

Latvia SIG

June 2005
Volume 9, Issue 3



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President's Report

Well, it's almost one year since I was "elected" president of the SIG at the IAJGS conference in Jerusalem, which I was not able to attend. However, I will be at this year's conference in Las Vegas and I look forward to meeting many of you there. Taking office as a relative newcomer to Jewish genealogy, and to Latvian Jewish genealogy in particular, I can truly say that I have almost grown into the job of president. Perhaps by next year I'll really be ready to take on the job.

As you know, the election of officers takes place at these meetings and I hope that you will be nominating potential officers of the SIG. Nominations will be accepted at any time up until the actual convening of the meeting. Please send nominations for president, treasurer, membership chair, and newsletter editor to me or Mike Getz. I certainly would welcome hearing from volunteers for others positions as well, especially project leaders.

I have developed a fairly aggressive agenda for the SIG meeting. (See page 3.) While we are scheduled for only one hour and fifteen minutes for the actual meeting, I am hoping that some of the issues can be discussed at more informal get-togethers throughout the course of the conference. Of course, I am hoping that real actions will follow from the meetings and continue throughout the year.

I am especially excited that Dave Howard, who will be making a presentation at the SIG luncheon, has agreed to take the lead in developing a Dvinsk Shtetlink. This project has been talked about for quite some time, but I think we finally have the critical mass to get it going. Dvinsk, now Daugavpils was, arguably, the home to more of our ancestors than any other city or shtetl in Latvia.

Latgale, as the district or region containing Dvinsk and other major Jewish settlements, is also a region of great interest to the SIG. I have recently made contact and met with a Latvian-born professor of history at Hood College, in Maryland, who, although not Jewish, has a special interest in the history and life of Jews in Lat-

gale. Mike Getz and I met with him recently, and we expect to meet with him periodically to get his perspective of Jewish life and history in Latgale. He has agreed to contribute an article to a future issue of this newsletter.

While in London a couple of months ago, I was fortunate to meet with Arlene Beare, a former president of the SIG and our long-time coordinator with the archivists in Riga. She has obtained and provided me with oral testimonies and Russian transcripts of the testimonies from about thirty Latvian Jewish survivors. I am in the process of finding Russian translators so that we can make the testimonies available to a wider audience.

You may recall from the last issue of this newsletter, that Bella Zisere abstracted her research concerning the Jewish genocide in Latvia, which is based on her own interviews with survivors as well as on the testimonies I now have. These were done under the direction of Prof. Ruven Ferber of the University of Riga. Bella was to present her research at the IAJGS meeting in the general session, but her student visa expired this month and she was unable to obtain another visa in time for the conference so, unfortunately, she will not be present. I am hopeful that she will present her material at next year's conference in New York City.

It is with regret that I must inform the readership that Constance Whippman will no longer be our database coordinator. Constance has done a remarkable job over many years in bringing on-line important databases along with the historical significance of those databases to the benefit of all Latvia SIG members. Her efforts, in no small way, are evident in the story by Debbie Shafir-Keret that appears in this issue.

Finally, I'd like to convey my personal condolences and those of the Latvia SIG to Rhea Plottel, our membership chair, whose sister recently passed away.

Barry Shay
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Editor's Comments

This issue of the newsletter contains a number of very emotional articles, all different in character and content but, taken together, characterize the pervasiveness of the Holocaust in Jewish genealogy research.

Jonas Green and his father Ralph visit Subate and the trip influences Jonas in ways that he never imagined. His story dramatically portrays how life and death and the survival of families depend on simple decisions made many years ago. This same theme, in a completely different context, brings drama and suspense to Debbie Shafir-Keret's lifelong search for information about her grandmother.

Although the plan to erect a Holocaust Memorial in Bauska at the site of the former synagogue is several years old, the time has come to publicize the effort to a wider audience. I am happy to include the letter by Prof. Jehuda Feitelson, which reviews the gruesome history of the demise of Bauska's Jewish population and solicits support from our membership to help make the Holocaust Memorial in Bauska a reality.

Mike Getz was kind enough to provide a brief summary of a very important project being carried out under the auspices of the USHMM to acquire archival records reflecting Latvian and Lithuanian communal and daily life in pre-Holocaust Europe.

This issue ends with a progress review of the Holocaust Victims Names Project, kindly submitted by Martha Lev-Zion and, unfortunately, a recent news item that again shows that anti-Semitism still exists in high places in Latvian society.

Barry Shay
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2005 IAJGS Conference

The 2005 IAJGS Conference is only a few weeks away and we expect about 30 Latvia SIG members to attend. As of this writing, the SIG luncheon has about 20 people registered and we hope that more will register by the cutoff date of 30

June. Please register online by that date if you plan to attend the luncheon. Dave Howard will be the featured speaker, and he will present his own experiences in developing a Family History Website as well as his initial thoughts on developing the Dvinsk Shtetlink.

The IAJGS conferences provide the venue for the annual Latvia SIG meeting. This year's meeting will be held on July 11 at 3:30 PM in Las Vegas. I have put a number of topics on the agenda not only to generate discussions but, hopefully, to encourage members to actively participate in SIG activities and projects.

The meeting will end with a presentation by Henry Blumberg about the Liepaja Memorial that promises to be both moving and memorable.

