestones to build the Park of the Communist Brigades.

Latvia had few years of independence; it was prized for its warm water ports and forests. The Daugava River was an important trade route, transporting goods from Scandinavia to Turkey and Greece. When electric dams were built in the 1900s, Roman and Arab coins were found at ex-
cavation sites. A Latvian folk song states:

Lieli celi, mazi celi, Big and small roads
Visi Riga sateceja. All lead to Riga.

The Germans were here by the 12th century; German merchants dominated the city. In the 15th and 16th centuries, Russians, Swedes and Poles fought for control. At one point in the 17th cen-
tury, the Baltic Sea became known as the Lake of Sweden! Even when the Russians defeated the Swedes in 1710, the German nobility and mer-
chants still controlled Riga. Under the Russians, Riga became the capital of Livonia Province. The old city remained the home of 30,000 Germans, but the suburbs with wider and straighter streets housed more Russians and Latvians, often in wooden homes.

The city walls were pulled down in the late 1850s to allow more freedom of trade. Riga became the world’s busiest timber port and Russia’s third greatest industrial city, after Moscow and St. Petersburg. Jewish merchants and traders prospered. They transported wood, tobacco, flax, food, and leather from Riga to Belarus. They were known as Holzern Juden, or wooden Jews, Aleks told us. Before WW I, half of Riga was Latvian but there were significant communities of Jews and western merchants. Both Itzik and Shmul Gerson were well-to-do merchants of the second guild.

We walk to the Peitav Shul that survived the
Holocaust because the Nazis feared that if they burned it, the fire would spread to nearby old Riga. It dates from 1905 and even the Torahs survived, hidden away. Aleks explained that during the Soviet era, he hadn’t known of the shul’s existence, although he is half-Jewish. There was anti-religious propaganda then and no one spoke of religion. When we enter the lovely yellow building, several old men greet Aleks and remind him to put on his yarmulke. One man, 82 years old, says, “In the old days, before the war, on holidays and even Friday nights, the shul was filled to the rafters.” He survived the war by joining the Soviet Army. He lost over seventy family members in the Holocaust. We ask if he knew our cousin Saul Gersons, who survived the Holocaust, came back to Latvia and started a family. The man had heard of him and knew he had immigrated to Israel some years before. Aleks told us that in 1940-41, the Soviets deported many Latvians to Siberia, among them 5000 Jews. Many of these folks perished. When the man hears my mom is a Brooklynite, he says he has cousins there. Aleks shows us several old Hebrew prayer books, lined up on a bookshelf. This is now Riga’s only shul.

In the early forties, bodies would be found on the street outside the Moscow suburb ghetto. There was little food and folks were crowded together in small rooms. The ghetto’s main street was Ludzes Street. About half the residents were able to work and forced into slave labor, among them Saul Gersons. The main job of the Jewish workers was the loading and unloading of trains. Davis recalls his father saying that one day in 1941, as Saul worked, he saw a German guard eating bread with bacon. The guard gave half of his food to Saul. Saul said afterward, “There are no good or bad nationalities, only good and bad individuals.” Another time, in late 1941, Saul left, with the other laborers, for work. When they returned, they came back to a different ghetto, a smaller one, and they never again saw the people who had lived in the old ghetto. Attempts to find out what happened to the inhabitants of the old ghetto were unsuccessful. We know now that on Nov. 29th and December 8, 1941, the old ghetto was annihilated.

Saul was transferred from the Riga Ghetto to a Latvian concentration camp, then to Stutthof.
Concentration Camp in Poland and finally to Buchenwald, from which he was liberated in April 1945. His son Davis showed us Saul’s belt from Buchenwald. The leather belt has many holes in it, made by Saul as he starved. When the belt is fastened at the last hole, the circled belt can fit a child.

Juris, Davis’ brother, later told us that Saul led a resistance group of 2000 prisoners at Buchenwald who attacked the Germans just before liberation. Although Saul was a Zionist when he was a young man and thought about moving to Palestine in 1940, he didn’t emigrate. A good friend of his from Buchenwald moved to Palestine immediately after the war. Saul, however, came back to Latvia in search of his brother, Alexander, whom he never found. He assumed Alexander died in the Battle for Moscow in 1941-1942, but this was never confirmed. Saul heard in the camps that his mother Chaska and sister Raschel perished in the town of Tukums, in 1941.

After the liberation of Buchenwald, Saul was on a train bound for Latvia. He noticed a dramatic change in attitude among local folks toward the freed prisoners. In Germany, people were positive about the Buchenwald survivors but when the train arrived in Poland, locals perceived the concentration camp survivors as criminals. Saul suspected something bad would happen and so he exited the train in Poland. He trudged east through Poland, then north through Lithuania to Latvia, arriving in the summer of 1941. He later learned the train he’d been on was bound for Siberia. Once he settled in, married his first wife, Ita Shapira, born in 1949, and studied economics at High College of Textiles, from which he graduated in 1957. Ita subsequently made aliyah to Israel and died there in 1996. In 1991, Saul and Sonia, his third wife, made aliyah to Israel. Saul died there in 1998. Saul’s eldest son Alex, and Alex’s wife Bronya, made aliyah in 1973.

We’ve walked past the Powder Tower, the old city walls, the Saima (Parliament), and Riga’s oldest buildings, called the Three Brothers. We go to the Jewish Community Center and Museum, which reminds me of Brooklyn’s Jewish catering halls. Almost all the items at the museum come from descendants of Latvians who emigrated before WWII to Australia, South Africa, Canada and the US. That’s because so many Jewish artifacts were destroyed in the Holocaust. We see photos from Steinberg, the same Dunaburg photo studio that our ancestors used. The Riga Jewish Museum has old photos, documents, and music sheets from Latvian towns with sizeable Jewish populations in the past: Daugavpils (formerly Dwinsk, Dunaburg), Liepaja (formerly Libau), Jelgava (formerly Mitau), posters for the Bund - a Jewish Socialist labor organization, and for the Zionist movement, a chilling video about the Holocaust in Latvia and the subsequent trial and hanging of a Nazi general in Riga. My mom admired the phonograph player that was the just like the one she had as a child.

We drive past Riga’s Chabad School with local teachers and others from Brooklyn. It’s in a building that was always a Jewish school, except during Soviet times. The principal of the school is Israeli and his wife is from Brooklyn; she is only thirty years old and already has nine children.

Aleks, mom and I continue our tour of Riga, past the Art Nouveau or Jugendstil buildings from the late 19th and early 20th century, fantastic in their ornamental facades of faces and flora. Mikhail Eisenstein, the father of the Russian filmmaker, designed one building. We peer into Isaiah Berlin’s childhood home, with its floral wallpapered hallway. “Only barbarians are not curious about where they come from, how they came to be where they are, where they appear to be going, whether they wish to go there, and if so, why, and if not, why not,” Sir Isaiah Berlin wrote.

We hurtle through the market, housed in converted dirigible hangars, but it’s closing time and we stop only for a glass of Kvass, a mildly alcoholic root beer-like drink that’s popular here. Kvass is made from rye flour and sugar. I like it but mom scrunches up her face. “It’s too much like beer.”

The streets are packed at 10 P.M.; after all, it’s summertime and still light outside. Outdoor cafes are filled with beer drinkers, some singing popular tunes. We dive into a pelmeni place, crowded with twenty year olds. The restaurant is cafeteria
style, like so many places here. Steel vats hold six different types of vegetarian and meat pelmeni, which in New York City we call pierogi. Various toppings of chopped vegetables, sour cream, and sauces are arranged on the counter. Mom opts for hot herbal tea but I go for the thick, lavender blueberry flavored yogurt drink. The pelmeni are steaming hot, soothing and creamy. The total bill comes to less than $5 and we giggle.

The following day, we go with Davis and Gatis to the fourth floor walk-up where Davis’ mother, Guna, lives. Guna was married to Saul Gerson for five years. The apartment hallway looks drab, like that of an old New York City apartment building, but inside the flat is light and roomy. There are several landscape paintings by friends and several bookshelves holding classic authors like Jack London. Guna, now 71, has lived there since 1972. Saul and Alexander (Sasha), his son by his first marriage, helped get the apartment ready. They painted and brought in furniture. Guna laughs now remembering how in Soviet times, furniture kits contained lots of mistakes. Somehow, Saul and Sasha assembled the bookshelves.

A tall, thin, elegant woman with gray hair in a blunt cut, Guna wears a chunky amber necklace. She met Saul when she worked as an economist in the same human resources department in 1951, calculating salaries. Before that she had been a factory manager of textile looms. She still works in accounting, for her son Davis and for another firm.

