Table of Contents

Co-President’s Report—Barry Shay 2
Co-President’s Report—Henry Blumberg 3
Editor’s Comments 5
Latvia SIG at the IAJGS Conference 6
New Life to the Green Synagogue of Rezekne? 6
Rumbula Updates 8
Shamir Updates 8
Lo Tishkach Foundation 9
Dankere (Part 3) by H. Ehrlich 11
Membership Fees 28
Latvia SIG Membership Questionnaire 29
Co-President’s Report

In line with my comments in the last issue of the newsletter, Christine Usdin continues to produce birth, marriage and death records at a remarkable rate. Those of you who subscribe to the Latvia SIG listserve understand the magnitude of her work and, I am sure, appreciate what she is doing.

Our ultimate goal is to upload to JewishGen the database that Christine is developing, where it would then become part of the JewishGen Latvia Database (formerly the All Latvia Database) and would then be available to a much larger pool of genealogists. In that regard, I have been in contact with Paul Deitch, who has provided some technical assistance to Christine in developing the spreadsheets that she has made available on her website. Paul has agreed to convert Christine’s spreadsheets into Excel in a format that meets JewishGen requirements. At some point, we will be asking for volunteers to help check the spreadsheets for errors.

Numerous listserve subscribers have already found useful information and have discovered new family connections because of the data that is now available. I expect such results to increase substantially once the data is available for searching on the JewishGen website. In particular, what follows are responses from two SIG members based on information that was gleaned from the spreadsheets that are currently available.

Judy Simon, whose article about genetics and genealogical research appeared in the last issue of the newsletter, found useful and intriguing information in the data provided by Christine. Here is what she had to say.

I have found the names of many of my maternal ancestors in the 19th century records that Christine Usdin has translated from Rezekne, Dvinsk, Ludza, Varaklani, Vishki, Glazmanka, Subate and Vilaka. I have not found even one record of any of my family surnames from Valdemarpils or Jakobpils.

Rezekne, Dvinsk, and the other villages where I have found my ancestors are all in the area of Latvia which was in the Latgale province between WW1 and WW2 in the region that was Vitebsk Gubernia in the Russian Empire before WW I. Valdemarpils and Jakobpils were both in the region that was Courland in the Russian Empire before WW1.

Because several of my family members have DNA matches with ancestry from the Vilna area, I think it is likely that my ancestors may have migrated to Vitebsk Gubernia from Lithuania/ Belarusk and not likely that they migrated to Vitebsk Gubernia from Courland.

I am wondering if Christine’s translations will be useful in learning about Jewish migration patterns during the 19th century into and within Latvia. I realize my family is only one example, and it is dangerous to generalize. Has anyone else noticed a pattern of ancestral geographic locations in Latvia during the 19th century and possibly been able to connect them to migration into Latvia?

The second account is from Paul Cheifitz of Cape Town South Africa.

Thanks to the amazing work of Christine Usdin and her remarkable translations of the Dvinsk Birth Records I have been able to connect to a hitherto unknown branch of my family.

This particular branch of the LOTZOV family moved from Ludza to Dvinsk in the 1890s. Dvorka LOTZOV married Itzik Mendel TRAININ. They had three known children: Sora Faiga, David and Hirsch. According to all the evidence this whole branch, as well as all of their cousins, were wiped out in the Holocaust. However, Sora Faiga married Sam CHITRIN and left before the Holocaust.

Christine's translations allowed me to reconstruct this branch of the family and I'm now in contact with Sora Faiga's family in Canada.

These two accounts attest to the importance of Christine’s work.
I have added links to the Latvia SIG listserv that make it easy for you to access the Latvia SIG website at: http://www.jewishgen.org/Latvia/ and to donate to JewishGen while supporting the Latvia SIG at: http://www.jewishgen.org/JewishGen-erosity/v_projectslist.asp?project_cat=16.

This newsletter will be the last of the 2009/2010 membership year, which ends on 30 June 2010. For those of you who have not yet paid membership fees for the 2010/2011 membership year please consider doing so now. Payment details can be found under Membership Fees towards the end of the newsletter.

Barry Shay
Co-President, Latvia SIG
bbshay@starpower.net

Co-President’s Report

When I visited Yad Vashem this past February, I searched the names of my Latvian family on the index cards of the International Tracing Service (ITS). I realized then, that it was necessary to go to Bad Arolsen to do research and meet with ITS researchers with expertise in interpreting the cards, often written in German with abbreviations.

The ITS had opened its vast archival resource on the 28th November 2007 to researchers and until then the archives was virtually inaccessible.

I read about the genealogical group that Gary Mokotoff escorted to Bad Arolsen and much regretted that I was unable to accompany them at that time. When I last saw Michael Goldstein, the President of the IAJGS, who lives in Jerusalem, he told me of his two visits to the ITS and provided me with the details about going to the ITS. This confirmed my decision to go to the source at Bad Arolsen and see what I could find about my Latvian family.

When the Allies entered the German concentration camps in the spring of 1945, they found detailed records kept by the Nazis. The documents were taken to Bad Arolsen, sorted, filed and locked way. In 1955, the ITS, an arm of the International Committee of the Red Cross, was put in charge of the archives.

In preparing for my visit to the ITS in April this year, I completed the tracing enquiries for family members and sent them to ITS to give them some idea of what I was researching.

The millions of records at the ITS compiled in one central archive bear witness to the horrors of World War II and, as a whole, form a meaningful memorial for generations to come. The archives hold records and documents relating to victims of the Holocaust, not only those who perished but also of survivors. Among the files are concentration camp lists, deportation lists, ship manifests of survivors, and wartime histories of the persecuted, which contain the fullest records of the Nazi persecutions available.

The ITS employs about 300 people and preserves the historical records and makes them available for research. If lined up back-to-back the archives amount to 26 km of files containing information on the fate of about 17.5 million people. It is estimated that there are over 50 million documents housed at Bad Arolsen. These documents provide information about:

- Germans and non-Germans who were detained in Nazi concentration or work camps or other detention sites from 1933 to 1945.
- Victims of the Holocaust.
- Non-Germans deployed as forced labourers on the territory of the Third Reich during World War II.
- Displaced persons who, after World War II, were under the care of international relief organisations (UNRRA, IRO).
- Children, under 18 years of age at the end of World War II, of persons belonging to the above-mentioned groups and displaced or...
separated from their parents as a result of the war.