Latvia SIG Annual Meeting Agenda 11 July 2005

President's Report

- Review of past year's progress
- Role of SIG in personal research
- Dvinsk Web Site
- Local Lansmanshaften for Genealogy Research
- Teaming with the Rokiskis SIG

Treasurer's Report

Membership Report

Editor's Report

- Need for more contributors and articles
- Web-based newsletters in PDF format
- Distribution via PDF or snail mail

Database Update and Status Report

- The 1897 All Russian Census for Dvinsk
- Repository of SIG Databases
- Formalizing the Database Acquisition Process
- Locating Additional Sources for Databases & Archives

Projects

- Green Synagogue
- Cemetery Restoration
- Bauska Memorial

Oral Testimonies of Holocaust Survivors
Latgale
What's happening in Israel?

Issues

Project Organizers
SIG Web Site Coordinator
IAJGS Coordinator
SIG Funding for JewishGen Databases
Database coordinator

Election of Officers

President
Treasurer
Editor (or assistant)
Membership chairperson

Presentation

Henry Blumberg - The Liepaja Memorial
Wall: Restoring Names, Honoring Memo-
ries

SIG Luncheon

Dave Howard – Family History Web Site
and Dvinsk Shtetlink Development

An Emotional Visit to Latvia

by
Jonas Green

I never knew my paternal grandfather. He died six years before my birth having lived his final days in South Africa, whose acceptance of him is the very reason his genetic line of 19 direct living descendants continues today. By any reasonable measure, this must begin as his story.

Hirshe-Leib (Harry) Gringuts was fourteen years old in 1910 when he, his close friend Nathan Kagan (Cohen) and his older brother Chaimitzik left Subate (a.k.a. Shubitz, Shubatia), a small town near the Lithuanian border, for South Africa. Remaining in Subate were a sister - perhaps there were two - a much younger half-brother, his mother, and her second husband (whose last name was Schlossburg). Harry and Chaimitzik were very close to their mother though not, it seems, to their stepfather and for Harry she was probably the most important person he was leaving behind. Chaimitzik, however, was in love with a young woman (last name Rosenberg) who

had remained in Subate. He vowed to return to her and sadly did so several years later.

Upon returning to Subate, Chaimitzik started a successful general store and owned several houses. He and his wife had three children and were very well respected in the town.

Harry first went to live and work with a paternal uncle in Calvinia, in the Northern Cape, and then moved to Johannesburg on "The Reef" during the heady days of the gold rush. In the early 1930's, he married Rochel (Ruth) Katz, whose family had also moved from Subate shortly before. Ruth's father and the Katz family scion was Reb Moshe Katz who had served as a Rebbe in Subate and ran a Jewish School and orphanage there since before World War I. Harry and Ruth had two children, Alice and Ralph. Like his brother, Harry also started a retail store and, similarly by his successes, was able to purchase additional properties. He wanted his family in Subate to join him. But none ever did.

Harry and his mother corresponded regularly, though infrequently - the letters taking many weeks to get from one to the other. I do not know the content of any of these letters and can only speculate as to the emotions expressed. But the last one would likely have been dated prior to July 1940 when the Baltic States lost their independence to Stalin's Red Army. Harry never shared the letters with anyone. He kept their content, as well as his pain and anguish over his intuition of what must have occurred, to himself. He remained in South Africa until his death, never returning to the land of his birth, nor ever knowing for certain what had happened to his family.

My own parents, Ralph and Irene Green, first visited Subate in 1999, along with Maish Cohen, a cousin on my father's side and son of the same Nathan Cohen with whom Harry had first embarked on his fateful journey. By accompanying my father on his return trip in October 2004, I had the privilege of being the first of Harry Gringut's grandchildren to visit. I was honored to represent my siblings in such an experience.

As with most young adults, I seldom get to spend

time alone with my father. Although we hoped to enjoy our time together, we knew as well that the trip would be fast-paced and emotionally harrowing.

And so for some months after the trip I felt rather guilty for my unintended emotional stoicism. Many aspects of experiences did not feel real to me. Perhaps I was numbed by the knowledge of what had occurred - anesthetized before arriving by stories I had heard and accounts I had read of what had taken place in Subate and other parts of Eastern Europe. I could not feel the pain I expected would consume me. Maybe it was the setting – the humble, sleepy shtetl by a quiet lake masking the horrors that occurred there even within the memorable past. But a large part of it, I suspect, is self-protective denial.



Shtetl by the Lake

On Thanksgiving, reunited with most of my immediate family at the home of my brother, Damian, in Seattle, the emotional whirlwind caught up with me. Often at family gatherings, one or the other of us, often the host, will say a few words celebrating our reunion. After Damian welcomed us, I thought to say a few words to recognize this testament to our family's survival against adversity. And I also intended to mention how fortunate I am to have such a family and to be so close to each of them, despite the geographic separation of our homes. But I was only able to get a few words out before I broke down in tears. And though few words passed my lips, everyone understood. Even now it chokes me to picture the eyes and faces of my brothers, sister,

and parents as they shared in my catharsis.

Our journey began in Riga, where we arrived late on the evening of October 2, 2004. The following day we took a tour with Eugenia, a Latvian guide with specific knowledge of the history of Riga's Jews. Our stops included: the site of the old synagogue destroyed by the Germans, now reduced to a single wall and two sunken rooms, the Jewish ghetto, the chillinh mass grave site at Rumbala where Riga's Jews had been forcibly marched one freezing November morning and shot in cold blood, and another mass grave site outside of Riga for German Jews who were sent to Latvia for "resettlement" that had a beautiful and elaborately designed memorial to them composed of stones representing each of the community's Jewish families.

