

# Latvia SIG

October 2009  
Volume 14, Issue 1



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## Co-Presidents' Reports



Those of you who are amateur detectives may have noticed that the Latvia SIG now has two co-presidents instead of a single president. It's not supposed to be that way, but despite efforts to recruit

other candidates for the presidency only Henry and I came forth and so we decided to share the responsibility. We hope this will be the last year in which we will have to do this. Although the new membership year has just begun, it is not too early to think about volunteering to be the next president. Henry and I have had the honor of serving as president for the last five years and we certainly need others to be honored in this way. Please submit nominations to Henry or me via e-mail and please note that you can nominate yourself or someone else. Henry and I will do all we can to help the next president lead this wonderful organization.

The difficulty in identifying new officers for the SIG is probably related to the lack of active participation in SIG projects and activities by the membership. Part of the difficulty may be that many of the SIG activities, like database acquisition, falls on a few individuals although many members are eager for the results of these activities to materialize. A good example is the acquisition and translation of the very large 1897 All Russian Census for Dvinsk. (*Note: The archivists at the Latvian State Historical Archives are working diligently to complete the project, but because of the severe economic conditions in Latvia we do not have a firm completion date.*) Other databases do exist and await volunteer efforts to transform them into the proper format for inclusion in the JewishGen Latvia Database.

Some weeks ago I went to a JGSGW presentation about the Virtual Shtetl project being developed in Poland. The concept is very interesting and I was wondering whether a similar, but much less ambitious, project could be defined for the Latvia SIG. It would be interactive in a way that would

allow members whose ancestors came from various shtetls to access information as well as to add information (data, photos, commentary, family history, etc.). Please go to: <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/> and see what was done by actually using the site—just select English if your Polish is a bit rusty. As an example, pick a shtetl of interest (there are a number of ways to do that once you are on the site) and go from there. The Virtual Shtetl project is still in the early stages, but it looks very promising.

What I am envisioning is to begin by developing a Virtual Shtetl site where SIG members, and others, would contribute information to specific shtetls of interest. As in the Polish site, there would be a relatively standard format for the type of information desired about each shtetl and it would include a section highlighting unique perspectives from those of us who have visited their home shtetlach.

The ultimate goal of this effort is to increase the active participation of SIG members so that we can all benefit. We have found over the years that most genealogy researchers are particularly interested in their home shtetlach and it seems that this project could leverage that interest to benefit all of us. Please respond to me with any ideas you may have about instituting such a project. That would be a good first step.

As has been written about in previous additions of this newsletter, the State Historical Archives of Latvia has placed digitized images of Jewish metrical records on their Raduraksti website: <http://www.lvva-raduraksti.lv/en.html>. Data from the following towns are now available: Aizputes, Bauskas, Daugavpils, Glazmankas, Grīvas, Grobiņas, Ilūkstes, Jaunjelgavas, Jēkabpils, Jelgavas, Kuldīgas, Liepājas, Ludzas, Maltas, Piltenes, Rēzeknes, Ribinišku, Rīgas, Sabiles, Saldus, Sasmakas, Skaistkalnes, Subates, Tukuma, Varakļānu, Ventspils, Viļakas and Višķu.

The records for these towns are mainly in Russian and need to be transliterated. As previously mentioned, Christine Usdin took it upon herself to transliterate some of them, including BMD records for Vishki from 1899 to 1904 and birth records for Dvinsk from 1868 to 1895 and posted

the results on her website: <http://pagesperso-orange.fr/vishki/rigavitalrecords.html>.

I think the list of towns identified on the Raduraksti website can serve two purposes. One is to use those towns as a focus for developing the Virtual Shtetl site and the second is to coordinate an effort to transliterate these data. As a start, I'd like to identify those of you who are interested in a particular shtetl to see if we have enough "critical mass" to even begin these projects. Please contact me at: [bbshay@starpower.net](mailto:bbshay@starpower.net) and indicate which shtetl is of interest to you and whether you would like to participate in either of these projects.

The State Historical Archives of Latvia has informed us that a project of the Estonian State Archives is to place digitized images online. It does not include Jewish vital records but does appear to include revision lists, 1782–1858. The site is at <http://www.ra.ee/dgs/explorer.php>

Please note that this issue of the newsletter is the first of the new membership year, so if you have not yet renewed your membership please do so on receipt of the newsletter. Some members who live outside of North America suggested that those who only receive PDF versions of the newsletter should no longer be required to pay the higher membership fee. The board agrees with this suggestion and the new fee structure is described on Page 29.

Barry Shay  
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The 29<sup>th</sup> International Association of Jewish Genealogical Conference (IAJGS) was held from August 2-7, 2009 in Philadelphia; a city rich in Jewish history. In an article on Jewish Philadelphia, David Minsk, in the fall 2008 edition of Avotaynu, wrote that the Jewish history of Philadelphia pre-

dates William Penn's presence in 1682 and that Jewish traders were in the Philadelphia area before Penn took possession of the land.

Philadelphia also houses repositories for research and the mid-Atlantic regional office U.S. of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) is located near the conference hotel. There, NARA houses copies of national censuses on microfilm and many other records. In addition there is also the Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center.

There were 36 member societies present with 935 attendees at the conference.

This year's program, as in past years, embraced a fascinating array of events. There were the various SIG programs and the Latvian SIG lunch and business meeting.

Constance Whippman, a co-founder of the All Latvia Database, now called the JewishGen Latvia Database, who has an extensive background in Latvian genealogical research addressed the Latvia SIG meeting on *My life as a Project Manager: Past, Present and Future of Latvian Genealogical Research*. She referred to the All Latvia Database's origins, early challenges, and development with a focus on how documents and records are identified, chosen, translated, extracted, and then converted into database format. She emphasized how this resource can be used to help family history research and preserve material for future generations.

I presented, *Step by Step: A Personal Journey of Discovery: Reconnecting Past and Present*. The presentation described a step by step journey of discovery that started with a few faded photographs and no one to answer questions. I examined the methodical and exciting genealogical research that led to connecting the past with the present - the valuing of my family heritage and established meaningful contact with extended family in Latvia, Israel, USA, Australia, France and Canada. The talk traced the migration of my immediate family from 1796 in Grobina, Latvia to New York and then South Africa and finally to Canada. Having now met many members of my extended family, genealogy, to me, is far more

than just a numbers game.