The first challenge in travelling to Bad Arolsen was finding out the easiest way to get there from Canada, since the town has no airport. The most effective way was to fly to Munich, then fly to the nearest airport, Paderborn, and then travel the rest of the way by cab.

I had arranged to be at archives on the Tuesday morning and was surprised and delighted that the person I had been corresponding with at the ITS, Martin Kesting, and a researcher, Mrs. Gabriele KlotzBuecher, met with me and carefully directed me through my research. They promised that copies of the actual documents would be sent to me later.

After I had completed my research with their assistance, Mr. Kesting also arranged for two people from the ITS, Martin Kriwert and Nicole Lorentz, to spend a few hours guiding me personally through a few of the six buildings housing the archives. The tour of the archives was very especially meaningful and moving since I was able to view some of the documents and cabinets that related specifically to my family. Their assistance and the preparation for my visit are most appreciated.

The ITS is situated in the beautiful Baroque town of Bad Arolsen and while there I felt that it was necessary to appreciate the setting of the ITS and some of the historical background to the town.

While I was cognizant of the beauty of this charming town I also knew that there lurked the ambiguity of an ugly Holocaust-related past.

The magnificent Arolsen Palace is the centre piece of the town. Construction of the palace was started in 1710 by Prince Anton Ulrich. He gained the hereditary title of Prince for himself and his successors and arranged for the layout of the town as it is today, with its Baroque palace avenues and pavilions.
The Palace is often visited by tourists, especially those from Holland since Princess Emma of the House of Waldeck married King Wilhelm II of the Netherlands and she later became the Regent of Holland until Queen Wilhelmina reached her majority. Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands visited the Arolsen Palace in 2008 where her great-grandmother, Emma, was born.

As part of its Holocaust-related past there had been an SS training camp, and the then head of the Waldeck family, Josias Erbprinz zu Waldeck-Pyrmont became an SS general, and was sentenced to life in prison for his part in the "common plan" to violate the Laws and Usages of War. He was sent to Landsberg am Lech prison near Munich, but was released in 1950 because of ill health.

On the recommendation of Michael Goldstein, I also visited the Jewish Cemetery in Bad Arolsen. I enquired at the town’s Information Office for directions to the Jewish Cemetery. They provided me with a map and plotted out the route; based on that I found my way to a cemetery. Unfortunately there are few requests for directions to the Jewish cemetery and I was misdirected and ended up at the wrong cemetery!

On returning to the Information Office the clerk was very apologetic and made a few phone calls and eventually directed me to the friedhofsamt at City Hall where I could collect the key to enter the Jewish cemetery. On being entrusted with the cemetery key, I proceeded to the correct cemetery and was very pleased to see that it was well maintained and preserved. This was especially so since I recalled the contrast with the many cemeteries I had visited in Latvia and Lithuania. It was also moving to see a memorial in the cemetery with the dedication, in German, “to our brothers and sisters who perished in the years 1933 to 1945.”

A few weeks after my return to Toronto I was very pleased to receive a personal letter from Mr. Manfred Kesting of ITS thanking me for my visit and advising me that based on the information in my applications for my relatives given during my visit they checked the documentary material on hand and provided information of two members of my family who had been committed to the Stutthof Concentration Camp in Riga and another who had been in the DP Camp Bergen-Belsen and attached 20 enclosures from their records.

The visit to Bad Arolsen was memorable and a very important experience on my journey of genealogical discovery.

All the best and with SIG’s greetings.

Henry Blumberg.
Co - President, Latvia SIG
henry@blumbergs.ca
www.blumberg.ca

Editor’s Comments

Many of us have read about the International Tracing Service and seen presentations about it at previous IAJGS conferences or seen programs about it on television. And now we can read about it in Henry’s first-hand account of his visit to Bad Arolsen. I hope we hear more about what he learned there and I am sure his trip will motivate others to go there.

The status of the Green Synagogue in Rezekne is of concern to many of our members and I am happy to include some new information in this issue. Perhaps some of you have also received an e-mail from Sigmund Hertzberg noting his interest in restoring the synagogue. If so, please respond to him as it is important for both the Norwegian and Latvian restoration groups to know that others are interested in the project as well.

Since this will be the last issue of the newsletter before the IAJGS conference, I am including some more detail about planned SIG activities at the conference. We expect a large turnout of SIG members at the SIG venues and if you haven’t registered yet, please do so as soon as possible.

Based on some positive feedback I have received, I am continuing to provide material from websites of interest to the membership. I highly recommend that you access these websites yourselves since they contain much more information than I can glean from them for the newsletter.

Finally, I am happy to include the third and last installment of the English translation of the book,
**New Life to the Green Synagogue of Rezekne?**

*Editor’s Note:*

Much has been written in this newsletter about the Green Synagogue in Rezekne and the desire to restore it. Dave Michaelson was a key voice in trying to mobilize efforts and attract sponsorship for the restoration. Because of Dave’s efforts, architectural plans and drawings were completed but progress seemed to have ceased some years ago.

In the September 2007 issue of the SIG newsletter, I wrote that I contacted Gita Umanovska, who is Vice Director of the Council of Jewish Communities and Religious Organizations, based in Riga and she stated that the Rezekne Art Secondary School together with the Latvian Jewish community had begun a project entitled, “Learning by doing – development of timber restoration in the Latgale region.” The project is funded by a European Union Norwegian financial agreement and the Latvian government, and is estimated to cost approximately 620,000 Euros. The project was scheduled for 18 months beginning in August 2008 and ending in February 2010. According to Gita, one goal of the project is to teach restoration techniques by actually restoring the synagogue. After the restoration, she says, the synagogue can be used for important holidays and function as a museum at other times.