We stayed in Riga for less than a day, taking a bus that afternoon to Daugavpils (Dvinsk). There we met with Sofija and Isaac Mejerova, Russian Jews who moved to Daugavpils after the war. The Mejerovas are very active in the local Jewish community and knowledgeable about the history of Jewish communities that existed around Daugavpils before the war. They were kind enough to accompany and, in fact, drive us to Subate.

During the two hour drive, which we did once in each direction that day, my father and I discussed the fact that Harry had made the trip only three times a year – for High Holidays, Pesach, and Shavuot – while attending a Yeshiva boarding school in Daugavpils from age six to twelve. Now, of course, the roads are paved. But the surrounding countryside cannot look much different today than it did then, with no real signs of modernity anywhere along the road.

The Mejerovas speak Russian, Latvian, and Yiddish. My father speaks good Yiddish, but I do not. To ease the potential complications, we were also joined by a young Latvian student studying to be an attorney who volunteered to be our interpreter. Though shy at first, her assistance came in very handy in enabling us to ask questions and put together video documenting the day's events.

It is unknown how many Jews lived in Subate, though it is estimated that they constituted as

much as one-third of the town. None are believed to have survived. We do know that in July of 1941, anticipating the arrival of German forces, their Latvian co-conspirators, the Isorgi, went on a massive killing spree. As in many shtetls, they rounded up the Jews of Subate and locked them overnight in Chaimitzik Gringut's warehouse. Before dawn the following morning they separately marched two groups - the men, and the women and children - up the dirt road that ran alongside the nearby Lake Ozara, past one of the town's synagogues, to a place just a few yards from the town's historical Jewish cemetery. They then turned about a quarter mile inland and stopped at a quiet, restful place in the woods. A place many of them, I imagined as frolicking children, had no doubt passed many times in their lives. Here the Isorgi lined them up and shot them.

There are two remaining symbols of Jewish existence in the town of Subate. One is the old synagogue and the other a memorial at the mass gravesite.

The synagogue - one of only a handful of surviving old wooden synagogues - was locked and almost unapproachable because of nettles and weeds surrounding most of the building. I was relieved to see the building had not been desecrated, though it had the general look of weathering and disuse: windows covered in grime, vines uncontrollably climbing its walls, and a partially caved roof. To my recollection none of the windows were broken.

In 1999, when my parents first visited Subate, the synagogue bore an historic landmark placard on the outer wall facing the street. In October 2004, it was no longer there. We couldn't help thinking it was removed as an anti-Semitic gesture by some of the locals, though there is really no way of knowing.

I made my way through the surrounding underbrush and stood on a mound of dirt trying to look inside. I wondered what human had last set foot inside the building or even glanced inside. I knew locals had used it as a storage barn after the war. Images of past or even recent desecration entered my thoughts, perhaps broken furniture or papers,

perhaps Sidorim or even Torahs littering the interior.

Neither the windows nor the hole in the roof let in much light, but I could just make out some of the interior. There was a single large room, devoid of any furnishings, books, or other signs of ever having been used, much less a vibrant center of community life that it probably had been. A few small piles of dirt or rubble could be seen in places, likely to have fallen from, or through, the roof.

I wondered how the place might have been. Had the congregates' experience prior to July of 1941 been much the same as my own with our synagogue? For some reason I wondered about and identified with the children. Had they, like me, come to services with simultaneous feelings of excitement and expectations of incipient boredom? Did they question the teachings? Had they whispered in the aisles, thinking the apples and honey somehow tasted sweeter? Had they slept or giggled during the sermons? Did they, at any time prior to their collective murders, have any thought of the disaster that would befall them?

A medium sized dog on a long and heavy chain barking menacingly within arms-reach interrupted my musings. It was tied to a stake outside the door of a barn slightly behind the synagogue. Startled, I stepped away from the window.

From there we made our way along the same road at the edge of the Ozara that my grandfather's family had been forced to march down some sixty years earlier. This day the weather was beautiful. Some of the leaves were just beginning to turn and though the air was crisp, the temperature was warm. My mind flashed to autumn days in my childhood in Ohio when my family had gone apple picking. But my attention quickly snapped back and I wondered what the weather was like during the dawn hours of that fateful morning.

Arriving at the juncture where the road met a dirt path leading to a mass gravesite, we went first to the historic Jewish cemetery on the plot immediately adjacent. The cemetery had become something halfway between field and forest; it was obvious that it had not seen any maintenance by a

caring hand since the extermination of the community who had tended it.

The grounds were divided in two parts, one atop a hill and the other in a lower lying area beside. Both were very uneven. Time and disuse had turned what likely had been flat land into rugged territory. Tall grasses were ubiquitous, with interspersed brambles and nettles. Solid, full-growth trees stuck out among the graves. For a minute I foolishly pondered why the Jews of Shubitz had placed their graves among these trees.

The bulk of the headstones were illegible, and many were leaning or had fallen over. Some, though, stood erect and were remarkably clear, and these were of varying ages. Most graves were modest though a handful, oddly enough those in the cemetery's corner closest to the mass grave site, were elaborate. One of these even appeared incomplete and I wondered whether this represented an interrupted work-in-progress. I had hoped to find a Gringuts somewhere among the stones - evidence that my family had not only lived, but that some had died naturally there. Though I searched rapidly owing to the pressure of time, it was not to be.