### **IAJGS General Meeting**

I was fortunate to attend the IAJGS general meeting as a voting delegate from the JGS of Toronto and found the issues raised at the meeting very relevant to the Latvia SIG. The meeting was chaired by the outgoing president, Anne Feder Lee.

As I was a voting delegate, I was very pleased to propose that a Stern Grant of \$2500 be given to Shamir to commemorate the memory of Latvian Jews and the proposal was unanimously approved.

An interesting report was given by Jan Meisels, Chairperson of the Public Records Monitoring Committee. She stated that a white paper is to be developed focusing on states within the United States and on other countries that are introducing egregious legislation regarding access to public records. Apparently legislators who support limiting access to vital records believe it will prevent identity theft. She discussed the limitation on access in California, New York, Pennsylvania, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and at the NARA.

The importance of SIGs being members was discussed and many of the delegates were of the opinion that if SIGs joined the IAGS, directly, it would not only enhance IAJGS membership significantly but be of substantial benefit to SIGs themselves.

The perennial issue of promoting genealogy among the youth was also discussed at the IAGS meeting and this is also of particular interest to the Latvia SIG. All of the SIGs are all faced with succession planning and figuring out how to attract younger members to the SIGs.

I also raised the issue of ownership of copyright regarding material placed on social interaction networks by genealogists and recommended that as this was an important developing issue, the IAJGS should be cognizant of the concerns and have a member of the its board keep apprised of the issues. I also raised this issue in my presentation last year at the IAGS Conference in Chicago.

Michael Goldstein was elected as President, Michael Brenner as Vice President, Joel Spektor as Secretary and Paul Silverstone as Treasurer. Michael Goldstein was born in Canada and is a Jerusalem-based genealogist who researches, lectures and conducts workshops in Israel and North America. He holds a B.A. from Concordia and an M.S.W. from Yeshiva University.

### **Regina Kopelovich.**

Most of us who have visited Latvia also visited Lithuania and have been fortunate to have the services of Regina Kopelovich, the very popular and proficient Lithuanian guide and researcher. She had been invited to the conference and she gave a presentation at a lunch entitled: *Visiting Your Ancestral Shtetl in Lithuania and Belarus*. She gave an additional lecture entitled: *Cataloging and Restoring Jewish Cemeteries in Lithuania and Belarus*. Many at the lunch had used her professional services and for many the event became a reunion. Many recalled her individually tailored trips and her great skill in reading tombstones, cataloging and restoring cemeteries. She is fluent in English, Russian, Lithuanian, Hebrew and Yiddish.

While many sessions were of great interest to me, the most enjoyable part of these IAGS conferences is meeting the attendees and renewing relationships of those interested in Latvian genealogy such as Barry Shay, Constance Whippman, Abraham Lenhoff, Paul Cheifitz, Anne Getlan and many others. In addition it was very worthwhile to meet leaders of other SIGs and JGSs. Among the regular attendees were Howard Margol, truly the doyen of Lithuanian genealogy, Rolf Lederer, a genealogy stalwart of many decades, Saul Issroff of the South Africa (SA) SIG, Warren Blatt of JewishGen, and Gary Mokotoff of Avotaynu, to mention a few. Then there are the new faces and expanding the range of genealogical friendships. My greatest research breakthroughs have come from the chance meeting of fellow researchers who turn out to be extended family members and that for me has been the most exciting and interesting aspect of attending the JGS conferences.

Choosing from the hundreds of sessions and programs listed in the Conference Program Schedule

and more fully detailed in the Conference Syllabus, is a daunting task. After the “essentials” such as the Canadian Birds of a Feather (BOF) meeting and the IAGS meeting, I reviewed the various SIG programs. Many of us have ancestors that came from different countries and thus there is a large choice of SIG meetings to attend. It is a challenge to decide which SIG meetings to attend and then to fit in all the other fascinating sessions after that. I obviously had to attend the Latvia SIG meeting – what else can I say when I organized it. Having been born in South Africa meant that I felt compelled to attend the SA SIG meeting. As my wife’s family come from Lithuania and I have visited Lithuania on two occasions - could I miss not going to that meeting? My great-grandfather and great-great grandfather were rabbis in Mintz and immigrated to what was then Palestine – but how many SIG meetings can one attend?

#### **Father Patrick Desbois:**

There were Book signings, Breakfasts with research groups and experts, computer workshops and the opening session and reception. One of the most interesting events was the lecture by Father Patrick Desbois: *Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 million Jews*. Father Patrick Desbois was the winner of the B’nai Brith International Award for Outstanding Contribution to Relations with the Jewish People.

#### **Film Festival**

The film festival had a range of fascinating films. *The Bielski Partisans: A Granddaughter’s Story* had Sharon Rennert, the granddaughter of Tuvia Bielski, exploring her family legacy with her video camera over an eleven-year journey that has taken her all over the world, from Brooklyn to Belarus, Israel and Lithuania. She discussed her family’s history and screened excerpts from her work-in-progress documentary. *Lest We Forget: South African Jews and Reconciliation* takes the audience into contemporary South Africa and looks at the range of issues facing the South African Jewish community in 2007 including reconciliation and perspectives on South Africa. *The Holocaust Tourist* by the Glasgow filmmaker Jes

Benstock considers the contemporary legacy of the Holocaust in Poland and his powerful documentary looks at the tourism industry that has grown up in Poland in the wake of Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*.

#### **Red Star Line**

Among the many sessions I particularly enjoyed was, *Eugeen Van Mieghen and the Jewish Emigrants of the Red Star Line*. The fascinating lecture by Erwin Joos tells the story of the mass emigration of Eastern-European Jews from Antwerp to American ports between 1873 and 1934. Of the 2.7 million people that were transported by the Red Star Line he estimated that 50% were Jewish. Sholem Aleichem and Yuri Suhl described their emigration experience from Antwerp and some of the important passengers included Irving Berlin, Golda Meir and Albert Einstein. He estimated that between 30 and 40 per cent of Jewish Americans have ancestors who sailed with the Red Star Line. The Antwerp artist Eugeen Van Mieghem is probably the only artist in Europe whose works described and related to the Jewish emigrants.