Just recently, I received an e-mail from Sigmund Hertzberg, International coordinator for the Blakstad upper secondary vocational school in Norway. He is interested in restoring the Green Synagogue in Rezekne and Norway has provided a special grant to Latvia for restoring heritage sites. The Blakstad school specializes in restoring wooden buildings.

Mr. Hertzberg will be travelling to Latvia this month and will be in Rezekne and Riga. He will attend a seminar with several partners, including members of the Rezekne municipality, the Jewish council in Riga, the Luznava professional school, the Viesite vocational school, the Rezekne art school and the Blakstad upper secondary vocational school. They hope to complete an applica-

---

**Latvia SIG at the IAJGS Conference**

On Sunday, 11 July we plan to have a table at the Market Square Fair, which begins at 2:00 PM and ends at 4:00 PM. The last few conferences have not had such a fair, so it should be lots of fun.

Tuesday, July 13, 2010 will be Latvia SIG day at the IAJGS conference. Four venues with non-overlapping time lines will allow us to participate and attend all the Latvia activities. Martha Lev-Zion, a SIG past president will present, *Documenting a Murdered Community: Goldingen (Kuldiga, Latvia)* at 10:45 AM at the general session. The Latvia SIG luncheon follows from 12:15 PM until 1:45 PM, where Bruce Dumes will talk about his second visit to Vishki. From 1:50 PM until 3:00 PM we will hold the Latvia SIG annual meeting, where the business meeting will be followed by Christine Usdin discussing her trips to Latvia and the motivation for the incredible work she has done in transliterating the birth, marriage and death records for most of the shtetls of Latvia. Arlene Beare, also a past president, will then update the membership on the Dvinsk Database project. From 3:15 PM to 4 PM, Christine will give a more formal presentation of her work at the general session.

Following is a rough agenda for the business meeting. Status reports for projects, membership, treasury, newsletter, and website will be presented. Nominations for SIG officers will be accepted and a general election will be held. As usual, all board positions are open and we welcome nominations for those positions from the membership.

**Dankere** by H. Ehrlich. 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 at: [http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/](http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/) if you haven’t done so already.

Barry Shay
bbshay@stapower.net
tion for the Norwegian EEA at the seminar. Gita Umanovska as well as a representative from the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Latvia will also participate in the seminar.

Dave Michaelson also received an e-mail from Mr. Hertzberg and, in response, sent the following to those who expressed interest in the Green Synagogue in the past.

**Dave Michaelson’s Note:**

It has been a very long time since I was focused on this project. I had succeeded in getting a site survey done and this led to some Norwegian (I think) money going to do some emergency repairs to the Green Synagogue of Rezekne. As far as I know, that is where things stand. It would already be an improvement since prior to these efforts the building was actively deteriorating. It should at least be stabilized by now.

However, since then I have lost my contacts in Latvia (many moved on and didn't connect me with their replacements) and lost my own initiative in pushing this project. I have a family and a job and other projects, so the Green Synagogue got pushed aside except for some blogging I have always done about the project.

I should note that during the same period where I lost contact with the project, Latvia has suffered a horrible economic decline, which I have felt bad about but have been unable to do anything to help. Not surprisingly, as the economy in Latvia declined, some degree of right wing extremism has grown and with it what seems to be some denial of any Latvian role in the Holocaust. I see this as a typical reaction to poor economic conditions and hope it isn't a permanent change.

The blogging I have done on the Green Synagogue may now lead to the next phase in this project. One of my blog entries has gotten the attention of a Norwegian vocational school. This is the message I received through that blog:

*I represent a vocational school in Norway: Blakstad upper secondary vocational school. We are interested restoration of the Green Synagogue in Rezekne. Norway has a lot of grants to Latvia, and some are to preserve heritage. We are in co-operation with three vocational schools in Rezekne region, Rezekne municipality, Jewish council in Riga and the Norwegian embassy in Riga.

I am planning a meeting in May with our partners in Latvia in Riga in May because of the application to Norwegian embassy.

I need to know your interest.

I have written him back expressing my interest, but don't know at present what I can do to help. I have lost my Latvian connections and have let my connections with you, my American audience on this project, lapse as well. So I promised to see what interest I could arouse, while also asking this Norwegian connection what help they need. I suspect funding will come up and I am not a professional fundraiser. In fact, even in my own scientific field I chose to leave that aspect of my work to a boss rather than become my own boss. So I am trying to reconnect with both my Latvian and American/Israeli connections to try and restart this project. Truth is in the grand scheme of things it wouldn't take a great deal to restore the Green Synagogue. It would take somewhat more, but not an impossible effort, to establish a long term method of supporting the Green Synagogue as either a Jewish center and/or a museum of tolerance. But I am a scientist, not a fundraiser or project manager. So I feel there is little more I can do here except keep nudging people and keep trying to make connections that will ultimately save the Green Synagogue.

I am waiting to hear from this new Norwegian connection as to what they need, but it would be great if I could offer concrete help from any of you when he gets back to me. Are you all still interested in this project? What help can we give this Norwegian vocational school that will help the Green synagogue? I am always interested in helping but have always, even when I have been successful in moving this forward, felt I have done little more than bring together those who are actually effective in this kind of thing and they were the ones who did the hard work.

Please let me know your thoughts, your interest and your messages both to any Latvian connec-
ections I can resurrect and to the Norwegians who have contacted me.

Sincerely,
David Michaelson
mole333@hotmail.com

Rumbula’s Echo
Extraordinary new content for the film has been located in three categories. In the first category are three survivors with extremely important stories about Rumbula, all of whom have consented to interviews. In the second category are both a rescuer, and rescued survivors, who can tell the stories of righteous Christians in the film from a compelling, personal perspective. In the third category are unusual archival materials from private and family collections including rare prewar photos, a telling post-war letter from a mass murderer active in Latvia, relevant architectural drawings and important music and poetry from the period.