Jewish Cemetery in Subate

Throughout the day I was torn by conflicting ideas about the visit. On the one hand, I wanted to stay indefinitely to understand the village and people, document the history, unearth stories that might otherwise be buried with each of the older residents, and find evidence of my family's life there. On the other hand, I wanted to leave imme-

diately, not wanting to acknowledge the place that had almost succeeded in wiping out my family, and me with it.

Leaving the cemetery we joined the path toward the mass gravesite. It was a dirt path like any other, in any other forest, in any other country, of any other era. Evidence of life surrounded it on all sides – plants, bugs, birds – but the walk carried the ominous feeling of death at the end.

The mass grave is only a few hundred yards from the road, ensconced in a quiet nook. Perhaps one hundred fifty feet long and twenty feet wide, the hallowed ground is bounded by four-foot high cement pillars, each connected to the next by two wooden beams. The ground is well tended and generally clear of brush. A local woman, a good soul we are told, has personally undertaken the upkeep of the memorial.

The centerpiece dedicating the site is a large headstone atop a cement block. It simply reads, "To the Genocide Victims," and bears a Mogen David. On either side of the gravestone is a rectangular plot extending to the ends of the site. A six-inch high concrete border surrounds each and has a single row of small flowering red salvia along the length of its middle. I walked from one end of the enclosure to the other, trying somehow to pay my respects to the persons who had perished there.



Memorial to the Genocide Victims

We placed stones on the gravesite to represent

each of my parents, my father's late sister, my siblings, their spouses and children and myself, altogether fifteen stones. Before leaving, my father and I each picked up two stones knowing that in six months we would be in South Africa.

(As planned, this past March we visited Harry's grave and placed the two stones upon his tomb. The symbolism of reuniting him, in death, with indestructible pieces from the burial site of his murdered clan – our clan – was powerful and important to us.)

As we turned to leave the mass gravesite, our young translator asked my father why we had come to this site. "I came to visit my grandmother," he replied. I was suddenly overwhelmed with tears. Until that moment it had not occurred to me that my father never knew his grandmother. And though he was born eight months before the Isorgi went on their rampage, we do not know whether she ever knew of his birth and therefore the continuation of the family name. This realization hit me with a rush. I felt stupid and powerless. Stupid for having never realized this before and for having ever worried about anything trivial. Even my greatest worries seemed petulant and meaningless next to this stark reality. Powerless because I could do nothing to change what had happened or to inform my great-grandmother of her continued lineage. I felt empty.

During our remaining few hours in Subate we sought out the village's oldest residents, in order to capture on video their recollections of what had happened to the Jews of the town. In 1999 my parents had encountered an elderly couple that remembered my father's uncle. At the mention of Chaimitzik Gringuts's name, the old woman broke down in tears, describing "a wonderful man" and regaling them with stories demonstrating his generosity at extending credit to her and others in the town when they were in need. Hoping they were still alive, our small group set out to find this same couple.

We located them as they were sorting potatoes at their home, a small building across the Ozara from the Jewish cemetery. Neither seemed to remember my father or their conversation five years earlier. I was disappointed that their recollections this time were more vague and considered that they must have aged greatly. My father and I

have since discussed the possibility that the 1999 outpouring had enabled her to release bundled memories and the purging had at last exposed the parceled contents to the amnesic influences of time and age.

We spoke to them for half an hour, and then noticed another elderly man hand-tilling his field in the neighboring property. We asked them about his age, and they demurred, "You don't want to talk to him." When we pressed further, they said he had supported the Germans. This obviously heightened our interest and so we approached him.

Telling him we were visitors whose family had once come from Subate, we inquired about his age. He replied that he was 83 (or something close, I do not recall exactly). But when we asked what had happened to the town's Jews, he replied, "Oh, I was too young to remember."

"How old were you," I asked. "Six," he answered. But at 83 in 2004, he would have been 21 in 1941.

We spoke only to a few other elderly townspeople. Most remembered (or shared) little, except the certainty that the Isorgi had come from neighboring villages and not within their midst. (Later, on the way back to Daugavpils we stopped briefly in a nearby village to see if we could uncover other information. Interestingly, the two elderly residents we spoke with were similarly convinced the Isorgi hailed from elsewhere, though residents of Subate had specifically mentioned their town.)

I still regret not stopping an elderly woman I glimpsed entering the Subate town store. She surely looked old enough to remember 1941, but we were trying to find the family home and were pressed for time.

Using historical ownership records we found the home belonging to Chaimitzik Gringuts and his mother. The building was rectangular, with thick walls and few windows. One could only enter from the rear, and we discovered that what appeared to be one small home had been divided into two even smaller units. We entered one that

had a kitchen and a living space, which together were no longer and only slightly wider than an average passenger car. There was no running water and only a single makeshift light bulb. The age of the coal stove suggested it might have been the one used by Chaimitzik's family.

Upon learning who we were, the current tenant, a pensioner, assured us that she was legally renting the property from the Latvian government. She soon began crying. We had our translator ask why, and the woman explained that she was worried we would take away her home. We reassured her this was not our intention.