Guna recalls that Chaim Solomon, Saul’s father, invented a cough medicine called Neklepot, which means not to cough. It’s no longer available. She believes Chaim’s pharmacy was Gerson’s Pharmacy on Zirnov Street in Riga, before it was sold and Chaim and Chaska moved to Slampe.

Later, Mom and I bought tickets for the evening’s organ concert at the Dome Cathedral. Dome stands for Domus, Latin for house of God. This cathedral is the biggest in the Baltics and lucky for us, it is a block from the hotel so we can always find our back to Gutenberg’s, by heading towards the Cathedral’s massive clock. The Dome houses the world’s fourth largest organ. The Cathedral was consecrated in 1211, but it was expanded and rebuilt over the centuries with Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque elements. A fire broke out in 1547, destroying much of old Riga, and the cathedral was rebuilt. Today, it retains its form from the 18th century. Many of Riga’s nobles are entombed here. On top is a distinctive rooster; in earlier days one side was gilded and the other black. If the gilded side faced towards the city, one had to hurry to the port as weather threatened the arrival of incoming ships.

The first great organ in the Dome, built in 1601, lasted for almost 300 years. The new organ, installed in the 1880s, has 6768 pipes, grouped in 124 registers and arranged in rows. For its ceremonial in 1884, Lizst composed a chorale, “Praise to God.”

Once seated inside, we admired the graceful lines and arches, the carvings, stained glass, and the organ. We sat near the intricate Baroque wooden pulpit, made by the court master to the Duke of Courland in 1641. Guilds, wealthy patrons and the town council donated the stained glass windows. There is no stained glass on the south side; WW II bombs destroyed these. The windows celebrate important dates and people in Riga’s history and glorify Jesus and Martin Luther. Tonight’s recital featured Finland’s Maija Tynkkynen performing various works. But after an hour, mom and I, bored, snuck out and headed over to Kalku Street to scope out the restaurants. We picked the Lido, recommended and crawling with locals. The cafeteria lured us with pink borscht, roast chicken with sauerkraut, and kapusta salad. Mom happily remembers this salad of cabbage, carrots, sugar, salt and vinegar that she used to make but had forgotten about. I drink draft beer and mom has tea that is boiling hot. The Lido reminds me of restaurants in the East Village, where no two chairs or tables match, but the food is tasty and cheap.

Saturday was to be a big day. First, we’d go to New Shmerlis Hebrew Cemetery to find Itzik Gerson’s grave, and perhaps that of his wife, Chaska. Itzik was my great-grandfather Shmul’s elder brother. We have no luck. There are so many tombstones in Hebrew, German, Russian and Latvian from the 1920s to the present, and the cemetery is dark and wooded. The office is
closed and we learn later that it lists only those buried after 1951.

Guna and Edita cut masses of red roses and white hydrangeas from the garden out back, to bring to Chaim Solomon’s grave. Chaim was Saul’s father, who died in 1935 in Tukums. Chaim’s father was Itzik. We divide up into two groups, in two cars. There will be Aleks in one car to translate, and Valdis in the other. Jurmala, the Latvian word for seaside, is the name of a string of smaller towns and resorts along the coast west of Riga. Jurmala lies between the coast and the Lielupe River. Upe means river and liel means big. There are lots of tall, leafy trees and stately Victorian wooden homes that date back a century. Gardens spill over with flowers; we see wild pink roses, and greenhouses for tomatoes. Itzik and Shmul vacationed in Jurmala with their families in 1889 and probably other years. They are listed in an 1889 Jewish Registry. In the last six years, lots of new houses have gone up. If you buy an old house, you must renovate it without destroying its architectural integrity.

We head west to Tukums, and the Jewish Cemetery where Chaim Solomon is buried. The cemetery, in a clearing, has no formal entrance. Most of the graves are in Hebrew. Guna tosses away the rocks my mom and I put there; she is unaware of the custom of leaving stones at the grave as a way of reminding the dead that the living have not forgotten them. She lays down the bouquet of roses and hydrangeas, her own remembrance to Chaim.

We stroll Tukums which in 1881 was 47% Jewish (almost 3000 Jews). In 1897, 34% of the townsfolk were Jewish and in 1910, 46% were.

The Jews were expelled during WW I. In the 18th century, the town’s Jews came from East Prussia (Koenigsburg was its capital); in the second half of the 19th century, the Jews came from Lithuania. Saul Gerson graduated high school in Tukums. The Nazis and their Latvian collaborators murdered the Jews in July 1941. Among their victims were Saul’s mother Chaska and sister Rachel.

Jossel, the father of Itzik, Shmul, Rafael, Ganna and Dobre Lea, lived in Bauska where he owned a flourmill. All five children were born in Bauska. Yet Grandma Ericka says on the videotape that she visited her paternal grandfather in Mitau, where she said he had a grocery store. Another discrepancy to clear up.

Davis says that there was a sugar factory in Mitau (now Jelgava), probably using sugar beets, and Saul’s grandfather, Itzik, invested in this venture. We push on to Jelgava. Mitau once had a flourishing Jewish community. We stop at the Jewish cemetery, just off the main road. It has a new plaque but some graves have fallen over and tall grasses and wildflowers grow. Aleks talks about the Jewish history of Mitau; we look at the shells of buildings that once were synagogues. Now deserted, only the outer bricks and the Star of David remain. In 1897, 6000 Jews lived in the town, representing 17% of the population. In 1915, the Jews of Courland were expelled to Russia. My guess is by then, Jossel had died; he was born in 1827. Some Jews returned after WWI but the Nazis murdered Mitau’s Jews in 1941.

Afterwards, we head to Bauska, home of the baroque Rundale Palace built by Rastrelli, who also built the Summer Palace in St. Petersburg. Rabbi Kuk/Kook, later the chief rabbi of Israel, became, at age thirty, Bauska’s rabbi in 1895. In 1904, he made aliyah to Palestine.

Perhaps Jossel Gerson heard Rabbi Kuk speak. Aleks directs us to the site where Bauska’s shul once stood; he recounts the town’s Jewish history. Jews have been officially recorded in Bauska since 1799, when they received the right to settle in the town. However, the first Jews settled in Bauska in 1628, when Poles took over the area. In 1835, close to 2600 Jews lived in the town. In 1864, Bauska had almost 2400 Jews, two synagogues and two praying houses; in 1897, 42% of the town was Jewish and Talmud Torah and two private Jewish schools flourished. We know that Jossel and members his family lived in Bauska in the 1850s through 1893. In 1920, there were 834 Jewish residents. In 1935, sixteen percent of the town’s 5,000 inhabitants were Jews. Nazis murdered Bauska’s Jews in the summer of 1941. Jewish men had already previously been castrated. Aleks wrote that only one Jew, Israel
Toik, survived the war, saved by a local barber.

The next morning Davis meets mom, Aleks and me at the parking lot just outside the old city to introduce us to the burly driver, Andrejs, and the yellow VW van, which will take us to Kraziai, Lithuania, where my great-grandmother Raschel Zaks was born. "Labrit!" I call out, "good morning". We stop once more at Jelgava’s large Hebrew cemetery. Some tombstones are still standing and quite beautiful. Perhaps Grandma’s grandparents are buried here.

We also see the two abandoned old brick synagogues, beside each other. In a nearby square of dirt, a patch of lettuce grew. We drive on, passing farms, neon yellow fields of rapeseed, wheat and flax fields, blue chicory flowers, smaller farms with peas, beans, beets, potatoes, squash, purple and orange poppies. Wooden farmhouses, cows, a few horses. Aleks recalls that during Soviet times, when coffee was scarce, folks made a hot drink from chicory (in Latvian, cikorijs). Other hot drinks were made from hops or acorns. He remembers a fruit called cidono, from which Jews made wine. Cherries, apples and currants were also transformed into wine.

After an emotional day in Kraziai, the next day mom and I relax in Riga. I go to the Photography Museum, near the synagogue, and see exhibits of old cameras, black and white prints from the 1920s and 1930s, and a temporary exhibit of photos taken in a Siberian labor camp from the 1950s to 1970. Mom and I stroll the squares (laukums in Latvian) and listen to costumed folk singers and bands while dancers in native garb swirl, often joined by locals. July is Latvia’s Folk Music Festival. We head to St. Paul’s Cathedral and up its elevator, for its sweeping views over Riga. We recognize the dirigible hangars, the river and bridges, the old town and new one beyond. There’s a bracing wind and we retreat, heading to the suitably black and box-like Occupation Museum, which documents Latvia under its Nazi and Soviet oppressors. There are displays of Nazi and Soviet propaganda, tributes to those who fought the occupiers, chilling artifacts from concentration camps and a replica of a Siberian gulag. We see a map secretly dividing Europe before WWII, part of a pact between Stalin and Hitler, and a KGB listening device found during the 1999 renovation of the Hotel Latvia. We flee outside again, to more folk music performers. Inside the bleak museum, our stomachs churned; now we see butter being churned and we slather it on dark Latvian bread.