Rumbula's Echo has a reciprocal working relationship with a Holocaust researcher who is currently working in Germany on war crimes trials. While doing so, he located a cache of photos of the Holocaust in Latvia for Rumbula's Echo. Some photos are familiar to the film, while others appear to be new finds. The Holocaust researcher is ordering copies on behalf of Rumbula's Echo, and these new photos should prove valuable to the movie.

The movie's special advisor, Margers Vestermanis, and its researcher in Riga, Lina Ferber, located a detailed bystander account of the November 30 forced march to Rumbula forest. They are now investigating whether the witness is available for an interview. In 2001 this retired teacher wrote the following vivid memories of November 30, 1941.

In this morning, German uniformed soldiers on Kalna Street took away very many Jews from the Ghetto. The march was messy, but there was no possibility to run away... I saw that near the tram depot one old man had fallen down - and soldiers shot the man, brutally and cynically... The march ended in the forest behind the train station "Skirotava." About what happened in the forest - those of us who worked in P. Kuz's gardening - learned from Eizhens Karklins - he - he was one of the riders who guarded the Jews on the way to the execution place. He was very shocked about what he saw in this forest. There was excavated a trench, which was as deep as a tomb. People were ordered to remove jewelry, shoes, outerwear, and Germans forced Jews to climb in this trench, to stand facing the ends of the pit and Germans shot them; and then climbed in the next group.

Please go to: http://www.rumbulasecho.org/news.shtml for additional information about Rumbula’s Echo.

Shamir Updates
Riga Ghetto Museum
The exposition will be arranged both on two floors of the building (the second one will be built from light materials, so that not to destroy the historical composition of the district) and also in the yard. The courtyard will be piched with block-stones from the central street of the Riga Ghetto - the Ludzas Street. Visitors will get to the courtyard through the wagon in which the Jews were brought to Riga from Western Europe – not the cattle wagon, but the passenger and comfortable one, because passengers as though were carried not to be killed, but to live and to work.
The house from the Ghetto area will be moved to the courtyard that will be covered with a transparent roof. Visitors could get acquainted with life of the inhabitants of the Ghetto. The furnishing of the house will be based on the memoirs of survivors of the Ghetto – E. Rivosh, A. Bergman, G. Friedman and others. The exposition that will be placed in the courtyard will reproduce the atmosphere of that time.

The artifacts from the life of the Ghetto and the multimedia devices through which a visitor will get a full picture of the life and history of the Riga Ghetto will be arranged in the rooms of the museum.

Due to the fact that the society “Shamir” is being engaged in research of the history of Jews in Latvia for many years, museum visitors will have access to various databases, e.g. children who were killed in the territory of Latvia, Jews, who survived during the Holocaust and who lived in Latvia after the war, the Ghetto house registers and others.

Rooms for seminars, a library and a hall for cultural activities will be located on the second floor of the museum. Authors will organize educational and cultural activities, seminars, concerts, as well as the basic exposition of the museum.

It is impossible to implement such project without international support. The society “Shamir” will seek the support in international funds and private donors. The concept of the exposition will be made with the help of leading museums and researching centers worldwide. But one of the sources of the exhibits may be descendants of the Latvian Jews, who are living all over the world now.

George Lansmanis, an adviser of the vice-mayor of Riga, made the first contribution to the Riga Ghetto Museum exhibition. He gifted the precious relic of his family – the album of his grandfather, who was being hidden from Nazis by grandmother and mother of George in Miera Street 40 from the 1st July 1941 to October 1944.

Nazis lived on the second and third floors of the building - recalled Lansmanis. – Maybe that is why no one thought to look for Jews at this address...

Jewish Encyclopedia of Latvia

Currently there are about 5,000 entries in the glossary of the Jewish Encyclopedia of Latvia. There are cantors and doctors, shoemakers and scientists, rabbis and robbers, teachers and soldiers among them. Each of them was a part of Latvian Jewish community and their lives are of interest to their descendants. Please note that an index is now available in the English at:


As part of the encyclopedia project, Shamir has started publishing family stories of Latvian Jews who left Latvia some time ago. Some of the stories have been provided by Latvia SIG members, and I encourage all members to consider submitting their own stories. Please go to:

http://www.shamir.lv/en/menu/30-family_stories.html to see some of those stories.

Shamir has also made available on-line the beginnings of the encyclopedia in electronic format. For a preview of what is anticipated, got to:


Shamir continues to solicit information about your parents, yourself as well as the Jews whose biographies are tied to Latvia and who, in your opinion, deserve to be included in this publication. They would be very grateful to you for any graphic and documentary materials related to the life of Latvian Jews.

Please visit the website: http://www.shamir.lv/en for more information concerning contributing historical information as well as financial support or contact Rabbi Menachem Barkahan, shamir@apollo.lv.

Lo Tishkach Foundation

Key projects in Latvia and Lithuania will see groups of young people spread out across the Baltic States during 2010 in a vast enterprise to survey all the cemeteries and mass graves in this
area. Over 600 individual sites will be visited, surveyed and photographed backed up by top-level educational seminars encouraging participants to reflect on the area’s rich Jewish heritage and the lessons of the Holocaust.

The surveys will include comprehensive data on the geographical locations of the sites and their current physical condition as well as extensive photographs of the sites and their general area. Particular attention will be paid to the need to physically mark all of these sites as well as to ensure their clear demarcation and, where needed, fencing. A report will be submitted on every site detailing the necessary work and appraising the projected expenditure.

Current data on cemeteries and mass grave sites in the Baltic States made available to Lo Tishkach identifies some 200 mass graves sites in each of Latvia and Lithuania with about 20 in Estonia. At least another 250 cemeteries have been identified across the region. For more information about the project to save mass graves in the Baltic countries go to:


The following account typifies the wonderful research that Lo Tishkach is engaged in.

**RIGA BIKERNIEKI MASS GRAVES**

Biķernieku iela, Riga, Latvia

Lo Tishkach ID: 10896

Alternative/Former City Names: Rīga (Latvian), Riia (Estonian), Riika (Finnish), Ryga (Lithuanian), Ryga (Polish), Riga (Russian)

**Mass Grave Date:** 1942 – 1944

**Location & Demarcation:** Two separate areas containing a total of 55 known mass graves are located to both sides of Biķernieku iela, between Gunāra Astras iela/Lielvārdes iela in the west and Strautu iela/Sergeja Eizenšteina iela in the east. Both sites are located off the road inside the forest; on Biķernieku iela, stone tablets indicate their exact location. Individual mass graves are demarcated with concrete slabs. The sites are loosely demarcated with concrete memorial posts.

