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President’s Report

As I write this, I am sitting beside a gas-fired stove trying to keep warm, since our electricity has been out for the past two days and tomorrow I leave for Sweden to attend my mother-in-law’s funeral. Hopefully you’ll be reading this while I am on the plane to Sweden.

For the first time since I’ve been involved with the Latvia SIG, and thanks to Michael Eliastam, the SIG board participated in a conference call this past Sunday. Those who participated were, Michael Eliastam, Henry Blumberg, Mike Getz, Bruce Dumes, D. L. MacLaughlan, and myself. The primary reason for the call was to come to some understanding about the State of the SIG, and where we’d like to go in the future.

The number of paid members per year varies slightly from year to year and averages about 90, including U.S. and non-U.S. members. A question that always arises is how to grow the membership. Since 90 represents only about 10% of the number of people who subscribe to the Latvia SIG listserve, the potential exists to increase the membership roles significantly. Unlike some of the larger SIGs, we do not require donations to access databases and other resources acquired by the SIG. Although we do ask for donations, and we have been fortunate to get them from time to time, most of our income is derived from our very modest membership fees. One recurrent expense is the cost to reproduce and distribute the newsletter to our paid members. As of this date roughly half the membership desires the newsletter in hard copy and the other half as PDF attachments to an e-mail. While we don’t plan to eliminate hard copy versions of the newsletter, we would like to reduce the number that we produce.

Mike Eliastam will contact those of you who receive hard copy editions to get some idea of the demand for continuing that option.

As you know, we upload newsletters to the SIG website about one year after the original publication. Of course paid members receive the newsletters as soon as they are published. Perhaps with better advertising, more potential members will become aware of this and will opt to become a dues-paying member.

The editor has informed me that he has now digitized and uploaded nineteen previous newsletters to the Latvia SIG website. We now have an almost complete set of newsletters from January 1996 until October 2009 on the website and each is completely searchable and accessible. Go to: http://www.jewishgen.org/Latvia/SIG_Newsletter.html.

A very popular feature of the newsletter are the testimonies of Latvian Jewish Holocaust survivors. The original interviews were conducted in the 1999-2001 time frame in Riga thanks to the sponsorship of Arlene Beare and the Latvia SIG. A total of thirty interviews were conducted and the SIG has the audio and written transcripts of all of them. The original transcripts are in Russian and the SIG has been slowly translating them as translators become available. As of this date, fourteen of the thirty have been translated and eleven of them have been published. Sixteen remain to be translated and the SIG budget for the remaining testimonies needs to be increased. Our translators have been paid volunteers, in the sense that the rates charged are very low. Even at current rates, however, translating the remaining sixteen would cost in the neighborhood of $4,000. Membership dues are insufficient to cover newsletter publication costs as well as translation costs, so we are asking that you consider donating an additional amount to the Latvia SIG to help pay for the translations.

As discussed in previous newsletters, Christine Usdin is doing an incredible job in transcribing the Raduraksti records and our ultimate goal is to upload the data to the JewishGen Latvia Database. Bruce Dumes will be determining the best procedure to do this, but we expect that volunteers will be needed to facilitate the transfer.

I am happy to announce that Mitchell Lieber has accepted the SIG’s invitation to speak at the Latv-
via SIG luncheon/meeting at the 2011 IAJGS conference in Washington, D.C. this coming summer. As most of you know, Mitchell is the creator/producer/director of *Rumbula’s Echo*, a documentary film about the events surrounding the massacre of the Jewish residents of Riga. He will discuss what motivated him to make the film and will describe events that occurred during production that revealed surprises about the Jewish community and their history in Latvia. Mitchell has also submitted a proposal to speak at the general session about how is own genealogical research led to the making of *Rumbula’s Echo*.

**Editor’s Comments**

As the president mentioned, Mitchell Lieber will be speaking about *Rumbula’s Echo* at the IAJGS Conference in Washington this summer and as I am compiling this issue of the newsletter the importance of Rumbula to Latvian Jewish genealogy and genealogists becomes apparent. Although this issue contains a diversity of articles, references to Rumbula appear in most of them and, unfortunately, Rumbula continues to elicit anti-Semitic actions by some Latvians even today. The heroic efforts of Janis Lipke that saved so many Jews in Latvia in 1942 still provokes hatred in Latvia as evidenced by the recent vandalism in Riga that is highlighted later in the newsletter.