While our genealogical involvement is primarily related to the Latvia it was brought home to me again how our ancestors travelled through many countries and one cannot only research family genealogy related to one country. My late father emigrated from Latvia at the age of ten to the U.S.A and until a few months ago I had no idea why he landed up in Greenville, Mississippi before he went to South Africa. Accordingly a talk of particular interest to me was that of Dr. Stuart Rockoff entitled *Bagels & Grits: How Jews Made a Home in the U.S. South*. He described how they were able to adapt to the local culture while preserving their religious heritage. More than 50 years after he passed away I found the answer. He had family in the South! I have managed to find two second cousins alive in Florida who used to live in Mississippi.

#### **Annual General Meeting**

The Latvia SIG meeting took place in Philadelphia on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2009. I presented my report. It dealt with the wide range of SIG activities

in the past year.

I thanked the following people:

Barry Shay, a past president, for maintaining a very high standard of editorship for the newsletter and for his work as Web page editor.

Mike Getz, for his work as treasurer.

Elsebeth Paikin, our listserv moderator, for her work in managing and growing the listserv during part of last year.

Bruce Dumes, our webmaster for maintaining our website.

Arlene Beare, our data base coordinator, for her work in relation to the Dvinsk databases.

### **Board and Office Bearers**

The board members for the next year are:

Co-Presidents: Henry Blumberg and Barry Shay

Treasurer: Mike Getz

Newsletter Editor: Barry Shay

Webmaster: Bruce Dumes

Website Editor: Barry Shay

Database Co-Coordinator: Arlene Beare

List Serve Moderator: Paul Cheifitz

Membership: Anne Getlan

Board Members: Abraham Lenhoff and Constance Whippman.



**New Board Members: Constance Whippman and Abraham (Bramie) Lenhoff**

### **Opening Ceremony of Riga Synagogue**

The opening ceremony of the Riga synagogue was held August 26, 2009 at 3 p.m. and was followed by a reception. The following day there was a concert at the Riga Synagogue directed by Cantor Zeev Shulman with the “Balsis” choir.

On behalf of the Latvia SIG, I wrote to Mr. Arkady Suharenko, Chairman of Latvian Council of Jewish Communities and to the board and the congregation of the synagogue conveying our very best wishes and congratulations on this auspicious event.

This synagogue is the only functioning synagogue in Riga, and as it is located on Peitavas Street it has long been known as the Peitavas Street Synagogue.

The synagogue was built in 1905 and was one of the about forty synagogues that functioned in Riga before the Holocaust. It is a stone structure with a Neo-Classic façade and the interior has a dominantly Moresque style design. A large chandelier with a Magen David motif hangs from the ceiling.

The synagogue had been targeted on two occasions by bomb attacks. The first took place on May 6, 1995 and that fortunately caused only a small amount of damage. A second attack took place on the night of the April 2, 1998, when a more powerful explosion destroyed the front door and the original 1906 stained-glass windows that managed to survive the Germans. The attacks were allegedly perpetrated by anti-Semitic elements within the Latvian society belonging to former SS members and their sympathizers. The Latvian authorities strongly condemned both attacks of vandalism.

Again thanks to Barry Shay, our editor, who has produced yet another splendid edition of our newsletter. There are a number of past copies on the website for easy reference.

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## Treasurer's Report

July 2008 – June 2009

Our opening balance for the year commencing July 2008 was \$6264. As at June 2009 our funds stood at \$3240. This has been an exceptional year of expenditure. There were considerable outlays including some \$1700 for to bring Dr Ferber to the Chicago Conference. We paid the Latvian Archives over \$1400 for the Dvinsk 1897 names list and supplied laptops to facilitate translation work in Latvia.

Translations for the newsletter ran to \$700. Approximately \$900 was spent on newsletter printing and mailing together with sundry donations to JewishGen, the WJC and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. These organizations feature developments of possible interest to us in Latvia.

We do have funds of \$3198, donated by members and friends, held by JewishGen and available to us for approved projects. It will be necessary in future to ensure that wherever possible, expenditure such as that related to the Dvinsk records, is drawn from these funds. Our income amounted to some \$3000, made up principally of membership dues and some gifts. The gifts included a few contributions toward the laptops mentioned earlier.

I want to pay tribute to our colleague, Barry Shay who has been responsible for editing and organizing our newsletter. The newsletter is perhaps the most important link to our membership. Barry is responsive and helpful on questions and queries as they arise from members and interested parties. He is also very involved in maintaining our key records and enjoys a wide range of contacts in the US and Latvia.

We need to note once again Arlene Beare's involvement in key issues concerning data from the Archives. This is a vital activity for us. Our President Henry Blumberg has through his presence, added to our status in Latvia by way of his contacts and presentations. We look forward to the outcome of these endeavors.

To continue the work of acquiring data we need to give serious attention to enlarging our mem-

bership and conducting fund-raising efforts to provide for the acquisition, translation and processing of archival material.

I regret not being able to attend this Conference and extend my best wishes to members and friends for a successful and fulfilling event.

## Editor's Comments

I am happy to include two short notes about upcoming events that have been provided by Martha Lev-Zion and Lois Ogilby Rosen, two active members of the SIG as well as organizers of the events. Those of you who attended the IAJGS conference in Philadelphia may have seen Lois's wonderful presentation about creating and printing a family tree scroll.

Mitchell Leiber, a SIG member, founder and Webmaster of <http://rumbula.org/> has provided an article about *Rumbula's Echo*, which is the first film that focuses on the Rumbula Forest murders of more than a third of Latvia's Jews and two of the largest single day mass shootings of the Holocaust. Please visit the website: <http://www.rumbulasecho.org/> to follow the progress of the film's production. Mitchell has advised me that the project has recently received a Claims Conference grant that has helped him raise \$105,000 of the filming budget. He hopes to add a production blog at the web site describing the filming activities.