**Memorial Markers & Structures:** In addition to the memorial posts present in both mass grave areas, a memorial is located at the site south of Biķernieku iela. At its centre stands a black granite cube, surrounded by thousands of granite stones. Plaques loosely distributed around the memorial show the names of European cities from where Jews were deported to be killed in the Biķernieki Forest. Between 1941 and 1944, 35,000 Jews from Latvia and other European countries as well as Soviet prisoners of war and political prisoners were killed at the biggest Holocaust mass killing and burial site in Latvia.

**History of the Jewish Community:** According to records, 1536 was the first year of temporary presence of Jewish merchants in the city. During most of the 17th century, Jewish merchants were confined to stay at special inns (Judenherberge) located outside the city walls. Restrictions on Jewish settlement continued when Riga became part of the Russian Empire in 1721. The first permanent resident permits were granted to some of the city’s Jews in 1841. Ten years later, the rulers authorised the construction of a synagogue. By 1881, the number of Jews living in Riga had risen...
to 14,222, i.e. 8.4 per cent of the city’s total population. As elsewhere in the Russian Empire, Jews suffered severely from the 1881-82 pogroms, and many were killed or forced to leave Riga. Latvian independence between the two World Wars saw both the emancipation of Latvian Jews and an increase in political anti-Semitism. Shortly after their invasion of Latvia in June 1941, the Germans established a ghetto in Riga, whose 25,000 inhabitants were killed in mass shootings in November and December 1942. Until 1944, Jews from other European countries were deported to Riga and killed there. After the war, 3,000 Jews returned to Latvia. Following decades of heavy restrictions on religious and cultural activities under Soviet rule, the community was re-established in 1988. Today, it has 8,000 members.

DANKERE

Types and episodes in a
Latvian town sixty years ago
by
H. Ehrlich

Part 3

"Kayor" Publishing House
Johannesburg, South Africa
1956

Published under the auspices of the
Jewish Cultural Federation of South Africa
A Peasant Exercises Evil Eyes

The formula for averting the evil eye is comparable to the shir-
ha-ma'amos chanted at the bedside of a woman in labor. Both formulas served
the same purpose: To drive away the "evil spirits" from the patients. The
method was as follows: When a child became sick, the mother took a scarf
and brought it to a pious Jew. The Jew took it in hand, chanted certain
mysterious words, and then returned the scarf to the mother. The mother
wrapped the scarf around the child's neck, murmuring: "May this be the cure
for you."

This charm, however, was not always effective and other methods had to
be sought.

A rumor once spread around town that there was a peasant in a nearby
village who performed wondrous deeds: Exorcised evil eyes, drove away
toothaches, headaches and other pains, and the point is -- that it helped.
Instead of going to the Jew to drive out the evil eye, the townspeople started
to go to the peasant. The first thing he did was to instruct the patient to look
depth into his eyes. Then he started to move both hands back and forth several
times over the patient's face, and it didn't take long before the sick one began
to feel better. Understandably, no miracle occurred. The peasant apparently
possessed hypnotic powers of which he himself was not aware.

When the Jews started to go to the peasant to have him drive away the
evil eye, it created a stir in town. How come! Exchange a Jew for a peasant?
A desecration of the Name! They consulted the rabbi on this matter. The
rabbi, it appears, was powerless to do anything about it, because when
dealing with a sick person, the patient is the boss. Not only did the sick
Jews go to the peasant's house, they even started to bring the peasant into
their homes. Little by little the furor subsided.

After a short time the peasant died, and many mourning townspeople
attended his funeral...
Hermann the Barber-Surgeon

There was not always a doctor in town, not because people didn’t become ill; on the contrary, there were many sick people. Then why? The average Jew could not permit himself the luxury of calling a doctor and paying 50 kopeks for the visit. Instead they called Hermann the druggist whose fee was only 10 kopeks. How much the druggist knew about medicine is hard to say, but his diagnosis was very professorial. He did not put much stock in cupping and in Spanish flies. “This is wild and barbaric,” he used to say. Instead he strongly believed in enemas. When he was called to a seriously sick person and realized that he could not do anything to help, he reflected and said: “Well, yes, this is God’s will” and left.

He was an assimilated Austrian Jew. I don’t know how he landed in to our town. He held himself and looked down on everybody. His wife was also like that, a half-German who did not relate to any one and led a personally isolated life.

Something happened that completely turned his life around. His father died. From then on he suddenly became a different person. First of all, he began attending synagogue three times a day to say Kaddish. Not only did he say Kaddish for the first year, but he continued to say Kaddish for a long time.

Secondly, he suddenly turned friendly towards everybody. He greeted everyone with a pleasant ‘good day’, a cheery ‘adieu’ and a ‘how are you?’. He was not at all the same person. His wife yelled at him, preached and even joked: “Hermann, you have become too good a Jew. You’ll yet become a rabbi...” Hermann, however, did not pay attention to his wife. His piety went so far, that when he entered a sick man’s house he first kissed the mezuzah...
Perets the Gravedigger

There was not a Jew in town who did not know Perets. First of all, you would always see him pushing a small wagon of wet hides from the slaughterhouse to the tannery. Secondly, he had a street stand with children's sweets, such as ginger, poppy tarts, honey cakes, dry chick peas and other trifles. Thirdly, you could see him at every funeral carrying a charity box and saying a prayer for the dead. It was an odd thing about Péret. He himself was a poor man, but he didn't think much of poor people. At a poor man's funeral he would recite the prayer hastily -- as though he were egged on from behind ... and he would think to himself: "Oh, you beggar, whoever asked you to be born, and do you think that without you, we couldn't get on with our business here"? ...