While in Sweden this past fall, I received an email from Sven Sundman asking where would be a good place to publish his account of his trip to Latvia in search of his mother’s family and its history. I responded and asked where in Sweden he was, thinking I may be able to meet with him. It turns out that he was about 1,000 km north of where I was staying in southern Sweden so a meeting was out of the question.

Sven found me through the Latvia SIG website after seeing Rita Bogdanova’s, *Reminisces of Liepaja* on our site, and thought that if he could publish something similar about his search for his mother’s family in Aizpute, someone who could provide information about his family might see it and contact him. I sincerely hope that publishing his account in this newsletter fulfills his wish.

I’d like to thank my wife, Birgitta, for translating Sven’s article from its original Swedish.

For about two years I have been asking our vice president, Michael Eliastam, to write an account of his trip to Latvia and I am happy that he finally capitulated. I think you’ll agree that his article is interesting as well as provocative.

The testimony of Kalman Feyzus is a compelling story of a man who many would call a true hero. Sonia Kagna, who helped translate this testimony along with her husband Viktor Popow, was so taken with the testimony that she offered her own assessment of this remarkable man. Her account, in part, follows:

*Mr. Feyzus is a unique individual, very noble and fearless. He is a humble man, who talks mostly about the accomplishments of others. His public admiration and frequent visits to Janis Lipke were acts of courage, because the Holocaust and the mass killings of the Jews were forcefully silenced by the Soviet authorities at that time. Not only was Janis Lipke not recognized as a hero, but his pension was reduced after he received a monetary award from Israel. The Soviet take on it was that the real heroes of WW II were either soldiers or Communist partisans. A non-Communist who worked for the Germans and saved Jewish civilians categorically did not fit this profile. Janis Lipke was also shunned because of latent anti-Semitism at the time.*

*Mr. Feyzus displayed quiet courage by his active participation in the restoration of Rumbula, where over 25,000 Jews were killed in two days. Again, it was done by a group of enthusiasts without the government’s permission. Those young people openly opposed the Soviet authorities. Israel specifically recognized the individual contribution of Mr. Feyzus in the restoration of Rumbula and I believe that I have found his picture on the Rumbula website. From his account, I believe that the middle-aged athletically built man teaching the young people how to use the tools perfectly fits the way Mr. Feyzus described himself.*
IAJGS 2011 Conference


The JGSGW welcomes you to the capital of the United States for the 31st IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy. Presentations by renowned scholars, archivists and genealogists from around the world will be included in the conference program, now in preparation. Go to: http://dc2011.org/ for more information about the conference.

The conference will highlight region-focused lectures and workshop tracks on the Jews of the southern U.S., South America, Eastern Europe, and from around the world. DC2011 will include a film festival where documentary filmmakers will speak at screenings of their movies.

Complete details about fees for attending the conference, refund policies, and much more information can be found in the registration pages: http://dc2011.org/index.php/register/170-fees-summary

Register at Early Bird rates before February 1 for a chance to win a free, 5 night stay during the conference at the Grand Hyatt Washington.

Register for the full conference on line by April 30 for $275, or $175 for a companion. These fees are $65 less than on-site rates.
From May 1 to July 31, on-line fees increase to $310 and $210, respectively, which are $30 less than on-site rates!

On-site registration fees beginning August 13 are $340 and $240, respectively.

**Rumbula’s Echo Update**

*By Mitchell Lieber*

This is to update you on our documentary film's progress over the past four months, and to tell you about new activities underway and scheduled for 2011.

**October 2010 Filming in Latvia**

*Rumbula’s Echo* completed its 2010 Latvia shoot on October 29. This trip took us from our Chicago base to Riga, Daugavpils (Dvinsk) and Liepaja (Libau) in Latvia.