That evening Davis picks us up and we meet the entire family at a Saliki (Shashlik) restaurant, a barbecue joint, in a Riga suburb. We notice that our Latvian cousins don’t show the easy physicality of Spaniards or Italians; they don’t kiss or hug when they see us or greet each other, as we are wont to do when we see them. But their warmth comes through in their words, enthusiasm and generosity. Mom and I practice restraint, moving towards what we perceive as local norms. We all enter a large wooden hut, decorated with Latvian and Russian objects. It’s as hot as a sauna but we’ll be eating there, fourteen of us, at two large, joined tables. Piled on are salads, pickles (Davis thought I had never eaten these), soups, barbecued lamb, and vegetables. There’s beer, tea and rich, creamy desserts. We eat, laugh, swap stories and Guna movingly toasts our family reunion. Pickle in Latvian is marineti darzeni vai augli. How I wish Grandma Ericka were here to raise her glass and toast the gathering in a poem!

The next day, mom and I drive with Davis and Aleks Feigmanis three hours to Daugavpils, which means big water castle. But we stop first at Krustpils, formerly Kreitzburg, which in 1897 was 76% Jewish (3,000 Jews). It’s less than seventy-five miles southeast of Riga. A wonderful local rescued the Jewish tombstones from the old cemetery and brought them over to the new cemetery so they wouldn’t be destroyed when the old cemetery was converted to another use.

We continue to Daugavpils, Latvia’s second largest city. As we drive, Aleks shows us a book by G. Kasovsky, called Masterpieces of Jewish Art: Artists from Vitebsk. Yehuda Pen and His Pupils, a gorgeous, informative book. Pen taught Marc Chagall. We also read excerpts from Sarah Foner’s memory of Dvinsk, A Woman’s Voice: Memories of My Childhood Days, but it’s weighty and hard to read in the car. Daugavpils was formerly Dvinsk when controlled by Russia, and Dunaburg when controlled by Germany. Du-
naburg is where some Gerson family photos were taken; Itzik’s wife, Chana Eidelman, was from Dunaburg and Chaim Solomon was married here. One hundred years ago Daugavpils was 46% Jewish - 32,000 people out of 80,000. Now the city is 90% Slavic - Russian and White Russian. Aleks decides we should enter the city via the old route, and we see many old Russian-style wooden houses, a century old, with brightly painted shutters and lace curtains in the windows. Beyond that Russian area are large, gray drab apartment complexes built in the Soviet era. We happen upon a market with wooden produce stalls. Some folks have no booths; they simply place their vegetables and fruit on cartons. I buy a pint of freshly picked raspberries for 35 santims (about 55 cents) and a bunch of wild king mushrooms that are very large, with red crowns. We see chanterelles, blueberries, potatoes, carrots, cucumbers, zucchini, hops, garlic, scallions, peas, and eggs. There are between 200-300 Jews remaining, dispersed throughout the city, and one active synagogue.

The Synagogue in Daugavpils

We visit the history museum housed in an Art Nouveau mansion. There’s a plaque to Latvia’s greatest writer, Janis Rainis, predominantly a poet, who grew up in this part of the country. There is a collection of clocks, including the same cuckoo clock my mom used to have in the kitchen. There are watches, armaments, fossils, an old Torah and photos. Stuffed animals and birds are in display cases painted to resemble the creatures’ natural habitat, much like the display cases at NYC’s Museum of Natural History. There are an old mortar and pestle, Viking artifacts, medieval armor, a costume display of the various peoples of Latvia, paintings and modern weavings. As in the other museums we visit elsewhere in Latvia, an attendant, usually female, follows us and turns out the lights in each room we leave. There is whalebone as big as a canoe, outside the museum. Afterwards, we eat lunch and drink beers and vodka in an outdoor café nearby. The pelmeni and borscht are delicious; so is the Latvian national dish of gray beans, onions and bacon.

We go to the Hebrew cemetery, where some famous rabbis are buried. Two competing rabbis lie next to each other. They are Rabbi Meir Simcha, chief rabbi of Mitnagdim, and the Rogatchover Gaon (Rabbi Yesef Rosen), chief rabbi of the Hassidim. Foner writes about the philosophical rift between the rabbis and how it played out among Dwinsk’s families when they purchased meat; if a Mitnagdim woman went to a Hasidic butcher, the meat was considered trayf (unclean). The wooden house and the synagogue of Rabbi Meir Simcha HaKohen are long gone from Daugavpils, but his grave remains intact. It was moved to the “new” Jewish cemetery after the older cemetery was desecrated by the Nazis and used by the Soviets as the location for a sports field. At the cemetery, next to many graves, are wooden benches like ones we’ve seen at other Latvian burial places. I’ve never seen these in American cemeteries.

The Synagogue in Daugavpils

“New” Jewish Cemetery in Daugavpils

Aleks mentions that Rabbi Kuk, a founder of Pal-
estine, was raised in the town of Griva, opposite Dvinsk. He had been Bauska’s rabbi and later became Israel’s Chief Rabbi. Mark Rothko, the artist, was born Marcus Rothkowitz in Dvinsk in 1903.

When I ask Davis what he learned from his father Saul, he replies: (1) There are no bad groups, only bad men. (2) Nothing is worse than nationalism. (3) Never do two deals simultaneously.

As we exit Daugavpils, we drive past a white brick prison and see prisoners looking out at freedom. We see the site of the former Jewish ghetto. A hellish life in either place.

I’d described Utah, where I now live, to Aleks earlier in our trip and told him that many of the world’s museums’ dinosaur bone collections come from Utah. It turns out that fossil hunting is a hobby of his and that we can stop in Lielvarde (meaning big frog) where greenish-gray shale by the Dauga River contains Devonian Era fossils of amphibians and fish dating back 400 million years. Lielvarde is on the way back to Riga from Daugavpils. Aleks and I walk briskly to the river but find the former entrance to the river blocked off. We go past a park where boys are playing, through the yards of private houses with splendid gardens and yapping dogs. Finally we get to a set of metal stairs heading down to the Dauga. A canoe sits placidly as the sun sets. Aleks and I wade in the water and look for fossils in the rock that lines the riverbank. We get lucky.

On Thursday, we drive west to Liepaja, stopping at Aizpute, formerly Hasenpoth, because an early photo of Moses Zaks, my great-grandfather, was taken there. Did he live there? Hasenpoth was one of the first places Jews settled in Latvia, about 500 years ago. In Western Latvia, in Piltene, Jews were elected to councils. Germans came to Piltene and Hasenpoth and the style of life there reflected German influence.

During WWII, both anti-Soviet partisans and Nazi deserters hid in the forests of Aizpute. Today parts of the town look much as they did a century ago. We go to the center of town, where the synagogue and the Jewish school were. The synagogue still stands but it is now used as a community center and any signs of its past Jewish life are gone. At the building next door, we see a stork’s nest on top of a chimney. On our drives, we see many storks’ nests on telephone poles and chimneys, often with storks and chicks inside their coarse, twiggy homes. The birds summer in Latvia and winter in Egypt. I walk down several steps to the river below; it is narrow, with trees on the banks and reeds, cottontails and lilies. Then, as we usually do, we head to the Jewish Cemetery, which would be hard to find without Aleks.

It’s in the woods, overgrown, on a dirt road that only small cars can negotiate. The area swarms with mosquitoes, which dampen the site’s charm. There are old graves and tall trees. Many graves have German engravings and lovely carvings.

We push on to Liepaja, Latvia’s third largest city, and the Baltic Sea. Outside the city we see tall, graceful, modern, white, Norwegian-made windmills, echoing the windmills in Livermore, CA. Liepaja is known as the birthplace of wind. A hymn makes reference to this. Liepaja is also the word for linden tree and perhaps that is how the city got its name. We see linden trees growing along the avenues. Grandma recalled seeing “beautiful linden trees in Berlin”, on her way to America. In her childhood, Liepaja was called Libau.