But, when a rich man died, Perets adopted an entirely different tune. He walked slowly, deliberately, step by step, stroking his matted beard and in a sweet, sorrowful voice intoned very slowly... "Righteousness will walk before him and guide his steps"... "Righteousness will walk before him and guide his steps"... This could be interpreted to mean: "Too bad that he has departed this life. Even though he was a pig of a Jew, nevertheless one could at one time or another wring a kerbel from him."

Perets lived in a little house that looked as though it would collapse at any moment. On one wall there stood a cupboard that held the board on which dead bodies were laid for cleansing before burial; children were frightened to walk past this wall, for fear that a corpse would suddenly jump out and start choking them.

Notwithstanding the fact that Perets dealt mostly with the dead, he nevertheless had a keen sense of humor. His witticisms were well known. I relate some of them here.
One winter evening the members of the Burial Society imbibed one too many glasses of whiskey and were too lazy to go to the cemetery to bury a dead man. (The cemetery was situated a few versts from the town). Perets yelled at them: "You lazy bums, here you are drinking whiskey, and meanwhile the corpse is freezing..."

At other times he would say: "Such tramps! It's not enough that they get sick, they also have to die..."

When he was asked why he so berated a poor man, he answered: "Good riddance. He'll now know not to die again..."

When he came to pay a condolence call and beheld a relative crying bitterly, he comforted him by saying: "Why do you cry? Some day, God willing, you'll also die..."

Those are, of course, not consoling words; but when they were uttered by Perets they somehow evoked a wry smile.

This was the crude Jew with the red matted beard, Perets the grave digger...
The Insolent Jew

The difference between rich and poor manifested itself in every aspect of life. In the synagogue, the poor man stood at the door. He was given a minor aliya, and at that, not too frequently. When he died, he was buried at the back of the cemetery. It is superfluous to add that he had no say in community affairs. Occasionally, however, a protest was evoked against the rich, albeit in a very minor manner.

The Burial Society included poor people as well as rich ones. Nevertheless, when it came to burying the dead, the well-to-do of the town, somehow, were never quite prepared and always left it to the cloggers and tailors, as though they were born for the task.

I recall a small incident. It happened that a Jew named Leybe Berezin died. He was a simple person, who could hardly chant a verse of psalms. Also, he was not much of a philanthropist, despite the fact that he was a well established proprietor of his own business and had a large house in the center of the city. He died on the first day of Shavuot, and burial had to be deferred till after the holiday. On the morning after the holiday the Burial Society came and started to make preparations for the funeral. Suddenly, a few elite townspeople came and announced to the Burial Society that they themselves would be responsible for this funeral. When, however, it came to the part where the corpse had to be cleansed, and the corpse, after the passage of a few days, did not emit too pleasant a smell, the fancy gentlemen started to hold their noses and began calling for the regulars to go cleanse the corpse. At this point one rather audacious member called out and loudly proclaimed: "Today's corpse is yours. When a poor man stinks, you are nowhere around. Now, you get your share of smells when a rich man stinks..."
The Tombstone Engraver

The only tombstone engraver in Dankera was a Jew named **Leyzer-Leybe Bond**. He walked shakily, as though on springs, his head a little on the side. He had such eyes that you imagined they would momentarily spring out of his head and run off somewhere.

As he chiseled away on the tombstones he gradually developed critical thoughts about God, about life and death, about hell and paradise and about the world order in general. Although he was very wary about talking about this, the town knew that Leyzer-Leybe was slightly 'touched', but no one bothered him.

He lived not too far from us. I remember, as a child, watching the way he bent over a tombstone and, with small chiseling motions rapping and rapping till some weird letters were deciphered, letters reminiscent of death. Once I even dreamt that Leyzer-Leybe was engraving a stone just for me. I never went there again. And when I saw him walking in the street, I kept thinking that this is not a person walking, but a living tombstone.

Leyzer-Leybe was always absorbed in thought, as though he were seeking to solve the world's problems. It happened that one day he engraved an incorrect inscription: "A man, simple and honest, Mr. Hinda Leah, daughter of Reb Yochanan, who has gone to her eternal rest"...

As can be imagined, people began to investigate the cause for this. Many said that it came to this, because he was too preoccupied with his philosophical thoughts. Others interpreted it to mean that Satan played a trick on him... That stone stood orphaned, alone. From that time on Leyzer-Leybe no longer engraved tombstones; he occupied himself with painting signs for the town's shopkeepers.
Shaye the Bookseller

Twice a year Shaye the Book-Seller would come around to Dankere with a sack of books on his back. He had a large humpback, a red turned up nose and bulging eyes, and from a distance he looked like a camel. He was the provider of little storybooks for the town. The biggest demand was for Shemer’s novels. Shemer’s novels were read by young and old alike. Even the old grandmother was not ashamed to sit and listen to a Shemer novel. The storybooks about princes and princesses were very evidently a welcome break in the small town life. It is therefore no wonder that his storybooks won such great success.

In addition to Shemer he had also storybooks about Good Jews who performed wondrous deeds, such as curing cripples, returning sight to the blind and other such miracles. A very popular story was the one of the yeshiva student who let himself be seduced by Lilith, and they found him much later somewhere in a field, demented, riding on a broomstick.

Another popular story was the one about the dragons and the pythons — how a python swallowed a person, and when the python was killed, the man was still alive.

The third category consisted of morality books, read mostly by adults, particularly women. In these books the Gehenna was described in minute detail; bad people frying in boiling cauldrons of pitch, with dancing Satan looking on gleefully. You could hear the screams of the wicked ones and sense the smell of the tar... There was also the story of someone who spoke slander; the demons would tear out his tongue and repeatedly put it back all day and all night, every day, except on the Sabbath...

A strong moral lesson was the story in which a woman did not cover her hair after she married; Lilith stood there and pulled out the woman’s hair. These morality books made such an impact that many women read them as
religiously as they read their *techinos* and shed many a tear.