We were very fortunate to speak with a survivor who amazingly escaped the march to Rumbula and described it, and with an 89 year old who was among the 11 hidden in a secret bunker by Roberts and Johanna Seduls. We interviewed one of the Seduls' daughters, a young girl during the war, in front of the building with the secret hiding place. Latvia's last survivor of the Dvinsk Ghetto, aged 89, accompanied us to the fortress that was the Dvinsk Ghetto and to the former Gestapo headquarters where he was incarcerated.

These are just a few examples of what we filmed during the jam-packed trip. Interestingly, we learned about the availability of each of these wonderful survivors, and numerous others, after we began filming last year, and fit them into the schedule.

**Progress in Quantity and Quality**

*Rumbula's Echo* has completed "principal photography" (filming of main characters, main story, etc.). This relatively modest plan, designed to get the film off the ground, was for 30 interviews, and these have been completed. The plan specified 30 hours of footage, a goal which we exceeded with more than 55 hours for about the same budget.

Seasoned documentary filmmakers and others who have seen edited footage have remarked that *Rumbula's Echo* has very high production values. A major market PBS station and a producer's rep have provided extremely positive feedback about airing *Rumbula's Echo* nationwide on TV in the U.S.

**Editing has Begun - First Editing Grant Received in December**

A sample of excerpts from the film has been prepared for funders, and a grant was just received for three months of assistant editor Sarah Klein's time. Sarah is working with me to prepare an initial rough cut of the film. We are raising additional funds to keep this going, and to pay for other initial editing costs.

**Supplementary Photography Planned**

Supplementary photography will be performed during editing, as is often done, to fill in parts of the story that are still needed. Details about these plans will follow in a future newsletter.

**Harpers Magazine in November 2010**

The November issue of *Harpers Magazine* (pages 81-83) published archival photos from *Rumbula's Echo*, crediting the forthcoming film. The photos illustrated a review of Gal Beckerman's new book about the epic struggle to save Soviet Jewry. The photos from our film show young Jewish activists in the late 1960's marking the mass graves of 25,000 at Rumbula. These Sunday gatherings, under the KGB's watchful eye, became a birthplace of the Refusenik movement, as is seen in *Rumbula's Echo*.

**Looking Forward to 2011**

In addition to the major step forward of editing the film's rough cut, there are other exciting new developments afoot for 2011. I look forward to updating you about these and *Rumbula's Echo* in 2011.
Green Synagogue Update
By
David Michaelson

Although I have personally been unable to push the restoration of the Green Synagogue of Rezekne any further, my efforts have helped a Norwegian organization get involved and progress is now being made. Now it is highly likely, that real work will be done on the synagogue. I have passed the plans from the site survey that I got funded to the Norwegians and I hope that an existing set of plans from a local architect will help the Norwegian project.

Here is the latest, very encouraging, email from my Norwegian connection:

Hello again from Norway!

There has been a development in this project. Norwegian EEA grants to Latvia is about 70 mill EURO for 5 years. The Norwegian Embassy has pre-defined some projects in this matter, and the Green Synagogue is included. The final agreement will be signed in Oslo in January. We are 99% sure that we will get the grants.

Therefore, we are invited to a meeting in Rezekne in February with Rezekne city officials, three vocational schools in the Rezekne region, the Norwegian embassy in Riga, the Jewish council in Riga, and the cultural heritage authorities in Rezekne and Riga and some others. There we will decide the final application and talk about the project process.

We have at our school experts in restoration with wooden buildings and I am in contact with Norwegian authorities in cultural heritage.

Greetings from a cold Norway.

Sigmund

This is one of those cases where something you did years ago comes back in a good way. Sigmund Hertzberg, in Norway, read my blogging about my efforts back in 2003 to fund the site survey and latched onto it for one of his projects and he has been persistent in this through thick and thin. I strongly suspect that my initial efforts, picked up tenaciously by Sigmund, is the reason why the Green Synagogue is one of the pre-defined projects. Of course anything can happen. I never feel 99% confident of ANYTHING until it happens. And even then I am sometimes only 95% confident ; -). But it seems like there has been a tenuous but very real progression from the very first abortive efforts by the Jewish community of Rezekne to restore their synagogue, to my visit in 2003 when my guide was the head of the Jewish community of Rezekne, to the grant I got from the World Monuments Fund to determine what needed to be done to restore the synagogue. Thanks to an amazing person also descended from Rezekne Jews, my blogging about these efforts to that point, the Norwegian efforts that seem to have connected with my blogging, things seem to be moving is a direction to actually restore the synagogue.