We stop by the large wooden house of Peter the Great, where we see the original nail heads, big and rusty. The house dates from 1697 and is the oldest structure in town. On the next street is a crafts cooperative and we step inside to watch the weavers. I try my hand at a loom, as a weaver instructs.

Lots of old trees. A university. An old ironworks factory. A nondescript white hotel, Latvija, closed for renovations. I’m surprised by a bicycle shop window, with the word velosipedi, Latvian for bicycle but it’s also the original name for the two-wheeled machine, velocipede. The young women here are stylish, with their translucent, jaggedly hemmed skirts. Liepaja was an important port and home to many Jews, who were active in the leather trade. It was a major port for those heading to places like the US and South Africa during...
the period from 1850 to 1910. In the 1890s, Libau was a spa down, a vacation resort for the citizens of St. Petersburg. At the end of WWII, many Latvians fled from Liepaja to Sweden. Latvia was the last European country liberated from the Nazis, in May 1945. The Russians sent many Latvians to Soviet camps and scores of Latvian soldiers of the Nazi army committed suicide. During Communist times, Liepaja was militarily important to the Soviets; one needed permission to go to the beach after 9 PM. Ventspils had a similar edict; one couldn’t walk on the beach after 10 PM. Aleks says it was impossible to buy bananas during Soviet times and difficult to buy meat. One had to wait in line for over two hours.

We visit the history museum; the building dates from 1901. There are stained glass, replicas of boats, ethnographic materials of the area and 1500 year-old carved amber ornaments. Then off we go to the well-preserved, large Hebrew cemetery; it is next to a Christian cemetery and there is a manned office. A website lists those buried with some information on each deceased person from 1909-1941. There are several Saks and Sachs, one Gersohn, two Eidelmans – surnames that interest me. A wealthy American, Edward Anders, is spearheading a move to restore the cemetery and he built a monument to those who perished in the Holocaust. Many of the stones are of black marble, intricately carved. The more recent stones have photos of the deceased etched into the stone and Russian Cyrillic writing. The older ones are elegantly carved in German script. Sometimes there is both Hebrew and Russian. There are flowers at the graves, a common practice here, and green wooden benches next to the tombstones. There are stone monuments to anti-Nazis and anti-Bolshevik partisans. Again, the mosquitoes are daunting.

We drive to the Baltic Sea, where there are dunes like those on Fire Island. A statue faces the water; it honors fishermen and sailors lost at sea and ten American airmen (perhaps on a spy mission), shot down by the Soviets in April 1950. After a swim, I walk with Aleks and mom along the beach, scooping up tiny pieces of amber, easy to spot because they catch the light. Aleks tells us a myth that amber comes from the tears of the sun god’s daughters, who cried bitterly when their beloved brother flew in a chariot too close to the sun and crashed.

On the way back from Liepaja, we stop at the site of a former concentration camp – Salaspils. It is night and Aleks and I walk quickly, because we have seen three skinheads heading towards the giant statues that commemorate the victims of this camp. The Salaspils Museum is locked but we can still walk the grounds. Between 1941 and 1944, Nazis and their collaborators murdered some 45,000 Jews from Riga, 55,000 Jews from other countries and POWs at this concentration camp, ten miles from Riga. The inscription reads: Behind this gate, the earth groans. It’s a line from a poem written by Latvian writer Janis Veveris, who was imprisoned here. There is a twenty-foot long block of polished stone with a metronome inside, ticking. Notches in the rock represent the days to liberation. Huge stone statues are of a gaunt mother shielding a child, a man bent over in submission, another man standing straight with his arm raised defiantly.

Rumbala, our last stop before heading back to Riga, has a memorial installed in 2002, sponsored in part by the Lauder Foundation. An earlier smaller monument, erected by the Soviets in 1962, references the martyrs of fascism but makes no mention of Jews. 25,000 Jews were killed at Rumbala, over two days, one week apart, in late November and early December 1941, marched there from the Riga Ghetto. A thousand Germans were also killed. Davis recalls picking cranberries and mushrooms and berries in the woods here and I think of Billie Holiday singing Strange Fruit.

Our final day we spend in Riga, visiting the Navigation History Museum just a block away from our hotel. Displayed are nautical instruments, models of boats, maps and china and household items that belonged to a famous dancer in the period of Latvian independence. For lunch, the hotel restaurant’s staff agrees to heat up the leftover Latvian dish and to sauté the king mushrooms I bought in Daugavpils. With a glass of wine, sitting at the rooftop restaurant, I feel as royal as the mushrooms. Until I have to pack. That evening, we meet our cousin Dace and her boyfriend Kaspar to say good-bye and we take a boat-ride on
the Daugava. We’d met them our second night in Riga and gone with them one day to Skulte, on the Bay of Riga, to visit the family’s summer home. When we get to the dock, Gatis is waiting and we head to a local café for drinks.

The next morning Davis drives us to the airport. Guna and Valdis meet us there. The plane is delayed but the family insists on staying with us until we go through the final gate. “It’s the custom,” Valdis says. So we head to the airport’s Lido Restaurant for strawberries and cream and Davis gives me his business card. I learn the Latvian word for wholesale – vairumtirdzniecības and try as I might, I can’t pronounce it. We hear the boarding announcement. To hell with self-restraint! We kiss their cheeks, hug them and mom chokes up. After we pass through the gates, we look back as they wave to us.

My Family in Latvia
By Betsy Thal Gephart

In August of 2003, I had the incredible experience of traveling to Latvia and meeting an entire branch of my family that I had learned of just a few months before. It was a life changing experience. Not only did I gather a great deal of genealogical information, but the week I spent in Latvia drove home to me the differences between the family histories of those who left Latvia and those who stayed.

In April, I received e-mail from Yuri Bregman, who introduced himself as a descendant of Moshe and Sarah Thal from Sassmacken. As part of my research into the descendants of Moshe and Sarah, I had posted information on a website (http://www.bgephart.net) on the Internet. At the time he contacted me, I only knew about his great-grandmother, Rosa Thal, a daughter of Moshe and Sarah. Yuri introduced me to his entire branch of the family, and put me in contact with several cousins, including Victor Shatz, still living in Riga. In the end, I was able to arrange to visit Riga while Yuri was there with his wife and children. Victor and Yuri are my father’s third cousins. Rosa Thal’s brother, Pesach, was my family’s progenitor, and he and his entire family came to the United States more than one hundred years ago. To my knowledge, that was the last time that the two families had been in contact with each other.

Victor turned out to be a perfect guide. Not only did he take a week off from his job, he was already well acquainted with and interested in his Shatz family history. During the process of denationalization of real estate in Latvia that has taken place over the past ten years, he and many other citizens tracked down proof that their family owned property in 1940 that was nationalized by the Soviets. They also were asked to prove their relationship to the property owners. In effect, he did a certain amount of genealogical research.

One of the first things that Victor had planned was a trip to Kurzeme or Kurland. We drove out to Talsi and Valdemarpils (Sassmacken), stayed in Ventspils overnight, and spent the following day in Liepaja, returning to Riga that night.

Talsi

In Talsi, our first stop was the Registrar’s office, where I had been told were a number of birth, marriage and death records from Valdemarpils that hadn’t been transferred to the main archives in Riga. Leva Ratniece, the registrar, was extremely helpful, and brought out all of the records for us to look through. Unfortunately, the policy at the Registrars’ offices is not to allow photocopying of their documents, so I made my own transcriptions. After we finished with the records from Valdemarpils, we found that her office also held the vital records for Talsi and Valdemarpils for the period after 1921. She searched through her entire set for my surnames, and we located several records of the Thal family, including birth records of cousins I hadn’t yet discovered. While we were working, Victor’s wife went down the street to get a box of chocolates for Leva. She was very helpful, and asked that I send a copy of my book when I finish it!

When we left the Registrar’s office, we wandered up and down Liela Iela, the “Main Street” of Talsi, and what was called “Grosse Strasse” at the time my great-grandfather grew up there. Talsi is now a city of about 12,000, and many of the buildings in the center of town have been nicely renovated. While the walls have been painted, and the storefronts now advertise internet and
computer businesses, the buildings are still the same ones that were there more than a hundred years ago. Although I don’t have the exact address where my great-grandfather grew up, I know that he lived on Grosse Strasse by the lake. Walking along that street, we saw several potential sites for their house, and I even saw their sledding hill behind the church across the street!

On our way out of town, we visited the Talsi Jewish cemetery, which is quite overgrown. Many of the tombstones have been toppled, but a large number of them are still legible.