In the May 2009 issue of this newsletter, Gary Feitelberg wrote about the effort by the Shamir Religious Jewish Community and Association to develop the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Latvia*. While that remains the primary focus of Shamir, the organization provides many religious, social and educational services for the Jewish community of Latvia. One service is to advertise and promote current activities and I have included a few of those in this issue. I highly recommend that you visit the Shamir website at: <http://www.shamir.lv/en>

A few months ago I received a request from a gentleman who accessed the Latvia SIG website and requested an article from the May 2001 issue of the newsletter entitled, *Eyewitness Report: July 1941 Killings of Gostini Jews*, since his descen-

dents had come from that shtetl. I was able to find the article for him and I am now happy to include a portion an English translation of book, *Dankere* by H. Ehrlich that he was able to find in Latvia and provided to me. I plan to include the remaining portions of the book in forthcoming newsletters. The book, originally published in Yiddish, can be found at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts. I strongly suggest that you visit the book center's website, if you haven't done so already.

Barry Shay  
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### **Fifth Annual IGS One Day Seminar: Preserving Memory of Family and Community**

We are delighted to announce that registration for the Fifth Annual Israel Genealogical Society One Day Seminar is now open. It will take place on Tuesday, 1 December 2009 at Beit Hatfutsot—The Museum of the Jewish People, Tel Aviv University

The one-day seminar, from 8:30 AM to 6:00 PM, will consist of two lecture tracks in Hebrew and English, instruction at Beit Hatefutsoth computers, software workshops, opening & closing session in Hebrew.

For the full program, abstracts, lecturers' bios and a registration form, go to: <http://www.isragen.org.il/siteFiles/1/198/6361.asp>

Early registration ends on 15 November 2009.

Martha Lev-Zion  
IGS-Negev

#### **Editor's Note**

When looking at the agenda for the above-mentioned conference, I noticed that Professor Daniel Wagner, [daniel.wagner@weizmann.ac.il](mailto:daniel.wagner@weizmann.ac.il), will be presenting: *Genealogical database merging - A tool for the reconstitution of vanished Jewish communities*. The subject of his presentation has been discussed at previous IAJGS conferences and, I believe, supports the concept and intent of the Virtual Shtetl project discussed earlier. The abstract of Prof. Wagner's presentation

follows:

*Most Jewish communities of Europe were devastated during World War II. Towns were emptied of their Jewish residents, and entire families disappeared, often leaving no descendants to attest of their very existence. Attempts of a new kind are currently underway to memorialize the victims by virtually reconstructing the family trees of individuals on a community-by-community basis, and to 're-create' the Jewish populations that existed just before the Holocaust. As such, the development of sophisticated tools designed to combine and compile –to merge– family data from different sources and databases, from different repositories, is currently viewed as a major objective. We present recent advances in the construction of a software package designed to merge the recently reconstructed cemetery listing of burials and the pre-Holocaust XXth century metrical death listing for the Polish town of Zdunska Wola. An overview of the benefits and complexity involved in database merging is presented.*

I recommend that you visit the Polish Virtual Shtetl site and search for *Zdunska Wola* to see how this shtetl is treated.

### **GO WEST, GENEALOGISTS!**

#### **30<sup>th</sup> IAGS Conference:**

The website for the 30th IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy is now live! Come visit us at: <http://www.jgsla2010.com>

The Jewish Genealogical Society of Los Angeles is your enthusiastic host for this event, taking place from July 11-16, 2010 at the JW Marriott Hotel at L.A. Live, downtown Los Angeles' new entertainment and cultural complex.

Are you passionate about genealogy, but haven't attended a conference before? Have you been going for years and wonder what's special about this one?

The 2010 conference will offer rich content, unparalleled learning and networking opportunities, and the intangible experience of connecting with others as obsessed as you are about tracing their family trees.

Whether you are a seasoned pro or absolute beginner, there will be a slate of workshops, lectures, films and panels on global Jewish history, resources and methodology that will educate and engage you for five and a half days.

Our website provides program, travel, and venue information, plus an FAQ section which should answer most of your early queries. The Call for Papers begins on November 15th and registration will open on January 15th, but hotel reservations can be made now. Take a stroll through our site to learn more.

If you really want to be in the loop with breaking news, sign up for our conference newsletter at: <http://www.jgsla2010.com/about/sign-up-for-the-announcements-newsletter/>

Although the JewishGen conference discussion group opens in January 2010, until then we will provide updates via this listserv. You can also keep up with our website blog and Facebook accounts.

We value your opinions and encourage you to contribute and/or volunteer to make this the best conference ever. Go to the “Contact” or “Volunteer” or “Sponsor” links on the site to reach us. Consider making this a true vacation by arriving early or staying late and traveling the length of our beautiful state and throughout the west.

And remember the number one reason to attend an IAJGS conference is the people—friends and colleagues, learning and collaborating in a unique, collective experience. For Jewish genealogists, there’s nothing like it.

Join us in 2010!

2010 IAJGS Conference Co-Chairs

Pamela Weisberger

Sandy Malek

Ann Harris

Lois Ogilby Rosen

[info@jgsla2010.org](mailto:info@jgsla2010.org)

### **IIJG Announces Latest Grants**

The International Institute for Jewish Genealogy has awarded two additional grants for research asso-

ciated with genealogy; one for Latvian research and the other for Hungarian Research.

The first proposal is entitled “A Systematic Study of the Riga House Registers as a Source for Jewish Genealogy in Pre-War Latvia.” It will result in a detailed database of the 20–21,000 Jews living in Riga in the inter-war period and will be accompanied by a historical and sociological narrative, contextualizing the findings in the database. The work will be carried out over a two-year period by Professor Rubin Ferber, Chair of the Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Latvia in Riga, and by Mrs. Irina Weinberga, a Departmental Head at the Latvian State Historical Archives, also in Riga.

### **Rumbula’s Echo to Start Filming**

Rumbula’s Echo, the feature-length documentary film about the Holocaust in Latvia, hopes to begin filming in 2009. The documentary is intended for public screenings, TV (PBS in the U.S.), and educational distribution worldwide. The Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia will assist with distribution in Latvia.