We have all pushed this effort in our own small ways. And for me it isn't just the restoration of a synagogue my ancestors probably were married in and which was used to hold Jews on their way to their deaths in the Holocaust and where I stood myself in tears. For me this is both a personal and collective, "F**k YOU" to Hitler and the Nazis who did their best to kill off the Latvian Jews.

For everyone who has offered help, this seems to have taken on a life of its own thanks to the efforts of Norway. When I visited Rezekne I gave a donation to keep the Jewish community alive there. Since then I have lost touch with both the Jewish community (many of whom have moved to Riga at least for now) and with my connections in the local government of Rezekne. So even though there was a very brief time where I was the world's expert in this project, now good-hearted Norwegians probably know more and are better connected to get things done. So my best suggestion for those who want to help the surviving Jews of Latvia, may I recommend the Jewish Survivors of Latvia, [http://www.rumbula.org/support_jewish_latvia.shtml](http://www.rumbula.org/support_jewish_latvia.shtml), which, though focused on Riga, is an excellent organization that helps both the surviving Jews of Latvia as well as the elderly Latvians who are known to have helped Jews survive the Nazi and Latvian extermination of Jews. A donation to them could mean a lot to people who Hitler's legacy has driven to
desperation. A donation is another way to say "FU" to Hitler, his pitiful legacy, and to all Nazis still active.

I will keep you updated on the efforts to preserve the Green Synagogue of Rezekne where many of our ancestors probably worshiped.

**Editor's Note:** Just before going to press, I received an invitation to the seminar in Rezekne that Sigmund Hertzberg mentioned in his email. The seminar will take place on 15 February from 10:00 until 20:30 at the Rezekne City Council, Atribvosanas aleja 93. The seminar will begin with a visit to the Green Synagogue located at Kraslavas iela 5. Following the visit, the formal meeting will begin at 11:00 at the City Council. Representatives from Norway, including the headmaster of the Blakstad Vocational School, as well as Latvian representatives, including the lead architect for the project, Arturs Lapins will make presentations. The major goal of the seminar is to identify the responsibilities of all the parties involved in the reconstruction project, both Norwegian and Latvian. It is heartening to see that representatives of the city of Rezekne will be actively involved in the restoration of this long forgotten synagogue.

(To: www.blakstad.vgs.no for more information about the Norwegian vocational school that will be collaborating in the restoration.)

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**Shamir Update**

http://shamir.lv/en

**Shabbat in Daugavpils 5771**

For the first time in many years, an authentic traditional Shabbat, the sacred and festive day Jews celebrate every Saturday, took place in Daugavpils. Five young cantors from the Tel Aviv Cantorial Institute, under the skilled tutelage and artful direction of Naftali Hershtik, and guests from Riga performed. Shabbat begins at 19:00 on Friday and all day Saturday, prayers and Torah reading resounded in the synagogue while the young Israeli cantors performed folk melodies at meal and break times.

**Every Child Has a Name**

On September 3rd in Vermanes Park from 12:00 until 16:00, for the first time, an extraordinary and important memorial event occurred – the names of all the children killed during the Holocaust in Latvia were read aloud. During these years, approximately 16,000 Jewish children perished in Latvia. Our intention in reciting their names aloud is to return the children to this world and not allow them to be lost or forgotten. This event will become an annual one and will occur on the first Friday of September.

**Role of Jewish Minority in History**

The project Role of Jewish Minority in History and Development of the Region will be implemented in Daugavpils’ secondary school Nr. 10. Shamir organized a learning course in Jewish history and the Holocaust for 8th, 11th and 12th grade students. Pupils will be taught about Jewish history of the region and of the state and begin a home project, which can only be completed with visits to libraries and museums.

This project is a pilot and will be continued in other schools in Latvia.