Upon returning to Daugavpils, the Mejerovas took us proudly to see the town's newly restored synagogue. A beautiful building completed only two weeks before our arrival. They told us that the week before a window had been broken. On arriving we discovered that two more had shared this same fate. One, at ground level, appeared to have been kicked or bashed in, the other, on the second floor, had been shot out, the pellets still on the floor inside a classroom.



Restored Synagogue in Daugavpils

We stayed in Latvia less than three days, taking an overnight bus through Lithuania to Warsaw. In addition to visiting the Jewish ghettos, war memorials, and commemorations to Polish insurgency, we also went to Auschwitz. For anyone who has been there, I need not describe the place or its emotional impact. For anyone who has not been there, I apologize for my inability to effec-

tively convey the images or feelings. I mention our visit to Auschwitz for one reason only. During the entire tour of Auschwitz I, and while wandering around the far more massive Auschwitz II, I thought constantly of the Gringuts and other Jews of Subate. And I wondered which, if either, was the worse fate.

End Note

I found this piece very difficult to write, because of strong emotions experienced during our journey, and of my egregious error of not writing daily (or even any) journal entries during the trip. Fortunately, my father purchased a video camera and so we have other documentation. I would recommend that readers who plan to visit their ancestral homes keep daily logs of their thoughts and experiences, so that these too do not get fogged over by the passage of time.

Finding My Grandmother Johanna Gerson, nee Friedmann

by

Debbie Shafir-Keret, Israel

The question of my personal identity has troubled me from the day I first knew my own mind. From that day on I have been troubled by questions: Who was my grandmother? Why did she put her daughter in a Christian orphanage? Am I a Jewess? Does my mother have a family living somewhere out there in the world? Why, when I was six, did my father answer my question, "Never ever again ask where your mother's family is!"

My mother's life story resembles the title of the book by Judith Viorst, *Necessary Losses* (1986). When she was a few days old, my mother was put in a Christian orphanage in Germany. She knew her mother had abandoned her. Throughout her life she felt wounded and obliterated. She carried enormous anger at her mother, while at the same time she was glued to the radio every day, listening to the program "Seeking Relatives," hoping that someone would look for her (mother? father? brother or sister?). My mother was ashamed of her life story. It was a secret.

On my father's side, I had a grandmother and grandfather who lived in Israel, together with us, and an extensive family. While I lived in my parents' house until I was recruited to the army, I carried within me my father's admonition not to

inquire about my mother's family. When in the army, I began to encourage my mother to speak, to give me permission to look through the papers in the drawers of our home. In time, the search for a solution to the mystery became an obsession. I felt I had to know.

Viorst writes (p. 17): "The forbidden impossible secrets of our childhood return to demand fulfillment of us." It seems to me that fulfilling this wish constitutes a revolt against fate. No-one will tell me not to know, not even my father. I control my life. I decide what will be open or secret in my life. I will not permit the effect of that obliteration to be transferred to my daughters as well.

My second daughter's project on "Roots," done at school in the Bar Mitzvah class was about my mother. We both wrote to many people and all kinds of national and international institutes. We translated letters. We put a puzzle together according to our understanding. My daughter's teacher increased the drama of the story for us when she wrote at the end of the project, "Incredible! Reads like a detective story. What is hidden in this story? What burdens and secrets? To discover that your grandmother is a figure at the center, or perhaps the end, of a terrible tragedy. A mother who has to hide her motherhood. A stormy romance? A Crime? Your journey is like that of a time machine to other times."

She continued, "Johanna Gerson probably wore white lace dresses, like my grandmother, and in her world even bath taps were weird. The air was cleaner, life was harder and the great horror they thought had ended after the First World War was only a preface to the ensuing horror yet to come. We usually perceive grandmothers and the mothers of grandmothers as dry figures in the family tree. You, without a concrete picture, without your grandmother's story, have drawn a portrait of a grandmother, bringing to life today the stress and difficulties of that time."

This project created a unique and special bond between my daughter and my mother. When my daughter was traveling the world in connection with her work, she would send postcards to my mother from every place and ask my mother to keep the memory of the places she had visited. In

the meantime, my mother became ill with Alzheimer's and we thought the postcards were lost. Years went by and we forgot about them.

Two years ago I had the privilege of participating in a group of Arabs and Jews who traveled together to Krakow and the extermination camps in Poland. Together we all felt our humanness. In a moment of weakness and pain, I knew to rest my head on the shoulder of an Arab man who stood beside me. As a young Arab man sobbed after hearing the personal story of a Jewish friend, I knew to hold and support him. At Birkenhau, among the huts, our group was asked: "If you could now say something to someone in the world, to whom would you say it and what would you say?" Not knowing yet that her fate too was the same as those murdered there, I addressed my grandmother, saying: "Grandmother, I long to know what happened to you." That place increased my yearning for roots, for identity.

In 2003 I learned the power of the Internet and, after a search on the JewishGen web site, I sent a letter to Irina Veinberga, at the Latvian Historical Archives, in Riga, hoping that records of my grandmother could be found in the archives:

Half a year later, after 35 years of research, I had got the answer that I was waiting for. I discovered my grandmother's identity. I understood her life story and the motive for abandoning her baby daughter. I received photographs of her. I saw



Friedman Johanna, b. in 1902

Johanna Gerson, nee Friedman, b. in 1902

Photos of Johanna Found in the Archives

how physically alike we are. I discovered that her birth date is the same as that of my grandson. I was given a grandmother. And I also received a family tree.