In Rumbula’s Echo, the genealogy search of producer Mitchell Lieber for his daughter’s namesake, leads to the story of Latvia’s Jews during the last 100 years and the Shoah. It is the first film focused on documenting the meticulously planned and savagely implemented mass shootings of an estimated 27,800 in the Rumbula *aktions* of 1941. It also shows the murders at Skede, near Liepaja, and touches on the many Jews rescued by the Janis Lipke and Robert Seduls families. As it ends, the film poses a question about an overlooked cost of genocide, the loss of the contributions of the murdered to the world.

The documentary has five historical advisors in Latvia and the U.S., including Professor Rubin Ferber, Chairman of the Judaic Studies Center at the University of Latvia. He says that making *Rumbula’s Echo* “is of the utmost importance for educational, ethical and historical perception of the Shoah in Eastern Europe.” The film’s advisor organizations are the Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia, The Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel and Jewish Survivors of Latvia USA. Since 2002 the film’s producer has

run the educational web site about the Shoah in Latvia, [www.Rumbula.org](http://www.Rumbula.org).

Fundraising efforts were advanced by initial small grants made in August 2008, by the Jewish Survivors of Latvia USA and the Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel. In February, the documentary received a \$19,200 grant from the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, the chief international Holocaust coordinating organization. Rumbula's Echo has raised a total of more than \$65,000, both in grants and individual contributions of \$100 - \$5,000. Producer Mitchell Lieber reports that, "The documentary has raised about half of the minimum budget required to film, and so is making good progress. Our goal is to raise the balance and begin filming this year."

A seasoned crew will shoot the film in Latvia, the U.S. and Israel. Individuals may join Friends of Rumbula's Echo, which is free of charge, to receive free newsletters twice a year and to receive invitations to see work in progress. To join, submit an e-mail address at [www.RumbulasEcho.org](http://www.RumbulasEcho.org). More about the documentary may also be seen there.

Producer Mitchell Lieber says, "This film about the past is also about the future. I hope that survivors share this article with their children and grandchildren, and that they become Friends of Rumbula's Echo and follow the documentary's progress. For descendants of Latvian Jews, the content of the film is the history of their family and illustrates that they too are survivors." Mitchell Lieber may be contacted via the documentary's web site, [www.RumbulasEcho.org](http://www.RumbulasEcho.org), or by telephone at 312-602-3302.

#### **Rumbula's Echo Supporter's Network:**

Rumbula's Echo has started a free membership group for leaders of key non-profits to keep updated about the film. It is an international network comprised of rabbis, a representative of the Holocaust Centre in the UK and groups in Latvia. The idea is to keep in touch with leaders of non-profits who can help spread the word about the film and whose members can play a role in

screenings and post-screening discussions once it is released. It is called the *Rumbula's Echo Supporter's Network*. It is a free group and involves no fundraising or financial support ("support" is in the area of audience development by passing along info, etc.) Mitchell would love to have someone from the Latvia SIG in this network. It means you'd receive an email 2-4 times a year, meant for leaders of NGOs interested in the film. If you are interested in participating, please contact Mitchell at:

## **Shamir Updates**

### **Jewish Calendar**

The Jewish calendar of 5770 is being published in Latvian, English, and Russian. The Jewish religious holidays and traditions, historical dates, memorial days, state holidays of Israel uniting all Jews around the world, and national days of Latvia are described in the calendar in great detail. Photographs of history of Latvian Jews in 1945 - 2010 serve as a basis of calendar design.

### **Week of Jewish Music**

Week of Jewish Music took place on September 03-15, 2009 in Riga. It is the first festival of Jewish music in post-war Latvia.

The concert of Jewish music 5770, devoted to the Jewish new year of 5770 took place on September 10, 2009 in Latvian National Opera. Participants: male's choir «Balsis» with program «Melodies of the Burned Synagogues», choir «Hassidic Capella», cantor of Riga Choral Synagogue Zeev Shulman, soloists of the Bolshoy Theater, cantor Colin Schachat (Israel), National Opera Orchestra. In the program - Jewish cantors' music, fragments from operas, popular Jewish songs.

This concert is the completion of large-scale six-year project of «Shamir» «Latvia. Synagogues and Rabbis. 1918-1940 », whose goal was to show the diversity of Jewish life in pre-war Latvia. During the concert in the foyer of LNO the exhibition «Synagogues of Latvia» was opened to the public.

This concert is the culmination of Jewish Music

Week. Seven concerts are to show the full diversity of Jewish music - from cantors' singing to folk music and klezmer, as well as a concert for children, women, dramatic performance about the Holocaust, and - for the first time in Latvia - the concert of Sephardic music (music of Spanish Jews).

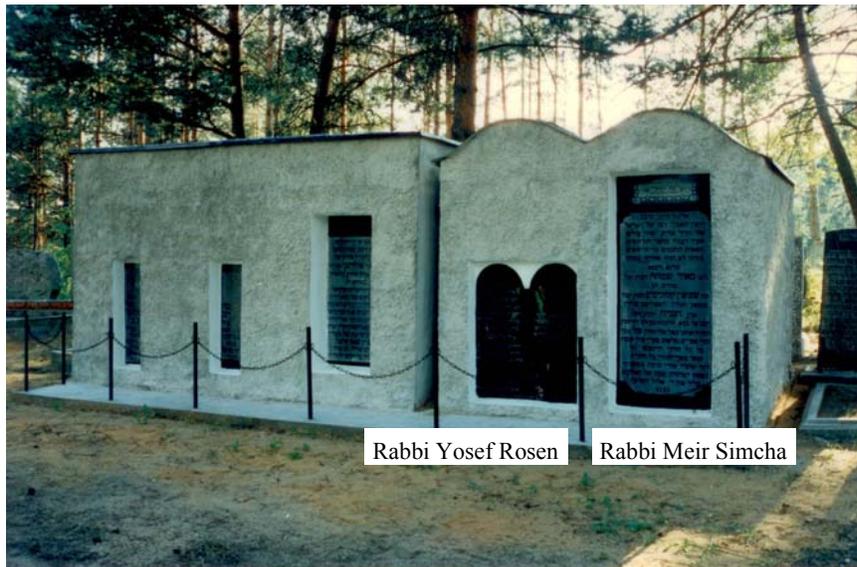
### **Memorial Groves in the Hills of Jerusalem**

The religious community and association "Shamir" has purchased two groves in the Martyrs Forest in the Hills of Jerusalem in memory of all Latvian children who perished during World War II in Latvia and of all the Jews who perished in Latvia in the Holocaust.