**Valdemarpils**

Our next stop was Valdemarpils (Sassmacken), where we visited with Eric Prokopovics. He invited us into his small country house, where we sat at his table as he brought out a number of photographs and documents of Valdemarpils. Because of a kindness shown to a member of his family by a Jewish doctor, he has taken it upon himself to preserve the history of the Jewish community of Sassmacken, and has accumulated quite a number of materials. He has also put together a small historical museum for the town, which we visited.

Valdemarpils has not changed much since Latvian independence. The process of renovation and revitalization has not come to towns as small and far-removed as Valdemarpils, and it remains a somewhat disheveled country village.

Before leaving town, Prokopovics showed us the site of the Jewish cemetery, as well as the pile of tombstones that had been removed from it, apparently for “recycling”. A monument to the cemetery is being planned to incorporate those stones.

The most powerful experience of my trip occurred when Prokopovics led us to one of the mass killing sites for the Jews of Valdemarpils in 1941. He showed us a copy of the list of 120 of the 150 Jews who were killed. The list, compiled by the town council, indicated those who were “able to work” and those who were not. Those unable to work were apparently killed immediately in July of 1941. Those who were able were forced to dig turf for fuel. Among them were three descendants of Moshe and Sarah. According to Prokopovics, these workers were killed on August 7, 1941, the last day that wages are recorded for their guards. By eerie coincidence, we were visiting on August 7. A few miles out of Valdemarpils, and a several-minute hike into the woods, we found the site, marked only by a rectangle of evergreens planted shortly after the war. Most likely, Prokopovics is one of the only people living who can find the site, and even he had a bit of trouble. There are no markers.

**Ventspils**

Ventspils is apparently one of the wealthiest cities in Latvia, probably second to Riga. Its money comes from the oil industry. It is a very large port, shipping out oil that comes from Russia. During Soviet times, it was a closed city, and home to a large military presence. It could only be visited with a special permit. Today it is home to about 40,000, a large part of the city has been renovated, and visitors are encouraged. The old part of the city is particularly attractive, including the very nicely renovated museum in the old castle.

**Liepaja**

In Liepaja, we met Ilana Ivanova, a representative of the city’s Jewish community. She gave us a wonderful tour of the city, including the park and its historical fountain, the beautiful beach and the headquarters of a shipping company where many left from to go overseas. We then visited the Jewish cemetery in Liepaja, which is huge and very overgrown. Though I knew that there were relatives buried there, and we looked for a while, it was hopeless to try to find the stones. Most were so overgrown they couldn’t be read, and it was very difficult to crawl around, as many of the stones were surrounded by small fences. Before leaving Liepaja, we stopped at the memorial at Skēde, where the largest killing took place nearby. The site is difficult to find, near the Baltic sea, in a grove of trees. There is a memorial stone.

Later in the week, we visited Jaunjelgava (Friedrichstadt), the home of Victor’s ancestors, Ure Schatz and his wife Rosa Thal. It is a small town with very little renovation in evidence, but with more businesses than Valdemarpils. Victor has been involved with the rebuilding of the
Holocaust monument at the Jewish cemetery, but the cemetery itself is greatly overgrown.

We also visited Tukums, now a city of about 18,000 people. The town square has been nicely renovated, each building labeled with a brass plaque telling what it used to be before Soviet times.

**Jurmala**

Victor and other members of the family spend most of their time in the spring and summer in their homes in Jurmala, an old resort town about twenty minutes drive from Riga. It is here that many of the newly wealthy Latvians are building their large American-style houses. Many beautiful old homes are being slowly renovated. As in the United States, there are regulations governing the renovation of historic homes, so that the flavor of the place is still retained. The old main street of Jurmala is now a bustling pedestrian street with the definite air of a resort. On the Saturday evening that I was there, stalls were set up selling jewelry and other items, and musicians were performing on the street.

In addition to the towns I’ve mentioned, we spent a great deal of time in Riga, where Victor and his family live during the winter months. It is now a lively European capital, refreshingly free of American chains, with the exception of a couple of McDonald’s and Baskin-Robbins. A great number of the buildings have been renovated, and the Old City is quite lively. The weekend I visited, there were several performances happening on stages set up there. Apparently, this is not uncommon on weekends during the summer. One of the biggest problems, according to Victor, is the automobile traffic. The number of cars has increased dramatically over the past several years, and the roads have not kept up. This has led to major traffic backups, especially on the road to and from Jurmala. Much has been written about Riga, the Ghetto, Rumbula, and many other monuments that we visited, so descriptions of them are probably unnecessary.

I’d like to finish with a few words about the powerful education I received during my visit. As students and genealogists, we have probably all studied a certain amount of Soviet history, as well as that of Latvia. We have all read – probably at great length – about the fate of the Jews living there in 1941. I had done the same before my trip. But somehow, meeting a family who had lived through all of this made it all much more real. I was forced to remember things I hadn’t thought about since my college days. Unlike their American counterparts, these cousins are lucky to have any family photos at all. The few they have were given to them by non-Jewish friends after the war was over. And unlike my American cousins, they were not allowed to openly observe their religion for the greater part of the last century. Their 20th century family history stands in stark contrast to that of my branch of the family in the United States.

But the 21st century looks much brighter in Latvia. It is very much revitalized. Even Yuri, who moved to Israel in 1990, was very impressed by the changes that had taken place since he left. I urge anyone with a family history there, and especially a family, to go visit!

I have made additional material and photographs available for viewing on the Web. For photos please go to:

- http://www.talsen.org
- http://www.sassmacken.org
- http://www.tuckum.org

For a more detailed journal about my trip please go to:

http://home.comcast.net/~bgephart/journal.html

**My Trip To Griva**

by Brad Elterman

Somehow, I had the feeling that Mr. Zalman Jakub had not met too many visitors from the USA, let alone Los Angeles. He was wide eyed when he greeted us at the Jewish Center in Daugavpils. As the local historian in Daugavpils and a prominent member of the Jewish community, he marveled at the documents that I came bearing during my recent visit. Passports with exit visas from 1904, a copy of my grandparents’ marriage contract from Griva from 1894 all belonging to my grandparents and all from Griva/Dvinsk.
We met at the Jewish Center along with Mr. Meir-Sympha Fish, also a member of the center, who would take us on the final segment of our long journey: a journey that I will never forget.

Ida Zaletilo, the curator of the Daugavpils Museum of Regional Studies and Art, arranged the meeting. Joining us was Sofija Meyerova the Director of the Jewish Center, my two cousins Merrill and Carol Altman whom I was recently introduced to online via the JewishGen website. My video camera captured the incredible enthusiasm for every word on these documents. They studied a photo of my grandfather as if he were a long lost brother. It was so moving to me that I find it hard to describe in words.

Mr. Jakub could read the Hebrew and read aloud the Marriage Contract for my grandparents, which was written by my great grandfathers, both Rabbis in Griva, Rabbi Abraham Elterman and Rabbi Yedhouda Kurtizky.

“... found a woman found goodness would it be out of good God wish list of chapter headings that was done today between the respected Rabbi Avraham ben Rabbi Itzchak who stands for his son the hatan (groom) the respected young man Zeev Wolf ELTERMAN, and between the respected Rabbi Yehuda son of Rabbi Yehoshuah KORITZKI who stands for his praised virgin daughter Chaju Rivka who the hatan Zeev Wolf will marry in Mazal Tov the bride Chaju Rivka in Chupa and Kiddushin (marriage) according to Jewish law (kedat Moshe ve'Israel).

And that will be paid but they would not force each other, they will control their property equal as each one of them has its manner. The sirs R‘Zeev Wolf committed in that matter to give the mentioned kala (bride) presents, as it is the custom of wealthy and respected persons (gvirim), and also give her a Ketuba as the custom, and additions as it is from Rabanan to sweeten her on a stamped paper.

Prior to the hupa (wedding ceremony) as the law of the government (dina demalchuta), the bride’s father R‘Yehuda mentioned above was committed in that matter to give a dowry to his mentioned daughter and hand over money during the next 2 weeks from today the sum of 500 rubles, and the hupa will happened with God’s will when both sides will fulfill their wish. And here we undersigned.

“Kurtizky” says Mr. Jakub. “I knew the family before the war,” he says translated from Ida.

It was a long trip to Daugavpils from my home in Los Angeles and my main goal was to see the old cemetery in Griva so I could feel close to my great grandparents. Everyone had told me that I was wasting my time since the graves were desecrated long ago, but Ida had assured me that Mr. Fish knew where they were located.