I recently found the packet of post cards my daughter sent my mother. I arranged the postcards in an album and gave it to my daughter. In it I wrote, among other things: "I suppose that as you maintained contact with your grandmother, I yearned to find mine. Now we are all granddaughters and we are all mothers. A circle has been closed".

I was relieved. I feel as if the missing piece in the understanding of my identity is now complete. One of my daughters said to me, "Mummy, I'm sure that during her last moments, when she stood with her eight year old daughter in front of the firing squad in the Riga forests, your grandmother thought about her child she'd been forced to abandon and was comforted by the fact that she had been saved from the fate of European Jewry. Every mother thinks about her children".

A wider circle was closed for me. My story has ingrained in me an understanding of the deep need human beings have for a personal identity; the strong connection between the yearning for roots, family, a place in the inter generational continuum and personal identity, as well as the need to control one's fate without being obliterated.

The archives in Riga provided the following details:

Her grandfather was Lasar Abraham, son of Sheftel Friedman, born in 1830 and died in 1899 in Riga. He was married to Itte, who was born ca 1834. They had 5 children, whose details I know. Their fourth child was Yedidia Elias Friedman, who was born on March 28, 1872 in Riga, and died on January 1, 1920 in Riga.

Yedidia Elias Friedman married Etta in 1898, the daughter of Mark Leib Brick. They had three daughters: Tanny, Lea and **Johanna**. The youngest was my grandmother.

Now I know that **Johanna** was born on March 12, 1902 in Riga. On December 26, 1929 she

married Abram Gerson, who was born on July 7, 1887 in Windau (Ventspils). They had a son Eduard, who was born on November 1, 1931 in Riga and a daughter Mia, who was born on December 15, 1933 in Riga.

In 1932 Abram, Johanna and Eduard lived in Riga at Lacplesa St. 21-6.

The last address of Johanna and Mia was Marijas 16 from where they were sent to the ghetto in October 1941 and killed later that year.

The detail that must be added now is that Johanna gave birth to my mother, Irene, on April 7, 1923. Irene immigrated to Israel in 1939 and built a family. My family is the offspring of the Friedmann and Gerson families.

During the time that has passed, I have been trying to find survivors from this family but I have not yet succeeded. Perhaps this article will help me and will help you not to lose the hope to find information about your families.

Editor's Note:

I just want to add a note of gratitude to Constance Whippman, Arlene Beare, and the archivists at the Latvian Historical Archives in Riga, whose joint efforts over many years enabled Debbie to discover her grandmother, Johanna. This story documents the importance to the Latvia SIG of bringing archival databases on-line and accessible to genealogists world-wide.

Bauska Holocaust Memorial

This letter by Jehuda Feitelson, a survivor of the Holocaust, relates to the tragic death of the Jewish population of Bauska during the Nazi occupation starting on June 26, 1941.

My family – the Feitelsons – lived for at least seven generations in Bauska where they owned a textile and ready-made clothes store on the marketplace where many other Jewish stores were located. In addition to various trades, the city of Bauska also excelled as a place of learning exemplified by the well known Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook who officiated in Bauska from 1895 till 1904 when he immigrated to Palestine to become the Chief Rabbi of Eretz of Israel.

According to the 1935 census, the Jewish popula-

tion of Bauska was 778 and accounted for 16 % of the total population. Their names are known as well as age, address and trade. Towards World War Two (WW2) some Jewish families emigrated from Bauska. This trend continued after the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940 and was due mainly to the loss of income after their businesses and homes were nationalized. On June 14, 1941 (one week before WW2) 35 Jews of Bauska (39% of the total number of deportees) were deported by the Soviets. The exact number of Jews in Bauska at the time of Nazi occupation is not known. According to the estimate of Aigars Urtans, there were from 500 to 700 Jews in Bauska proper and 150 to 200 Jews in the nearest neighboring villages and townships.

The Jews who stayed in Bauska at the time of the Nazi occupation underwent a gruesome fate. The first five Jews of Bauska were executed on July 2, 1941. Together with five people regarded as Soviet activists and ten Red Army war captives they were publicly shot at the bridge over the river Memel at the center of the city. The Jews were accused of being responsible for the mutilation of the bodies of German soldiers. During the first half of July, fifty-six Jews were brutally emasculated. One of them, Israil Toik, managed to flee and later testify about these crimes. The remaining victims were killed at end of July in the Vecsaules Likverten woods, about 8 km from Bauska. A week later, for two nights, this same place became the killing grounds for all the other Jews from Bauska and nearby places. The town of Bauska was among of the first cities proclaimed to be "Judenfrei."

Five years ago I visited Bauska together with my sons to see the place that once contained a thriving Jewish community. There were no Jews in Bauska. The once splendid synagogue, the nearby prayer house and the Jewish cemetery were all destroyed. At the Bauska Regional Museum I discovered a well illustrated and documented exhibit of former Jewish life prepared by the historian Aigars Urtans. During our meeting we discussed the idea of a Holocaust Memorial in Bauska at the site of the Central Synagogue, now a neglected space at the center of the town. Mr. Urtans embraced the idea wholeheartedly and expressed his wish to assist with the project.

Since then the memorial project has been discussed at various levels both in Latvia and in Israel. To remove the last obstacles last year at the end of July leading people of the Association of the Jewish Organizations in Latvia met in Bauska with Mrs. A. Gaile, the mayor of the city together with a number of other officials to discuss the building of the Holocaust Memorial at the site of the former synagogue in Bauska. The meeting took place in the presence of the historian Mr. A. Urtans and the ambassador of Israel in Latvia, Mr. G. Koren.