### **Reburial Place of the Rabbis of Daugavpils and Griva in Daugavpils**



**Before Restoration**



**After 1996 Restoration by SIG Member Ron Moskowitz and Family**

Photos courtesy of Ron Moskowitz

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**DANKERE**

Types and episodes in a  
Latvian town sixty years ago

by  
H. Ehrlich

"Kagor" Publishing House  
Johannesburg, South Africa  
1956

Published under the auspices of the  
Jewish Cultural Federation of South Africa

Note: *Italicized words in the text are foreign language words explained  
in the glossary.*

Dedicated to the Memory  
of  
My Mother  
Shifrah-Leah

Preface

The people and events depicted here are typical of life sixty years ago in a small town of Latvia. Up until the Holocaust the Latvian Jew was looked upon as a stepson in the Yiddish literature. None of our Jewish writers was really interested in him, and, when he was mentioned it was only as the butt of a funny story. No wonder little was heard about such towns as Neire, Denkere, Kreuzberg [Krustpils], and Livemuze, even though they had considerable Jewish populations. It was only after the Holocaust that they were remembered. I know that I myself did not fully absorb the full flavor of life in the town during the years that I lived there. Let this then be a memorial and also a contribution for the historian who may be interested in documenting the life of the Latvian Jews of that era.

### Dankere

Dankere is a town in Latvia located between Riga and Dvinsk on the border of three provinces -- Vitebsk, Livland [Livonia], and, across the river, Courland. It was not without truth when it was said that when a cock crowed in Dankere it was heard in three provinces. Dankere had three names: Glazmonka, in Russian; Trentelberg, in German; Dankere, in Yiddish. Since we were so close to Courland and Livland our language was "Germanized" [considered unacceptable as a cultivated Yiddish]. Although our poverty was no less than that in other Lithuanian towns, our way of life was different. I would characterize it as a polished poverty, as, for instance, the manner in which we were wont to tidy up the house when expecting a doctor to come. The language, in addition to Yiddish, was Lithuanian and also a little German. Relations between Jew and gentile were friendly. We did not experience any anti-Semitism, perhaps also because the Lithuanian was not fanatically religious. When the peddlers would make their round to the outlying villages, the peasants welcomed them with open arms and gave them food and lodging.

Dankere was not outstanding for its great scholars or distinguished personalities as there were in other towns of Lithuania and Poland. There was a Talmud Torah supported by the city, attended by the poorest children of the town. In one large room, at a long table there sat many children, many of them in tattered clothes, hungry and barefoot, all taught by one *melamed*. Small wonder that the pupils who learned at the Talmud Torah left as ignorant persons who could hardly read Hebrew. There was no yeshiva in Dankere. In the houses of study, however there were yeshiva students, stemming mostly from Lithuania, who boarded at various homes and studied by themselves.

As in other places, we, too, had a "fire brigade" which, truth to tell, had little to do with fires, nor was it much of a brigade. In the market place, near the church, there was a hut that looked like a burial chapel, near which

stood a few water-borrels on wheels, a couple of hoses and a few ladders. Due to the fact that a fire in Dankere was a rarity, the equipment just stood there. If sometimes there was a fire, everybody suddenly became a fire fighter. True, later on the "fire brigade" turned into a respectable modern group donning regulation cockades and brass buttons.

Class played a great role in Dankere. For instance, it was unheard of for a daughter of rich parents to be seen socializing with a son of a craftsman, or vice-versa; or for a rich man to chat with someone not his equal. Consistent segregation reigned. It is worthy of note that in the first few years of the Zionist movement in Dankere the membership there did not include a single laborer or a youth of the town's poorer class. The few Zionists were well-to-do young people who considered it demeaning to mix with the tramps.

This wall of class distinction lasted till the beginning of the century, when signs of the coming revolution were felt and brought about a change in the life of the Jews in Dankere.

\* \* \*

Life was hard, very hard in Dankere. The very rich man, as everywhere, enjoyed all good things. The middle-class somehow managed to survive. The great mass of Jews struggled to eke out enough for daily sustenance and never had enough for the Sabbath or for a holiday. It often seemed to me that the piety in the town was a result of the poverty; because the poorer the Jew, the more religious he was. It was as though the synagogue and study house were places of refuge, havens where they could for a short while forget the need and oppression in their lives. And when I read about the idyllic portrayals of shtetl life, it evokes from me a bitter laugh; this idyll where people went around half starved, where need and poverty spewed frugality from hearth and home, and all of life was hard and gray. To call such a life idyllic is nothing but bitter mockery . . .

### The Rich Man of the Town

The rich man in the town was a Jew named **Yonah Kahn**. He was of medium height with a rounded beard, a thick mustache and a protruding belly. He was particularly noticeable when he donned his sheepskin hat and coat and his long boots. He then gave the impression of a rich landowner. He was the trustee of the *misnagdim* synagogue, of the Burial Society, the *bikur-holim*, the *hachnases-kallah*, and the *malbush-arumim* where he was in control of everything and hardly gave an accounting. Who would have the audacity to ask for one? They left everything up to him. He would arrange a great feast every Hannukah for the Burial Society. And what a feast it was! Chicken and geese, and stuffed turkey, and potato kugel, and a variety of fish and herring, beer, and whiskey, and wine were imbibed like water. The people, of course did not have to be urged to partake. They ate and drank and ate and drank again until they fell asleep in a drunken stupor. At such a feast Yonah Kahn found favor in everybody's eyes. He felt like a king without a crown . . .

On the night of *Shmini-atseres* he was led into the synagogue with great pomp. The children walked with flags topped by lit candles and the adults carried burning candles. There was singing and dancing as though it were the greatest joyous event. From the synagogue everyone went to his house, where they made merry till late into the night.