Instruction will take place from November 2nd through the 23rd and then a conference will be organized in the school.

The project is financially supported by the Social Integration fund and Ministry of Justice of Latvia.
Opening ceremony of Riga Ghetto Museum

The Riga Ghetto Museum exposition was launched on September 21st, 2010 at Maskavas 14a (entrance from Krasta street). More than 70,000 local Jews and nearly 20,000 Jews deported from Western Europe were executed in Latvia in World War II. The Riga Ghetto Museum is located in the historical part of the city near the borders of the former ghetto. The Riga ghetto territory itself is unique in Europe in terms of the absence of any significant architectural changes within past 60 years.

Opening the first exposition should be is a significant step in the further development of the Riga Ghetto Museum. There are displays with the names of more than 70,000 Latvian Jews who faced the Holocaust at the museum area, which are covered by stones from the streets of the Riga Ghetto. The museum has also opened a photo exhibition dedicated to anti-Semitic propaganda, the Holocaust in Latvia, the resistance and the Righteous Among the Nations.

It is impossible to commemorate the Holocaust without considering the 450-year history of Latvian Jewry. Therefore, a part of the overall exposition is dedicated to the past that was lost by Latvia and world after the catastrophe.

The Riga Ghetto Museum is not just a museum. It will become the significant memento of the dreadful events that occurred in the history of Latvia and should never ever be repeated. The Museum will be a center of culture and education, a source of tolerance and mutual respect.

The Vice-mayor of Riga, ministers and public figures, diplomats and business men took part in the ceremony.

Riga Holocaust Monument Vandalized

A monument honoring a man who saved Jews during the Holocaust was vandalized in the capital of Latvia. The monument in Riga, honoring the late Janis Lipke and others who saved Jews from the Nazis, was spattered with paint. Latvian President Valdis Zatlers denounced the vandalism.

The vandalism comes a week after large swastikas were found painted on more than 100 gravestones in the Jewish cemetery in Riga. Latvia's President Valdis Zatlers condemned the attack on the Jewish cemetery in Riga, where unknown perpetrators had painted Nazi symbols on dozens of headstones. “Such things cannot and will not be tolerated,” Zatlers told reporters, urging police to bring the culprits to justice quickly. Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis and Foreign Minister Girts Valdis Kristovskis also condemned the attack.

State police spokeswoman Ieva Reksna told the news agency AFP that police officers had found about 100 tombstones with swastikas painted on them. A guard at the cemetery, the only still functional Jewish burial ground in Riga, had spotted the defiled tombstones, she said. Officials from the City Council headed to the cemetery after news of the attack emerged, and Mayor Nils Usakovs, who is on a visit to Russia, issued a statement condemning it.

Jewish Graves Vandalized in Riga

The National Digital Library of Latvian

http://www.periodicals.lv/

As part of its collection Periodicals, the Latvian National Digital Library is offering 40 newspaper and magazine titles in Latvian, German, and Russian, ranging from 1895 to 1957 - altogether more than 45,000 issues and 350,000 pages! For the first time users are given the opportunity to perform a full text search of historic newspapers as well as being able to browse them page by page on their computer screen.
There is a full-word search engine. It is unnecessary to use diacritic marks when searching the publications. Due to copyright restrictions, those items published after July 1, 1938 are not accessible on the Internet. They can only be accessed in Latvia at the National Library of Latvia, the Academic Library of Latvia and all public libraries in Latvia via workstations connected to the library’s internal network. A list of newspapers digitized is available at the site.

A Request from Martha Lev-Zion
martha@bgu.ac.il

As you may know, the magnificent synagogue in Goldingen/Kuldiga had been used as a barn, a cinema, a club and a bar after the extermination of all the Jews in the area. Finally it was totally abandoned and fell into complete disrepair. In the past few years, some of us Goldingeiners and descendants were active in trying to get the town to renovate the synagogue for use as a library for the city, with a memorial corner for the city's murdered Jewish community. I am happy to report that that renovation is now in its final stages. We were pondering what we could include in the memorial corner. We were thinking in terms of photos, memorabilia, maybe even individual family stories...What do you have that we could include? What ideas can you come up with? Please let us know!! It is vital that we keep the memory of our Jewish Goldingener ancestors alive and you can help! The Jewish Museum in Riga has accepted responsibility for the content of the memorial corner, and is working hand in glove with the officials in Kuldiga. Any way that you can help us will be a blessing!