Our stay at the Jewish Center was short and we said our goodbyes and piled into our rent-a-car with Mr. Fish in tow, along with our driver from Riga who also proved to be an excellent translator.

We drove over the river Daugava and entered Griva, the village of my grandparents. My first and lasting impression was that it looked like a small and tired Soviet-inspired community. Mr. Fish explained to us that this was a village that flourished with Jewish life and culture. In the early days there were four synagogues on every block. Now there were none.

He pointed to where some of them once stood. This one is now a hotel; that one looks like a church. This one looks like it is ready for the wrecking ball. He points out where the old bathhouse was, still standing but not too sure what it is today.

After about six blocks of depressing looking worn-out dreary cottage homes with smoke rising from their chimneys (just as they looked in Fiddler On The Roof) we arrive in a section of Griva of small farms - cows grazing on vacant land everywhere.

Mr. Fish says, in Russian, “turn right, turn left” to the driver. He is the navigator, but seems a bit unsure of himself as he has not been on this small rural road in years. “Back up,” he tells the driver and “pull into that farm.” We drive down a dirt driveway and pass the farmhouse. He tells us to keep driving. We get to the rear of the property
and he tells us that we have arrived. I am sure that someone lived here, but we never saw a sole. Around us was scattered old rusty farm equipment, a few cows, two dogs on a chain and one horse that was eyeing us.

Mr. Fish, who is 77 years young, jumps out of the car and tells us to follow. He has determination in his step. I ask Mr. Fish and the translator if we should be concerned about walking on this property without permission, but they do not seem to think it is anything to worry about.

We approach a gate that Mr. Fish opens for us. We continue. The ground is moist and my Italian boots look like they will be ruined. All of a sudden a flock of black birds, I think crows, just fly up in front of us as if they had not been disturbed in years. It was very eerie and since it was about to get dark it made the moment chilling.

We walk for about ten more minutes and we are informed that this is a section of the Old Ghetto. During the walk, he tells us that a local farmer recently purchased this parcel. Our hike takes us to a mound where we can see part of a valley. The only thing keeping us from going further is some rusty old barbed wire and Mr. Fish tells us that we can go no further.

In front of us is overgrown farmland with the old stone remains of what could have been an old building; certainly too large to be a headstone. What ever it was, it has fallen apart with the years and weather. We ask if this is all that is left and he says, “yes.”

He takes us up to a different vantage point and there in front of me, on my side of the barbed wire, is a large round boulder about the size of half a basketball. Something catches my attention. It has Hebrew writing on it! It is so worn that you could not make out anything, but Mr. Fish confirms that it is one of the few headstones left. We look around and there is another one and another one. Some are broken up as if someone just took a hammer to them. It is shocking to see.

I know that I am at the right location even though I cannot find the grave of my great grandparents Abraham and Hanna. I take out the stones that I carried from my garden in Los Angeles and place them on the remains of various markers to they know that I was there.

My cousins call out to me to see what looks like an old container that has been unearthed. It looks like it could have been for a child. It is truly a sad sight.

At this point we are all a bit emotional and we ask Mr. Fish if he would say a Kadish prayer and he agrees. He seems to be moved at our request. During the prayer I look out of the corner of my eye and notice our driver from Riga, who is not Jewish, with his head bowed, looks to be deep in prayer with great respect for the moment. Certainly I will never forget this moment, reflecting on my great grandparents who were left behind as my grandparents set off for the new world to make a better life for themselves, their children and grandchildren.

It is getting dark and it is time to get back to the car and drive Mr. Fish home. Riga is a 2.5-hour drive from here and our driver has not had time for his lunch yet.

We drop off Mr. Fish and say our goodbyes. We were very grateful to him and he was very moved that we would take the time from our lives in the USA to meet and learn from them. He gives us all a hug and a kiss that I will remember always.

Sofija, Zalman Jakub, Meir-Sympha, and Ida
The Road to Rezekne
by Lavi Soloway

My trip to Latvia a few months ago required a change of planes in Stockholm, which was just as well. I needed to re-orient myself. On the first leg of my flight I had reviewed excerpts of testimony from a 1965 Soviet war crimes trial in Riga. The defendants, some present and some absent were charged with the mass murder of the Jews of certain Latgale region shtetls in the summer of 1941. It was a graphic and stomach turning account of barbaric inhumanity. It was not my plan to immerse myself in the details of the killing during the transatlantic flight, but the transcript had arrived by Federal Express on the day before and I hastily packed it with my other research materials. I knew from my previous research of the Soviet Extraordinary Commission reports that the victims described in the trial transcripts were members of my grandfather’s family including his brother, sisters, cousins and their families.

Still dazed from my overnight flight from New York, I was rudely reminded of winter that October day when I crossed the tarmac past the propellers of the small Baltic Air plane that would bring me to the country of my grandfather’s birth. The frigid wind swept snow around my feet, and bundled passengers, seemingly better prepared than I for the weather, scurried from the passenger carrier to the awaiting aircraft. During the short flight across the Baltic Sea to Riga, I never actually warmed up but that didn’t bother me. I was eager to land and begin my journey eastward to the land that was once the Pale of Settlement, near the modern day borders of Latvia, Russia, Belarus and Lithuania.

Arriving at Riga’s small airport, the first thing I noticed was the quiet. There were very few passengers and almost no one to greet them. The parking lot was almost empty. A few small white taxis were lined up to pick up passengers, but I walked past them wondering what to do next. I had no real idea where I was going, except to the train station to get a train to Rezekne. I couldn’t speak a word of Latvian or Russian, but before long I saw some people shivering at a bus stop and I approached them to see if they could help me get to Riga. After fumbling about for a few minutes with a phrase book, I tried using the only word I could actually pronounce, “Rezekne.” This brought a look of recognition to the well-worn face of a large middle aged man, whose eyes lit up on the mention of that obscure place. Though he spoke almost no English, we managed to communicate sufficiently so that for the next hour or so he was my personal guide. Together with his willing wife, they accompanied me on a local bus to the train station and helped me buy my ticket to Rezekne on the Moscow-bound sleeper that afternoon. (If you are a patient person, I highly recommend jumping on a local bus as a way to catch a first glimpse of a new place. The bus ride was long but economical, costing only forty cents.) I spent the rest of the day wandering around central Riga, visiting the Jewish museum and walking the streets of this bustling metropolis.

The Jewish museum was well worth the visit. A friendly woman greeted me, turned on the lights and a sound system that played Jewish and Hebrew music, and showed me around. The several rooms of the Jewish community center on Skola Street contained exhibits of pre-Holocaust Latvian Jewry in Riga and in the more rural regions, including Latgale to the east. In pictures, news articles and documents there was the story of thriving communities swept up in the changes brought on by the 20th century to that part of the world. Alongside, there was evidence that little changed in the life of the Latgale shtetl dwellers - still religious and poor. Through pogroms, wars and mass emigration they held on to their homesteads until finally in 1941 a force so murderous and overwhelming overcame them. I readied myself to travel to Rezekne, the first stop on my tour of the shtetls of my grandfather’s family.

I returned to the train station, only to realize that I was now unable to discern where my train would depart from. With thirty minutes left until its departure, I began to approach various travelers hoping for assistance. I had heard no one else speak English since arriving in Riga, so I must have been an unusual commodity. Finally two men exchanging money at a window agreed to take me to the platform after I showed them my ticket. I climbed the stairs and came upon a plat-
form filled mostly with women, some with children, but all carrying large bags or luggage. A sign indicated that this was the train to “Maskava” or Moscow. Within moments a creaking steel train rolled into the station as the crowd lurched forward. The doors to each car were mobbed and I quickly realized that I would need a conductor to help me find my seat. A man in a uniform pointed me to the last car, where a throng of middle-aged women had laid siege to the only opening. Worried about being left behind, I pushed my way to the front and showed my ticket to the car’s conductor who was trying vainly to control the stampede. She ushered me in and I dropped myself into the first single seat I could find.

I soon realized that the rest of the passengers were going to spend the night, most sitting some lying down as this train slowly made its way to Moscow. I settled back in my seat for my three-hour ride, as they shared food brought for the journey. I watched them occasionally rise to fill their teacups at a large hot water boiler at the end of the car. Speakers above played what sounded like Russian pop music, while a heater kept the car relatively warm until an occasional opening of the car door brought a gust of cold air.