Due to the fact that Yonah Kahn had two large businesses, a dry-goods store and a leather store, all the craftsmen in town were continuously in debt to him. And here I would like to recount something that is deeply etched in my memory:

My father was a shoemaker. In winter when work was scarce, we still had to have some money in order to live. He would take what little silver he received when he got married and pawn it at the establishment of the rich

man, Yonah Kahn. When Passover drew near and work increased, he would take the silver out of hock, and then later, of course, he would pawn it again.

It just so happened that one year, he could not redeem his silver. When the Passover holiday was almost upon us, my father decided to ask the rich man to lend him the silver till after the holiday; but since he was somewhat ashamed to go to the rich man to beg for it, he sent me, a mere child, on this errand. I went to Yonah Kahn and shyly said: "*Reb* Yonah, my father sent me to ask you if you could lend him his silver goblets and spoons till after the holiday. He'll return them to you immediately after the holiday."

*Reb* Yonah fastened his eyes upon me, looked me up and down, and curtly said: "Young man," go home and tell your father to pay me what he owes, and then I'll give him the goblets."

I came home in tears and related what *Reb* Yonah had said. My father remained silent. My mother, however, a gentle, sensitive soul, burst into tears. That Passover was a very gloomy one in our home.

This incident has remained deep in my memory. When I hark back in memory to the image of my town, I recall the rich man Yonah Kahn in his sheepskin hat and elegant sheepskin coat, who said to me: "Young man go home and tell your father . . ."

### My Teacher Leybe Zagerer

The name itself would instill fear in the heder pupils of the town, because **Zagerer** sounds like *zshageres* which to us meant highway robbers. There was reason for fear. He was a tyrant of a Jew. He would actually torture his pupils. The only way he had of drumming Torah into their heads was through blows; and Zagerer did not spare blows. The ways in which he delivered them were many: Whipping with a strap, poking on the spine, pinching out pieces of flesh, prodding with a long, sharp peaked pointer, twisting ears till they were swollen. And if he wanted to inflict even more severe punishment, he would grab a youngster by the ears and lift him on high. The piercing screams of pain did not bother Zagerer. He did what he had to do.

It once happened that he encountered a healthy, strong boy who was stubborn, and it was just this youngster when, for a minor misdemeanor, the teacher wanted to whip. What occurred was a battle for life or death. The boy grabbed the teacher by his beard and thrust him so violently to the floor, that he lay there bleeding. It created quite a stir in the heder; some neighbors rushed to the scene and wiped the blood off Zagerer. This was the only time that we, the heder pupils, had revenge on him. Not even this incident, however, deterred him from hitting the children again and again.

Not only did he beat the children; he also cursed and berated them by saying, for instance: "May you rot, may you burn, you hoodlums, you garbage collectors" and other "nice" names. I don't know. Perhaps his sadistic tendencies were due to the fact that he was a sickly man. His mouth was crooked, drawn to one side. His feet swelled up, and when that happened, one boy would roll up his trousers and another boy would dip a goose feather in kerosene and rubbed down his legs.

I don't remember whether any scholars emerged from his heder, but many cripples and physically impaired children did: Some with crooked backs, some with defaced ears that stood out like a donkey's, and others merely with some other defect. Although many years have passed, I still remember my teacher, that vicious Jew who walked around in the heder and exclaimed: "Hoodlums, garbage collectors, may you rot . . ."

### Good Jews

From time to time Hasidic *rebbe*s used to come to Dankere, and they were dubbed "Good Jews." I could never quite understand of what their goodness consisted. The last Good Jew whom we had, as far as I can remember, was the **Tomashever Rebbe**. He looked as though he thought little of the world to come and more about this world. His face was red, his neck thick, his hands fleshy, and his stomach fat.

He did not come alone, but was accompanied by a retinue of servants: One who wrote the *kvitel*, another who collected them, a third who submitted them; also, he brought along his own cantor who prayed Sabbaths at the lectern. The portion of the week was read by the *rebbe* himself. I remember that the portion for that week happened to be *Bishelach* and I recall how he cried out: "Let my people go, that they may serve me." When he spoke those words it was as though he had uttered a stern decree to be followed immediately upon his command . . . He had lodgings in the house of a childless couple, and on that account he promised that next year they would have a child. When this blessing did not materialize, the man, a butcher, grew so angry, that if the *rebbe* were there, he would have let him have his due . . .

It was mostly the poorer segments of the population who came to see the *rebbe*. One came to find ways for making a living. Another came to bemoan his poor health. A third came to petition the *rebbe* to find a suitable groom for his daughter. And the *rebbe* promised everyone that whatever was desired would be granted.

It was not an inexpensive matter to have an audience with the *rebbe*. The petition-writer took 25 kopeks to write a *kvitel*. The guard at the *rebbe*'s door took another 25 kopeks for opening and closing the door. True, the *rebbe* himself took no money, but on the table was a *pushke* on which was inscribed "For the benefit of the *rebbe*." For this, of course, 25 kopeks was not a seemly enough contribution.

During the time that the Good Jew was in Dankere, the town really hummed. All you heard was: "Nu? have you already been at the *rebbe's*? Have you seen him? It was as though going to the *rebbe* was the order of the day. And if a scoffing *misnagid* wryly remarked that he did not believe in the *rebbe* and his wondrous deeds, he was considered to be a heretic. What does it mean, not having faith in the *rebbe*!? . . .

On Sabbath he went to the synagogue with an honor guard of *hasidim*. He walked in the center encircled by them. Parading in such manner, each time the *rebbe* let out a groan and a deep sigh, the groan was picked up by the *hasidim* and interpreted in various ways.

What was most interesting to observe was to see how the *hasidim*, as a matter of honor, partook of the remnants of the *rebbe's* food and how the bearded Jews leaned over the table and sought to catch as much of the leftovers as they possibly could . . .

### The Belief in Spirits

The belief in ghosts, demons and transmigrations had a stronghold not only on the masses of the common people but also on those of the higher strata of society. As an example, I present the following episode.