Inexplicably, the site of the synagogue has been leased to a local businessman who has drilled an artesian well to supply his enterprise with water. The well has been constructed under the prayer house whereas the memorial has been planned at the site where the main synagogue building was situated. A gentleman's agreement has been reached that the well may stay and continue to be used. A decision was reached that the Holocaust Memorial will be erected at the site of the synagogue. Recent developments indicate that the question is going to be finalized soon.

Meanwhile, an ad hoc committee (see below) has been formed to work on the list of Holocaust victims of Bauska and they have also contacted a number of people, including a few living survivors and a number of descendants of people from Bauska, who might be interested in the project.

We, herewith, appeal to everybody directly or indirectly linked to Bauska, or feel emotionally obliged to support the commemoration of a thriving Jewish community of Bauska, in writing to one of the committee members.

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**USHMM Project: Latvia and Lithuania
Jewish Community Archival Records
1918-1941**

by
Mike Getz

I visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington to meet with Vadim Altskan. Vadim has been wonderfully helpful to the Latvia SIG in many ways, most recently with the Extraordinary Commission data related to Holocaust victims in Latvia. He is currently the Program Coordinator for International Archival Programs within the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies.

This program plans to acquire archival records reflecting communal and daily life of Jewish communities in pre Holocaust Europe during the interwar period from 1918 to 1941.

Records covering a spectrum of Jewish community life in Lithuania during the interwar period obtained from the Lithuania Archives are already in hand. The collection includes records of the Ministry of Jewish Affairs, Council of the Jewish Community of Kaunas, records of the Jewish public, cultural and political organizations and Jewish schools. These records have several thousand names of families and individuals.

Vadim will be visiting the Latvian State Historical Archives in Riga later in August for the same purpose. The preliminary survey of the archival collections in the above-named archives allowed Museum researchers to find more than two dozen of the Jewish collections, including records of the Board of Riga's Jewish Community (1914-1940) as well as records of political, cultural and education organizations active in prewar Latvia. In due course these records will be made available.

As genealogists, many of us remain focused on the 19th and early 20th century. The emergence of an independent Latvia after WW1 changed its en-

vironment and status as a province of Czarist Russia. This change would influence relationships between local and central government and Latvia's Jewish community. It would present both challenge and opportunity. There could be opportunity to participate on an equal footing in terms of holding public office. Access would now be possible to academic, professional and business sectors, hitherto restricted. The challenge would be the maintenance of Jewish vitality and continuity.

This initiative of the USHMM is a positive step toward putting on record the substance and quality of Jewish life during this period. The Holocaust physically and brutally destroyed Jewish families and communities on a vast scale. But the event itself also undermined our perception of their significant role in Jewish history and pre Holocaust Europe. As a result much of Jewish identity has had to manage with shallow roots.

**The Holocaust Victims Names Project:
A Memorial List of the Latvian Jewish
Community (1941-1945)**

Submitted by Martha Lev-Zion

Completed Work

The first stage of the project is creating the list of pre-Holocaust (pre-war) Latvian Jewry (Family name, First name, Father, Date of birth, Place of birth, Gender, Occupation, Prewar residence, Prewar address). At the moment work on the first stage is progressing.

List of the pre-war inhabitants – Jews in Kurseme and Semgale was created and updated (11502 names and identities).

Creating the list of pre-war Jews in Latgale proceeds. The list of inhabitants of the larger cities of Latgale (in Daugavpils – 11,096 names, in Rezekne – 3,342 names, in Preili – 847 names) has been created and is being updated for the situation to 1940. The work has started on creating the list of Jews in districts of Daugavpils and Rezekne (inhabitants of small towns and villages - 4,500 entries). The list already contains 5,350 names.

Simultaneously, creating of the list of pre-war Jews in Riga (5,500 names and identities) continues.

Two booklets about the project have been produced in English and Latvian:

The Holocaust Victims Names Project: A Memorial List of the Latvian Jewish Community (1941-1945), 22 pages.

Latvia Holocaust Jewish Names Project: List of Kurzeme and Zemgale Jewish Inhabitants in 1935, 26 pages.

On-Going Work

An Internet site and database are being created that also contains a description of the project and its methodology. It will be possible to search for information and to send additions as well.

We are making two more booklets:

Updated booklet: *The Holocaust Victims Names Project: A Memorial List of the Latvian Jewish Community (1941-1945), will be 76 pages.*

Latvia Holocaust Jewish Names Project: List of Latgale Jewish Inhabitants, will be approximately 40 pages.

Dissemination of Results

Information about the project methodology, its supporters and preliminary results were presented during the years 2003-2005 at the following organizations, conferences and meetings:

Yad Vashem – conference and meetings devoted to Holocaust studies (26 December 2002 – 4 January 2003, Jerusalem, Israel) - Prof. Aivars Stranga

Tenth Annual International Interdisciplinary Conference on Jewish Studies (January 28-30, 2003, Moscow) (organizers: Moscow Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization “Sefer”, International Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization, Hebrew University of Jerusalem) – Prof. Ruvin Ferber, Aina Antane.

Kiev Summer School (August 20-26, 2003) (organizers: Moscow Center “Sefer”, International Solomonov University) - Aina Antane.