As a very young boy I read the little story books and read everything that I could lay my hands on. When Shaya the Bookseller showed up in town, it was quite a holiday for me. By various means I could somehow extort these books from him without paying a groschen. I spent many a sleepless night reading all these foolish stories, many of which I remember to this day...
The Teacher

Even though he, like everyone else, had a name, he was never called by it, but was simply spoken of as 'The Teacher.' He was small and slender, had a large, hooked nose and watery eyes like a chicken's. Winter and summer he had a scarf rung around his neck -- because, he used to say -- when he was young he had tonsillitis, and at that time the doctor had told him to always wear a scarf around his throat...

He occupied himself with teaching. That meant that he taught boys and girls to read Yiddish. He called it "Giving hours." He used to walk around in the street with a paper tablet under his arm. Over one ear he had a pencil, and over the other, a quill. He was particularly pleased when a pupil addressed him as Herr Lehrer [Sir Teacher]. In order to evoke more respect he sewed brass buttons on his coat and a cockade on his hat so that he give the appearance of a Russian teacher...

In addition to teaching, he occupied himself with writing letters for bride and groom and love letters for young men and women. He was always sunk in thought, so he always had a paper tablet handy. During the long winter nights he would be invited to come to many homes to read aloud a Shemerg novel. The problem was, however, that he himself was mawkishly sentimental, and when the story came to a tragic point in the hero's life, The Teacher would burst into tears; seeing him like this, the listeners, too, followed suit.

Today all this would sound simple and naive, but to know how to read and write Yiddish in those days was a great accomplishment, and The Teacher, no doubt, fulfilled a great need. When the workers' movement began to be felt on Jewish streets, there was a more or less ready element that could understand the message.
Yudel the Wagon Driver

When Yudel the driver had to take a passenger to the train, he had to leave one hour earlier than any other wagon driver in town. The reason for this was his horse, who not only was unable to run fast but could barely stand on its feet. Also, since Yudel was a very poor man, the few groschen that he did earn he needed to support himself, and the horse had to go hungry. He had a long whip with which he constantly lashed the horse to the accompaniment of a volley of curses; the horse, hungry and body covered with wounds, had to pull the wagon with its last bit of strength.

A few people in town could no longer witness the cruel treatment of the horse and went to the rabbi to bemoan Yudel the Driver who was beating the animal to death.

The rabbi summoned Yudel to come and reasoned with him: "How come, Yudel? How can you do that? It's really a pity for living things. You have an animal and are practically beating it to death."

"Rabbi," Yudel said and began defending himself. "I have a wife and six children and barely make a living. I am a very poor man who must live, and there simply is not enough money to go around for me and the horse. And for whom, Rabbi, is it more important, for me or the horse?"

The rabbi listened attentively, thought and thought, put the tip of his beard into his mouth and in a very sympathetic tone declared: "You are right, Yudel, but you forget that the horse is a living being and also has to eat. If God forbid, the horse should expire from hunger, the horse could bring you to judgment, and it would be just and right for the horse to win."

Upon hearing the rabbi's words, Yudel burst into tears like a child. "No, Rabbi, from now on I will deprive myself, my wife and children, and will feed the horse."
Yudel, however, did not keep his promise. The horse fainted from hunger and was never revived. Yudel was left without a horse, but -- with a great fear in his heart. And wherever he went, he always imagined that the horse was calling him to judgment...
Leyzer the Tanner

He was a tanner all his life. He was up at dawn and worked late into the night, dragging the raw hides from pond to pond. He looked like a living corpse: Eyes, deep in his head so that only the holes were visible; protruding cheekbones, twisted hands, bowed back and sunken chest. Thus, in such manner, Leyzer worked and groaned, groaned and worked till the last day of his life.

He lived, so to speak, somewhere in a house, near the door. All he owned was a broken cot propped up with bricks. Even though he had six children, they were also very poor and could in no way help their old, sick father.

When he began to feel that he could not lift his hands, that his feet were not serving him and that he couldn't catch his breath, he began to envision that his last hours had come. He called for the representative of the Burial Society and asked him to bring the Ma'avor Yabbok. He wanted to confess his sins.

With trembling voice he started repeating word for word: "We have sinned... we have deceived... we have robbed..." and at this point he stopped abruptly. A wan smile broke out on his emaciated face. "No!" he groaned. He had never robbed anyone... never taken anything from anybody... worked hard all his life... No, he doesn't want to confess his sins...

Upon hearing such words, the Burial Society representative grew very frightened. He thought that Leyzer the Tanner had suddenly become insane. In all the time that the representative had recited confessional prayers with sick people, he had never encountered anything like this. He grabbed the prayer book and fled.

A short while after that, Leyzer the Tanner died. He died not on his cot, but in the cannery, in a corner, without confession...
Avrum Leybe the Cobbler

He went about with shaggy hair and matted beard. He had a waistcoat which he wore only on holidays and bore stains of mead, wine, whiskey, pudding stew, dumplings, beets and other foodstuffs. He did not much approve of washing himself. What was the use of washing, he would claim, if he was only going to get dirty again. He did not work in town, but in a courtyard in Livland, 15 versts from town. He would leave Sunday morning and return Friday evening. He was not much of a craftsman, but he had a feeling for higher things, like fixing things. For example, Avrum Leybe could suddenly become a clock-maker. He could take apart a wall clock, then put it together again, and the clock was good as new.

It so happened that in the court where he worked a German came riding in on a wheel (a velocipede), and that bewitched Avrum-Leyb. He put aside his awl and stood and looked to see how the wheel was made. Oh! If he had such a wheel he wouldn't have to journey such a long way on foot. He then had an idea that he would try making such a wheel himself. From what? Yes, he would make it out of wood, a wooden wheel. And Avrum Leybe went to work, being transformed from a cobbler to an engineer. After a long period of thought and study, he built a velocipede. Except for the iron rims, it was made all of wood. When he came riding into town, everybody ran out, curious to see him sitting and riding on the wheel...