Before I arrived in Rezekne, the train conductor summoned me to indicate the imminent arrival. A few moments later I stepped off the train into the dark cold night. I could see my breath linger in the air in front of me and in the distance I saw two women standing close together near the station. The train slowly rolled on toward the Russian border and the night grew silent. I approached the two women who were there to meet me. They were Rashel Kuklya and Inta Rimsane. Rashel Kuklya was in her late 60s and she was one of only about fifty Jewish inhabitants left in Rezekne, a town that before the Holocaust had 10,000 Jews and eleven synagogues. Inta was her neighbor.

Growing up in Rezekne, Inta had befriended Rashel’s niece and thus Rashel has been a part of her life for many years. Inta was Latvian and employed by the regional government of Latgale. She also taught at the Pedagogy Department of the local university. Most importantly, Inta spoke fluent English and was very interested in preserving the Jewish heritage of the Latgale region. Rashel Kuklya, the president of Rezekene’s Jewish Community, was her close friend and neighbor. After months of correspondence with Inta and Rashel by e-mail, I was looking forward to meeting them.

After seeing me to my hotel, a Soviet built red brick building that had few guests, Rashel and Inta made arrangements to pick me up the next morning to begin my tour. After a well-earned sleep I was ready for them. Inta took me to the roof of the hotel, which was the highest building in Latgale at about ten stories. From there I could see the entire town of Rezekne. Inta pointed in the direction of the old town and showed me the dirt roads and small wooden houses that were once the homes of Jewish families. In the other direction she showed me factories and buildings built by the Soviet government. Across from the hotel were two beautiful churches, one of which belonged to the Russian Old Believers, the Starovery, conspicuous because of its bright sky blue roof.

We hired a car for the day and began our tour. First we stopped at the nearby hills of Anchupany, where in 1941 and 1942 thousands of Jews from Rezekne and other towns were slaughtered and buried in mass graves. A stone wall about three feet high and about a hundred meters long marked the spot. We walked the length of the site where the shootings had taken place and paused at the memorial erected there. The place seemed abandoned and rarely visited. The sense I had standing there was that a great historic tragedy had occurred here; an event memorialized by the Soviets who were interested in documenting the evils of fascism. Rashel and Inta explained to me what had happened here and how the memorial had come to be erected. Nowhere were the Jewish victims mentioned specifically. I asked Rashel about that, gingerly. She explained that the purpose of the memorial was to remember all those who had been killed, not any one group. Indeed, hundreds of Roma had also been killed here. I said the mourners’ Kaddish and we left.

Next stop was the cemetery, which was a vast sprawling and hilly area filled with “matzevahs”
and bordering a creek. Though it was sunny, the air was crisp and the ground was covered in snow. Rashel led the way and paused by a memorial to the Holocaust victims and attempted to read the Yiddish for me. She could not, so she finished by reading the Russian carved beneath it.

Rezekne Memorial at Anchupany

I walked by the few modern graves and soon came across hundreds of stones, some in greatly deteriorated condition bearing the first real evidence that there was once a large and thriving Jewish community here. Rabbis, teachers, women of valor, brothers, sisters, parents all lay here. Grandly carved headstones next to short stumps of boulders with fading letters poking up from snow and straw-like grass overgrowth. Headstones had been overturned or had fallen; others had clearly been used for target practice. The path ran the length of the cemetery; the graves were dug on a hill and were difficult to reach in the snow. Rashel pointed to a second place below, where the Jews of Rezekne had been murdered. Another memorial stood there.

I photographed the headstones and tried to read as many as I could looking, in vain, for family names, which were rare and trying to calculate the year of death. My great-great-grandfather Boruch Soloway and his wife, Sheina (Gutkin) Soloway were probably buried in this place, but I did not find their graves. As Rashel signaled that we should move on to our next destination, I made a note to myself that visiting cemeteries was probably better done in warmer weather.

We drove through the streets of the old town looking at row after row of wooden houses; many still standing after more than 100 years. Rashel was able to name the families that had once filled some of these houses. We found the streets on which my ancestors had lived, including Mogilnaya, the road to the cemetery. As we passed a house of a family that she recalled she would call out their name and on occasion tell us the occupation of the head of the household. The effect was chilling. At one point, as we drove down Latgales Iela passing the bus station and a modern shopping complex, Rashel pointed to a patch of grass and noted that a house once stood there in which my ancestors had lived. (Rashel had reviewed the results of my archival research in preparation for my visit.) Across from the spot stood a massive black statue of a Soviet soldier, erected to honor the Red army for its role in liberating Latvia from the Nazis.

Over lunch I met with other members of the Latgalian regional government who want to find funding to restore the only synagogue still left in Rezekne. Closed now because the structure is no longer sound, the green wooden building was built in 1845. It stands on a street in the old town across from a handsome old brick building which a hundred years ago housed the Jewish bank. Rashel took me for a candlelight tour of the synagogue building because it had no electricity. In the doorway, I noticed a very old mezuzah still on the frame. The interior was damp and dark, but it was clear that this had once been a functioning shul. Benches, in good condition, still filled most of the interior space, though they were pushed off to one side. A wooden bimah faced an ark where the torahs would have been kept. The ceiling had on it a faded design. A women’s section upstairs was separated from the main hall by small windows. I wanted to ascend the stairs but they were
too unsafe.

After lunch I also had an opportunity to tour the Rezekne Museum, which contained artifacts of the history of the town as well as the Ruins of a medieval castle in the center of Rezekne that date back to the ancient Latgalians in the 9th century. The first Jewish inhabitants are thought to have been keepers of an inn near the castle grounds. By the beginning of the 19th century there were more than 500 Jews in Rezekne. According to Encyclopaedia Judaica, Jewish merchants were given permission to live in the new part of the town in 1851. By 1897 they numbered 6,478. By 1920 the number of Jews had declined to 4,148 (41.5%); in 1925 to 3,911 (31%), and by 1935 to 3,342 (25.4%).

Most Jews were either merchants or artisans and during the period of Latvia's democratic regime (1918 - 34) they were very active in Jewish communal life. Rezekne had a yeshiva, several Yiddish and Hebrew schools, and a variety of communal organizations and institutions. Some of this thriving Jewish life could be seen if one looked carefully at some of the 20th century photographs on display in the museum. Not surprisingly, despite the fact that the Jews constituted a large proportion of the town’s population before the war, there was little direct reference or evidence of that fact on display.

As the short day began to grow dark, Rashel showed me the house of her grandparents, which was behind her own modest house at the top of a hill. I asked who lived there now and she explained that people who were given the house after the war still occupy it. After the war when her family returned from its place of hiding in the Russian interior there was no way for them to oust this family. So instead they lived as neighbors. Later, when Latvia became independent new laws allowing for the repatriation of property gave Rashel the right to seek the return of her grandparents’ house. She did not, valuing her relationship with her neighbors above all.

With dogs barking we made our way down the dirt road until it met up with the pavement. I returned to my hotel for a night’s rest before my next day’s tour, which would take me to the nearby shtetls, including Riebini the place of my grandfather’s birth a hundred years earlier.

Accompanied by researcher and interpreter Aleksander Feigmanis, and armed with a sheaf of documents from the Latvian archives, the next day I set out with the driver for the small town of Varaklani, a 30 minute drive west of Rezekne. It looked deserted compared to the bustling Rezekne. We looked for signs of life so we could start asking directions to the street names I had obtained from the archives. We found a few very cold individuals walking near their houses and we stopped the car so that Aleksander could make inquiries. Ultimately, we were unable to determine whether we had found the street that had been home to some of my distant ancestors. We did find some old wooden houses that looked much like the ones I had seen in Rezekne. At one point our efforts to find our way became comical as a drunk man with an overgrown beard and muddied clothing attempted to guide us while he also tried to negotiate his way on a bicycle, through the falling snow. (Where had this character come from?) As Aleksander talked to him, he eyed us suspiciously. Meanwhile I photographed a building that now contained what appeared to be a shoe store, but was once a synagogue.