Eleventh International Scientific conference “Jewish History and Culture in Central and East-European Countries: Fate of Jewish Communities of Central and Eastern Europe in the First Half of the XXth Century” (August 26- 28, 2003, Kiev, Ukraine) (organizers - The Institute of Jewish Studies, the National Vernadsky Library of Ukraine, Chase Center on the development of Judaic in Russian under the Jewish University in Jerusalem, International Solomonov University) - Aina Antane.

Fifth International Conference “Jews in a Changing World: Latvian and Baltic Jewry in European History and Culture,” September 16-17, 2003, Riga, Latvia (organizers – Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Latvia, Jewish Community Center, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem) – Prof. Ruvin Ferber.

International conference “Lost Heritage of Cultural Assets – Documentation, Identification, Restitution and Repatriation of Cultural Assets of WW II,” November 20-21, 2003, Prague, Czech Republic (organizer - Documentation Centre for Property Transfers of Cultural Assets of WW II Victims) - Prof. Ruvin Ferber.

AJC offices in New York and Chicago, December 2003. – Prof. Ruvin Ferber.

Eleventh Annual International Conference on Jewish Studies (February 3-5, 2004) (organizers: Moscow Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization “Sefer”, The Chais Center for Jewish Studies in Russian, Joint) – Prof. Ruvin Ferber.

Twelfth Annual International Conference on Jewish Studies (February 1-3, 2005) (organizers: Moscow Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization “Sefer”, The Chais Center for Jewish Studies in Russian, Joint) – Prof. Ruvin Ferber.

Chair of Latvian Parliament's International Affairs Committee Thrown Out of Party for Anti-Semitic Comments

Submitted by Nickolai Butkevich

Aleksandrs Kiršteins, a long-time member of the People's Party and the chair of the Latvian parliament's international affairs committee has been expelled from the People's Party after complaints from the local Jewish community about his anti-Semitic statements, according to a May 27, 2005 report by the Baltic News Service. The party's statement referred to the fact that Mr. Kiršteins has "several times caused outrage by his statements about Jews, integration [of the country's non-Latvian population], and the need for repatriation of the Russian population of Latvia to its ethnic motherland" (as a result of the Soviet occupation, Latvia has a large Russian minority, which some nationalist Latvians think should not be allowed to stay in the country).

The People's Party's action came as somewhat of a surprise, since the day before, its leader Atis Slakteris publicly defended Mr. Kiršteins, claiming that his statements should not be seen as anti-Semitic. However, other members of the country's governing coalition sharply criticized Mr. Kiršteins.

While Mr. Kiršteins has reportedly made radically nationalistic statements before without any consequences (one of the ethnic Russian community's main newspapers "Chas" claimed on May 27 that he once publicly called for violence against Russians), the final straw appears to have been Mr. Kiršteins' reaction to a May 23 statement by the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia.

The Council's statement, published in full by the Regnum news agency on May 23, condemned "a worsening climate of anti-Semitism in recent times" sparked by what it termed attempts in the Latvian media to rehabilitate "the executioner of the Riga ghetto" Herbert Tsukurs—a Latvian collaborator with the Nazis implicated in Holocaust era crimes against Jews. The Council accused Mr. Kiršteins of being part of those attempts, and of allying himself with "radical" forces in the coun-

try.

Mr. Kiršteins responded by characterizing members of the Council as collaborators with external enemies of Latvia, whose ideas "facilitate a split within society." He then made an explicit reference to the role that some Latvian nationalists accuse Jews of playing in the brutal occupation of the country by the Soviet Union in the year before the Nazis invaded: "Taking into account historical experiences which the authors of the statement refer to, it wouldn't be wise to repeat the mistakes of the 1940s, when they [the Jews] openly collaborated with enemies of the Latvian people." This accusation was used by the Nazis and their local collaborators to justify the Holocaust in the Baltic States.

The Council's statement referred as well to a recent "attack" on Rabbi Mordechai Glazman in the old part of Riga, claiming that since this incident: "Many members of the community have lost their sense of security—the center of the city has long ago become a place for constant meetings of extremist-minded youths dressed in the fashion of European neo-Nazis. The freely gather near the Centrs department store, on Domska Square, and in other places, thanks to the total indifference of the police."

A May 25 report by the Baltic News Agency revealed that Rabbi Glazman was not physically assaulted, but he was confronted by a group of youths who shouted neo-Nazi slogans at him at the Centrs department store. Police reportedly refused to open a criminal investigation into the incident. An Indian worker was assaulted in the same place a month before in a possibly racist attack.

Membership Fees Are Now Due

This is a reminder to kindly renew your subscription to the Latvia SIG and Newsletter. Our subscription year runs from July 2005 through June 2006. Please mail your check for US \$20 for the US and Canada, and \$30 (bankable in the US) from elsewhere, to:

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

USA

You can also remit your payment through PayPal to: mgetz@erols.com. We look forward to your participation and support.

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. Money can also be deducted from your bank account, if you choose to do so.

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.

Please note that the new membership year began in July after the IAJGS meeting in Jerusalem.

Latvia SIG Membership Questionnaire

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

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

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

Bibliographical or archival sources used in your Latvian genealogical research:

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

Cemeteries, travel experiences, etc:

Suggested newsletter topics:

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

I would be willing to volunteer for the following activities:

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

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Bethesda, MD 20814-2061