Memories From My Relatives in Aizpute and My Mother Cipe Foss
By Sven Sundman

In 1940 my biological mother, Cipe Foss, came to Karlskoga, Sweden to marry my father Erik Sundman. I was born in 1942 and in 1944 Cipe died of heart disease. My father never spoke to me about his marriage to Cipe. He had somehow repressed everything about her death and I, unfortunately, never discussed this with him. My father has been dead for many years and the only mementoes I have of my mother is her wedding ring and a couple of photographs.

My genealogy research started when we visited a havtornsodling (sea buckthorn—a plant primarily valued for its golden-orange fruits) farm in Jämtland (a county or län in the middle of Sweden) where I met Gallina. She told me she was from Latvia and I told her the little I knew about my background. She gave me information and I contacted the Latvian State Historical Archives in Riga. On November 2, 2009 I received a letter from the archives, which I opened with great anticipation.

I learned that my family was from Aizpute and belonged to the Jewish community there. My grandmother Haja Foss and grandfather Hatze Foss lived on Liepaja iela 2, and several of my aunts and uncles also lived there at different times. My grandfather was born in Azpute on November 5, 1875 and my grandmother was born in Saratova, Russia in 1877. Her maiden name was Reznik.

- My mother Cipe was born on July 27, 1905 and she had six siblings:
  - Jette Foss was born on June 24, 1899, and was married to Mordsche-Hirsch Trembe.
  - Jankel Foss was born on June 8, 1901, and died of kidney disease in 1905.
  - Kalman Foss was born on May 24, 1903, and was married to Gita Herzman from Krozh in Lithuania.
  - Schmere Foss was born on June 29, 1907 and was married to Dweira from Liepaja.
  - Sara Foss was born March 17, 1909.
  - Taube-Beila Foss born in 1909 and was married to Aisik Faiwe.
  - Mascha Foss was born on February 3, 1917.

Almost all of the documents from the archives verified that they were probably murdered by the Nazis some time during 1941. Documents from the Jewish Museum in Riga tells how members of
the Jewish community were forced to come to the synagogue in Aizpute and then, based on undocumented sources, were transported to a wooded area outside Aizpute where they were shot. The Archives did not find any information about what happened to my uncle Scheme Foss and his wife Dweira. They had three children - Esra born on October 13, 1934, Jehuda born on November 12, 1937 and Avraham born on February 21, 1939. In 1935 the whole family lived in Liepaja iela 2.

The archives did not have any information about my aunt Mascha.

Although the archives consider it very unlikely that these people escaped the Holocaust, I am still hopeful that they did.

On several occasions I have contacted the Lithuanian Embassy in Sweden as well as the Registrar’s Office in Riga to determine if these people could still be alive, or if there is any information about what happened to them. These two institutions show total disregard, and have answered none of my letters. I have written a small booklet that I intend to give to my children and grandchildren and I hope that one day when they travel to Latvia the information in it will be useful for them.

In June 2010 my wife and I travelled to Latvia and we visited Riga, Aizpute and Liepaja. It was a very emotional trip. We visited all the addresses where my mother had lived during her time in Latvia. From 1927 to 1935, with a few interruptions, she lived in Liepaja. Most of the time she lived at Julius iela 2. The street name has been changed, but the tourist office gave us the new name. We stood outside her house and thought back about the time when Cipe lived there. We also found the other addresses where she lived: Grandu iela 12 and Palmu iela 6. My mother probably got her training as a seamstress at a trade school in Liepaja.

Liepaja made a strong impression on us, and we visited several Holocaust memorials. The strongest memory is from Skede and the horrible things that happened there. One has difficulties grasping the facts that are presented on the information signs. That is a memory that will forever stay with me.