We found our way to the cemetery, which was framed by a recently painted red cement brick arched entrance. The cemetery was large and in fairly good condition. Unlike the cemetery in Rezekne, this cemetery was located in a wooded area, which I would soon find was quite common, and many old headstones where still readable. On one of them I found the name SOLOWAY. Although I could not place this woman on my family tree (or her father whose name was also mentioned on the stone), I knew that the SOLOWAY family had a branch in this town so I satisfied myself by assuming that this SOLOWAY must be one of us. In one place a massive tree had fallen and toppled some of the headstones. Snow continued to fall as Aleksander and I wandered through the hundreds of graves reading out names to each other. I stopped and read the words on a monument that had been erected in one corner of the cemetery to the memory of those lost in the Holocaust.
Entrance to Varaklani Cemetery

The extreme cold (it was about 20°F) kept us from lingering and after about 20 minutes we decided to move on. The main goal of my day was to reach Riebini, known also as Ribinishki. I was anxious to get there, because seeing Ribinishki was a dream I had for as long as I could remember. As a young child I had imagined what the shtetl must have looked like when my “zaidy” lived there. About 45 minutes drive southeast of Varaklani, Riebini was located on a road that extended from Rezekne through Daugavpils (Dvinsk) to Vilnius (Vilna). (I will tell the story of the rest of my trip to Riebini, Preili and Daugavpils/Dvinsk in a future installment.)

My Roots in South Africa

by
Irwin Sagenkahn

When I began my search in the early 1990’s I discovered that a brother to my paternal grandfather settled in South Africa in the early 1900’s. He brought his family with about 10 children. I was able to make contact with these families when my wife and I visited South Africa in November 1997. We had a family reunion in Cape Town with about 50 family members and then a week later in Johannesburg with another 50 family members. It was just great.

When my grandfather’s brother whose name was Zundel ZAGENKAHN immigrated to South Africa circa 1900, he changed his name to Sidney COHEN. So I had a hard time tracing these people to begin with because I was looking for SAGENKAHN’S and not COHEN’S. Incidentally, some of the younger generation who made aliyah to Israel have gone back to the original Hebrew family name that is SGAN-COHEN.

News from Latvia

Contributed by Glen Riker

Prosecutor in hot water

A Latvian prosecutor will face disciplinary action for obstructing a program aimed at catching World War II-era criminals. The prosecutor in question pressed a citizen to sign an affidavit indicating she had no information regarding a potential criminal, even though she had submitted evidence to the Simon Wiesenthal Center as part of its Operation Last Chance program.

Baltic countries fighting anti-Semitism

Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are focusing more on fighting anti-Semitism, a new report said. The three Baltic countries also are promoting a more balanced approach toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as they prepare to join the European Union, according to a report on the former Soviet Union prepared by NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia. The report says the Russian government is fighting anti-Semitism but grass-roots antipathy to Jews continues. It also highlighted the lack of religious freedom and problems with anti-Semitism in Belarus.

Mystery Man

by
Barry Shay

Oral history says that my father was a socialist, was somehow “involved” in the Russian revolution of 1905 and was an activist for workers’ rights in his native Dvinsk. Since he died when I was 10 years old, I was unable to discuss any of these issues with him. Now, through my genealogy research, I am getting closer to answering some of the questions associated with his early life in Dvinsk.

I found the photo that appeared in the last issue of this newsletter, shown below in a larger format,
in a box of old family photos and memorabilia that hadn’t been looked at in many years. Another photo was a formal portrait of my father taken at the famous W. Steinberg photo studio in Dwinsk. In the group photo I could only recognize my father - the man standing on the left and his sister - the woman seated right below him. I was particularly interested in the identity of the gentleman in the center of the photo. He was obviously the center of attention, the person around whom all were gathered. The two newspapers were centrally placed and of obvious importance in the photo. So what was the connection between my father and this imposing group of people and those newspapers?

While I haven’t quite figured out the relationship of my father to the group, I think I have identified the central figure in the photograph. I believe the gentleman is Leon Trotsky and I believe the photo was taken in St. Petersburg, possibly in November of 1905. I have come to this conclusion based on the importance of the two newspapers, Nachalo (Beginning) and Novaya Zhizn (New Life), and the role they played in spreading the revolutionary doctrine, the close resemblance of the gentleman to Trotsky, and the response to a query I placed on Viewmate on the JewishGen web site.

First the newspapers:

The following is taken from Trotsky’s autobiography, My Life, Chapter 14 – The Year 1905, originally published in 1930.

On November 13, in alliance with the Mensheviks, we had started a big political organ, Nachalo (The Beginning). The paper’s circulation was jumping by leaps and bounds. Without Lenin, the Bolshevik Novaya Zhizn (The New Life) was rather drab. The Nachalo, on the other hand, had a tremendous success. I think this paper, more than any other publication of the past half-century, resembled its classic prototype, the Neue Rheinische Zeitung, which was published...
by Marx in 1848. Kamenev, one of the editors of the Novaya Zhizn, told me afterward how he watched the sale of newspapers at the stations when he was passing through by train. The St. Petersburg train was awaited by endless lines. The demand was only for revolutionary papers. “Nachalo, Nachalo, Nachalo,” came the cry of the waiting crowds. “Novaya Zhizn,” and then again, “Nachalo, Nachalo, Nachalo.” “Then I said to myself, with a feeling of resentment,” Kamenev confessed, “they do write better in the Nachalo than we do.”

On the relationship between the two newspapers, Trotsky goes on to say:

The relations between the editors of the two papers were most friendly. They engaged in no polemics against each other. “The first number of the Nachalo has come out,” wrote the Bolshevik Novaya Zhizn. “We welcome a comrade in the struggle. The first issue (ed. appeared in November 1905) is notable for the brilliant description of the October strike written by Comrade Trotsky.” People don’t write in this way when they are fighting with each other. But there was no fighting. On the contrary, the papers defended each other against bourgeois criticism. The Novaya Zhizn, even after the arrival of Lenin, came out with a defense of my articles on the permanent revolution. Both newspapers, as well as the two factions, followed the line of the restoration of party unity. The central committee of the Bolsheviks, with Lenin participating, passed a unanimous resolution to the effect that the split was merely the result of the conditions of foreign exile, and the events of the revolution had deprived the factional struggle of any reasonable grounds. I defended the same line in the Nachala, with only a passive resistance from Martov.

Now the photograph:

After studying many photographs of Trotsky and comparing them to the Mystery Man, I concluded that he was, in fact, Trotsky. To get confirmation I posted the group photo on Viewmate on the JewishGen web site without providing any hints as to who I thought it was. I received a number of interesting responses from Israel, Australia, Russia, and the U.S. In particular, Alexey, from Khabarovsk in the far eastern part of Russia that borders China, sent the following along with four photos of Trotsky at varying ages:

Hello barry,
Possible this is Leyba Davidovich Bronshtain (Lev Trotsky). Known revolutionary, one of the editors of newspaper “a beginning” (Nachalo). This newspaper in photography. Best regards, Alexey

So, after studying photos of Trotsky, the results of the Viewmate posting, the prominence of the two newspapers, the relationship between the newspapers as written by Trotsky, and the obvious importance of the central character in the photo, I have concluded that the gentleman is Leon Trotsky. Now I have to figure out what role my father played within this group of "comrades." That's the hard part.

**Trip to Latvia**

I would very much like to find out if there is any interest among you in putting together a research trip to Latvia after the IAJGS International Jewish Genealogy Conference in Jerusalem July 4-9, 2004.

Some of us have made the trip in the past and are ready for a repeat go, and for others it could be a first. Planning now just might give us enough time to contact the Latvian Archives with our informational requests.

Important to note is the fact that, for those coming to the conference from North America and other distant sites, the flight time from Israel to Riga is relatively short, about 3 hours.

So, please let me hear from any interested parties.

Barbara Siegel
bsiegel@netvision.net.il
Jerusalem

**IAJGS 24th International Conference on Jewish Genealogy**

The Israel Genealogical Society is delighted to invite you to the IAJGS 24th International Conference on Jewish Genealogy, which will be held on July 4-9, 2004, in Jerusalem.
Jerusalem: home to unique archival and family history resources including Yad VaShem, the Jewish National and University Library, the Central Zionist Archives, the 3,000 year old Cemetery on Mount of Olives, and more...

The hotel: The conveniently located Jerusalem Marriott Renaissance offers a complete range of facilities and services—and special rates for conference participants.

The program: a wide selection of lectures on family genealogy, community studies, genealogy and DNA, Sephardic studies, Holocaust research, genealogy for beginners and much more...

For more details, questions and discussion join our mailing list: Jerusalem 2004, simply go to http://www.jewishgen.org/listserv/sigs_add.htm and fill in your name and e-mail, go down the page and choose Jerusalem 2004* - a mailing list devoted to questions and issues about the 24th IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy to be held in Jerusalem, July 2004. Choose your subscription mode (individual mail, digest, etc.), and submit.

See you in Jerusalem in July 2004!
Jean-Pierre Stroweis, Prof. Daniel Wagner, Eitan Shilo
24th IAJGS Conference Co-Chairs

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 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 immediately 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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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:

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