He was a bizarre person. He liked to play with toys, like a child. When Purim rolled around he made such a large gragger that it was enough to deafen ten Haman-heads. The synagogue officials would chastise him: "Peh, Avrum-Leybe, why all this foolishness; you're no longer a child..." He, however, continued to go his merry way, each year creating a new gragger, each year an increasingly larger one.
On Tisha b'Av, when in the synagogue congregants sit on the floor, candle in hand, and recite kingo, he came with a full sack of sticky pine burrs and threw them at the bearded Jews.

On Simchas Torah in the synagogue, he carried a specially decorated flag borne on a long stick, the head made from carrots embellished like a menorah with lit candles. It stood out very prominently.

This was Avrum Leyb the Cobbler. A mature adult who enjoyed playing like a child.
Mikal the Tailor

Mikal the Tailor was also known as Mikal the Slowpoke. He justly earned the nickname. This was a person who walked slowly, spoke slowly, worked slowly and even slept slowly... He also had the habit of dozing off while he was working. It was his wife who had the greatest problem with him. She was constantly having to wake him up. "Mikal, Mikal, you're sleeping again?" Mikal would get up with a start, lift his head, glance at his wife and promptly fall asleep again. He had the reputation of being a great craftsmen. When Mikal sewed on a button -- and the garment was already completely worn out -- the button held fast.

In addition to tailoring, Mikal also occupied himself with barbering and cupping at the bath house on Fridays. And just as he was slow-motioned at tailoring, he was equally so when he gave haircuts. One day Mikal was about to give the town's rabbi a haircut. As was his habit, he started to cut and then caught a nap, roused himself and continued cutting. The rabbi evidently, while sitting thus also dozed off. Suddenly, he awoke with a start and exclaimed: "Oh, woe is me. I'm missing a peye! Mikal!" he called out struck with fear, "What have you done! You've gone and cut off a peye!"

Mikal just stood there confused and didn't know what to do. If he could perhaps take off one of his own side curls and paste it on the rabbi for as long a time it would take for a new one to grow back, he would gladly do it. "Rabbi," he said in desperation, "Maybe paste on this peye till another one grows in?" ...

The rabbi went about for a long time with only one peye. If the rabbi was to be pitied, it was even a greater pity on Mikal. He almost went crazy with grief. From that time on he stopped giving haircuts to adults and started giving haircuts to children. Till it happened again, that while catching a nap he cut off a child's ear. At that point de decided to give up barbering and remained with tailoring and cupping...
Glossary

ALIYAH: Call to read a portion from the Torah.
BIKUR-HOLIM: Society for visiting the sick.
DIBBUK: An evil spirit or soul of a dead person residing in the body of a living individual which can be expelled only by magic means.
GROGGER: Purim noise-maker used when Haman's name is mentioned.
HACHNOSES-KALLAH: Community support of poor brides.
HAMOTSEY-KALLAH: Blessing said over bread.
HASID: Adherent of an Eastern European movement; (pl.) Hasidim.
KINOS: Book of Lamentations recited on Tisha b'Av.
KVITEL: Written request presented to a hasidic rebbe.
MA'AVAR YABBOK: A collection of death-bed prayers, confessions, etc.
MALBESH-ARUMIM: Society for clothing the poor.
MEGILLAH: The scroll of the Book of Esther read on Purim.
MELAMED: Teacher of children in a heder.
MISNAGID: Opponents of Hasidism; (pl.) Misnagdim.
PEYE: Side curl.
PUSHKE: Alms box.
REB: Mister; traditional title prefixed to man's first name.
REBBE: Leader of Hassidic sect; also synonym of melamed.
SHALACH-MONES: Presents exchanged on Purim.
SHAVUOS: Pentecost; gathering of first fruits; receipt of Torah.
SHIR HA-MA'ALOS: Song of Ascent; Psalms 120-134.
SHEMINI ATSERES: The eighth day of the Sukkos holiday.
SIMCHAS TORAH: Holiday on the day following Sukkos celebrating the completion of the year's reading cycle of the Torah.
TISHA B'AV: Ninth day of the month of Av commemorating the destruction of the first and second temples in Jerusalem.
TECHNINOS: Women's meditations and prayers.
TSITSIS: Tassels of undergarments worn by Orthodox Jews.
Membership Fees

This is the last issue for the current membership year, which ends on 30 June 2010. So, if you have not done so already, please renew your membership in the Latvia SIG for 2010/2011. Dues may be paid for multiple years. Yearly fees are US $25 for the US and Canada. If you live outside of North America (NA), the fee is $35 (bankable in the US) if you prefer hard copy (HC) versions of the newsletter and $25 if you prefer PDF versions via e-mail. If you wish to renew your membership for multiple years, the first year will be $25 ($35 for HC outside NA/$25 for PDF ) and $20 ($30 for HC outside NA/$20 for PDF) for each additional year. Please make checks payable to Latvia SIG and mail to:

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

You can also remit your payment through PayPal to: MikeGetz005@comcast.net. Directions for using PayPal can be found on the Latvia SIG website or follow the directions below:

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: MikeGetz005@comcast.net, 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 e-mail 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) and include Family Finder information.

Special Appeal

As always, the Latvia SIG is happy to accept additional payments to the SIG to help pay for expenses associated with projects and day-to-day activities, like testimony translations, reproduction and mailing costs, and database acquisitions. The SIG has now established two accounts on JewishGen to supplement the Latvia SIG general fund, also under JewishGen. Go to:


Donations to these accounts will be used to help fund the Dvinsk Census Project and the Speakers Bureau. Please note that you can also support these two worthy causes by contributing directly to the Latvia SIG as described above. Simply state which of the projects you wish to support along with your donation. For U.S. taxpayers, contributions to the SIG via JewishGen are tax deductible, whereas direct contributions to the SIG are not.
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 $25 (U.S. and Canada), $35 outside of North America for hard copy and $25 if you prefer PDF versions. Make checks payable to Latvia SIG and send to:

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

Enter contact information in FF: Yes ____ No____

Please circle newsletter preference: PDF  Hard Copy

Note: If you prefer to join or renew your membership for multiple years, please submit $25 ($35 HC outside NA/$25 PDF) for the first year, and $20 ($30 HC outside NA/$20 PDF) for each subsequent year.