The city of Liepaja was very beautiful and we will probably visit it again. I had great expectations before our visit to Aizpute, especially the visit to Liepaja iela 2 where my maternal grandparents had lived. The house no longer exists and a road was built where the house once stood. When we stood looking along the street, a window opened above us and a lady called out that she had a photo of my grandparents’ house.

At the post office in Aizpute we were lucky to meet Diana and Erik. They guided us through the little town. We visited the synagogue which was beautifully situated above the river Terbe, the old cemetery which was completely overgrown and where my grandparents were probably buried. We look forward to more contact with Diana and Erik, who we now consider as friends.

We actually started our genealogy research in Riga. We visited the Holocaust Museum at Skola iela where we found some facts about Aizpute which proved useful when we drove to Liepaja. Riga is a wonderful city and we were lucky to visit during mid-summer.

We also went to the Rumbula forest and Kaiserwald. We were stunned by grief when we thought back to how horribly the Jews were treated.

What made the greatest impression on me was the sarcophagi with the sound of a beating heart, which served as a reminder of all the Jews that had been killed. I will never forget the memorial with all the teddy bears and stuffed animals that reminded us of all the children that were killed. The memorial stones in the Rumbula woods is a memory that will also stay with me.

I also visited the monument at Gogol iela and the Riga big synagogue which the Nazis set on fire, killing 300 Jewish worshippers.

My mother lived in Riga at Audeju iela 9, Merkele iela 1 and Marijas iela 6 All three very nice houses are still there and in the nouveau style.
I imagined how my mother, in 1940, walked down to the ferry terminal to go to Sweden to marry my father.

How did my parents meet? I think that my father was on vacation in Jurmala and met my mother, who lived in Riga, at a café and they started talking to each other in German. Both of them spoke German, so that must have made it easier to communicate.

We also went to Jurmala and stayed at a hotel there. I wandered around wondering where and how my parents met. I will never know, but it feels as if I have in some ways become one with Latvia.

My dream is to make contact with somebody who knows something about my relatives in Latvia, to fill in all the gaps that I have not succeeded in doing.

So it Goes: Embarking on a Never Ending Journey

By
Michael Eliastam

My daughter Monet set out in September 2008 traveling to Australia, China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Czech, and Lithuania, committed to arrive in Riga, Latvia in late April 2009, to meet my son Jordan and me.

Suddenly I needed to begin to answer all those questions my two sisters and I had mulled over the years; though we had heard murmurings of “Communists and Bolsheviks” in Riga and Moscow, exactly where in Latvia did our mother come from, how did Moscow fit into her history, and what events had finally made her parents leave an apparently aristocratic life? And where did my father’s parents come from, how did they get to South Africa so much earlier, apparently in the late 1800’s? And, given that both my parents had the same last name before marriage, were they related and if so, how?

Over the year preceding the trip, I combed the internet learning about all the amazing recent research done by Jews in Eastern and Western Europe, South Africa, Israel and the USA, compiling records to restore the names of the Jews in countries invaded by the Nazis where total destruction had erased them completely. I also read about the Soviets actions in Latvia which often sounded as cruel as that of the Nazis. I learned of the wonderful people who have devoted their lives to this kind of work over the past 25 years; I read of their trips to these ‘old countries,’ and their laborious efforts to document their findings. For me it was a real surprise to discover a Latvian Special Interest Group (SIG) that has annual meetings in the US. And another “too good to be true” finding was to discover that one of the original leaders of these activities is Arlene Beare (Gold) who like me, comes from Springs, South Africa, and knew my family. I retained services of archivists; one was from the group in the official Riga archives, Rita Bogdonova, and Jelena Polovecova, Heads of Section, another was a freelancer, Aleksandrs Fegmanis, who also served as our guide in Latvia. While the Riga archives staff did tell me of their backlog of work, and their precarious budgets, they did provide me what I asked, and I am very grateful to them for their reports.