I studied with a *rebbe* who was an avid hasid. His belief in *rebbes* and "Good Jews" was without limit]. In the wintertime, at twilight, before lights were lit, he would tell us these terrific tales of the wondrous deeds of the Good Jews: How one returned sight to a blind man; another cured a cripple; a third exorcised a *dibbuk*, and other such miracles and wonders, which evoked from us children the greatest degree of amazement.

Since he lived alone -- his wife remained in Lithuania -- he had to cook meals for himself. He once sent me to the bakery to buy him a sweet-sour bread. I went and kept repeating to myself: "Sweet-sour bread, sweet-sour bread," but when I reached the bakery, as luck would have it, it slipped my mind completely, and instead of a sweet-sour bread, I bought him an ordinary loaf. When the *rebbe* saw it, he started to yell at me: "I told you to bring me a sweet-sour bread. Go back right away and exchange it." As I was about to go out the door, he called me back. "No. Let it be," he said in a loud voice. "There is a *dibbuk* in this bread, and since I have to make *hamoytse*, and you children will say 'amen', I am destined to redeem a lost soul.

Upon hearing that there is a ghost in heder, we children became very frightened. Each one of us thought that soon, soon the ghost would fly into his body. We all shut our mouths and pinched our nostrils together so that the ghost could not fly in. Upon seeing our fright, the *rebbe* assured us that no harm would come to us because in a heder, where children study, a ghost has no power . . .

Another incident: This happened one Wednesday evening at the end of the month on the way home from heder. It was very dark, and a stormy wind was blowing. Several children missed the right road, lost their way and arrived home later than usual. When the *rebbe* heard about this the following morning, he immediately interpreted the happening: On Wednesday nights, especially at the end of a month, spirits reign, so it is imperative that one's *tsitsis* be just right, because if not, God forbid, the spirits can harm him. He ended this with a story of what happened to a Good Jew who one Wednesday night was walking all alone when the spirits encircled him and wanted to hurt him. But since the Jew uttered the Holy Name of God, the spirits were frightened and ran away . . .

### Marriages in Town

To marry off a girl, or, as they used to say in the old country, "give away a girl," was a great burden for the poor man; more so, if he had four or five daughters. It is difficult to describe what it meant to get a daughter married and out of the parental home. The word 'dowry' hung like a Damocles sword over the heads of the parents. Without a dowry a girl could sit around till she was old and gray, unless she married solely out of love. There were bridegrooms who demanded that the dowry be deposited with the rabbi even before they went under the wedding canopy. Most of them, however, were satisfied to get half the promised dowry. Not groundless was the ditty:

Rejoice, rejoice, my little girl,  
The bridegroom we've deceived.  
From the promised dowry's hundred,  
Only one grosch he's received.

A wedding in town was a holiday, but it affected only a few. Not only the in-laws and family attended the ceremony, but many strangers also came. Weddings never took place in a home, or even in the courtyard of a synagogue, but under the open skies. Urchins held the canopy poles. They were always the first guests at the festivities and if they were overlooked it was scandalous.

Musicians we didn't have. We therefore had to bring them from the nearby town of Kreuzberg. The band consisted of a fiddle, a trumpet, a bassoon and a cymbal. To this very day I see before my eyes Moshke the fiddler, a little Jew, big as a yawn, with a fiddle that was almost taller than he, as he played the music for the veiling of the bride prior to the wedding ceremony and how the bride's side of the family cried bitter tears.

Binyamin the cymbalist was a comical figure. He had a pug nose, and from both nostrils he had growing small, pointy hairs like a porcupine's. His mustache resembled a worn out brush. And when he wielded the two small sticks over the cymbal it looked as though little mice were scurrying around. In the late hours when he was tired and sleepy, he kept his eyes closed, and his hands went through the motions of playing the cymbal. He was like a fifth wheel of a wagon. Nevertheless, he was always a member of the band.

As everywhere, it was the custom to bring wedding gifts. The closest and richer members of the family would give: A silver goblet, a tray, a spoon, earrings, a blanket and other items. The more distant relatives would send a cake, a streussel twist; the poorer relatives sent a brown honey cake, because that was the cheapest.

A wedding of the rich lasted only a few days, but the poor man's wedding continued for a week or more. Here you could be blissfully happy and forget your troubles for a short while . . .

### Yakke the Organ-Grinder

Yakke was one of the few familiar people who went begging from house to house. Everybody knew him. He was tall, dark, somewhat bent over, and had a shy look on his face. Many people grumbled: "A man, strong as a stick, going around begging! Why can't he find something useful to do?" It didn't bother Yakke one bit. Let them talk . . . The people gradually grew accustomed to him, and as he entered a house, people would already greet him with a donation, and in some houses he was considered a welcome guest to whom the housewife could pour out her bitter fate as she would with close kin.

Yakke was not a young man; a bachelor, already in his late thirties. He suddenly realized that perhaps it was time for him to get married. He was not worried about making a living; instead of begging at each house once a week, he would go twice. Also, the wife could help. One fine morning he appeared with a wife at his side. Truth to tell, she was not a beauty, and she was blind in one eye. But she did have fifty rubles, and that fact charmed Yakke.

After the wedding, he started to consider what he could do with the fifty rubles, and he came to the decision that he would buy a hand organ. From that time on, Yakke became very proud of himself. Instead of going from house to house, he would stop in front of the shops, turned the organ handle, and the organ played its tune. When it stopped, he took his hat in hand and collected the donations. The organ played just one tune. But since this was not enough, he accompanied it with a song, first in a broken Russian and then in a Yiddish translation:

Where are you climbing, little lad?  
To where are your feet going?  
To no avail is your futile journey,  
Poverty just keeps on growing!

Yakke's wife was pregnant twice a year -- at least that's what the women used to giggle about amongst themselves -- but somehow she never came to term, a factor not conducive to domestic bliss. He claimed it was her fault; she claimed it was his. It reached the point where divorce was considered. She, however, demanded the return of the fifty rubles; but since he didn't have it, there was no choice but for them to stay together . . . and have children.

Before a holiday, the wife would help him earn a living and go begging from house to house. When she came into a house, she introduced herself as Yakke's wife. And who had the heart to deny a little something to a poor man that you knew? . . .

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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:

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