From Riga, Rita Bogdonova and her colleagues reported the addresses where my mother had lived, and of her father’s travels between Moscow and Riga, and their departure from Latvia around 1930. Surprisingly, I also learned that my mother’s first name was actually spelled Iza not Isa. By amazing coincidence, when I had registered my daughter Monet’s birth with her middle name as Izabeth I had inadvertently spelled it cor-
rectly! Part of my family story includes the disappearance of my mother’s brother, Simon, during World War II. He had joined the South Africa Air Force, and disappeared on a training flight over North Africa on his 21st birthday, July 22, 1942. It was so emotional for me when my web searching of Jewish military records revealed that his disappearance was memorialized at the El Alamein Memorial in Egypt, about which we had no knowledge. As a young boy and teenager I knew my grandmother, Simon’s mother as a very depressed and dysfunctional older woman, and terrified of life. Sadly and now understandably, our family narrative includes that she never recovered from the loss of her son.

On the first morning in Riga my children and I rose early and had breakfast with our guide, Aleksandrs Fegmanis, who presented his report. In response to my two primary questions he had these answers. Of the history of my father’s side he had found little, other than they may have come from Mittau. He gently told us that my father’s ancestors were from the “peasant” class, and had never amounted to much! On the second question about finding out if my mother and father with the same last names were actually related, he had found the link of a common ancestor Jankel Eliasshtam. His son, Salomon Eliasshtam spawned my mother’s line, and his other son, Moses Eliasshtam gave rise, two generations later, to my father’s great grandfather, Moses Itshak Eliastam.

Aleksandrs took us to sites where the Eliastams from both sides of our family had lived, unknown to each other, in both Riga and Mittau, but where of course absolutely nothing remained to show they existed. I had found a long list of Eliastams spelled in various ways,(Eliastamm, Eliasstam, Eliasstham) in the Latvian records prior to 1941, in the Latvian records prior to 1941, particularly in Riga, Mittau, and Lepaije. Now we cannot find a single record of a living Eliastam in any current Latvian public document. I believe they were all murdered by the Nazis (or Soviets) who murdered almost all the 150,000 Jews living in Latvia at the time. I was horrified to have confirmed that a significant amount of this murdering was done by local Latvians prior to the arrival of the Nazis with the intent of gaining favor with the advancing German forces. Apparently during several weekend killing sprees in the second half of 1941, the Latvians chased, terrorized, raped and humiliated the Jews who had been living alongside them for many years. For the first time I realized how much the minds of my mother and her parents living in South Africa at that time of 1941 must have been seared by learning about the wanton murder of family and friends by their Latvia neighbors.

I had promised to blog about our trip along the way but two factors made that difficult. One was the lack of easy and inexpensive internet access, particularly since I was competing with my adult children for time to log on, and the other was the difficulty I had organizing my thoughts once we started the search for family roots. I found myself more angry and resentful than I expected, disappointed at how little of my families’ history was discoverable. I had been warned the there is ‘nothing left’ in Latvia but I had not understood.

We visited the Jewish Museum in Riga, inside the Jewish Community Center, a tired building but apparently well used for weddings and family celebrations by Riga’s remaining tiny community of Jews. The museum is in three parts, the history of Latvian Jewry from early times to about 1922, the halcyon days of Latvian Independence from the early 1920’s to the late 1930’s, and then the period of the Nazi terror. Photographs of happy family scenes tell of the idyllic life during the period of Latvian independence followed by stark photos of young women being forced to strip naked, then marched into the pits to be shot by Latvian civilians, and Nazi and Latvian troops.

We also visited two major sites of the organized murdering of Jews in the concentration and labor camps, especially in the Rumbula forest outside Riga. More depressing to us was the relatively poor maintenance of these and other monuments. We also visited the old cemeteries and the memorial to the burning of the Riga synagogue with several hundred Jews locked inside. I was saddened to see they are not well maintained, not what a country, contrite or greatly embarrassed would do.

In fact, my impression is that Latvia has just moved on, now a prosperous country (although
shaky financially currently due to over-confidence) within the EU, and feeling quite protected by its NATO membership from its ‘almost’ neighbor, the Russian Bear. I doubt the Latvian children know what their grandparents and parents did to their Jewish neighbors. To my mind, there is a real sense of Hanna Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’ - it seems to have just happened, and a long time ago. Candidly, as I walked about I felt very suspicious of every person appearing to fit my stereotypical version of ‘central European’ features, I could imagine them humiliating and abusing, even murdering Jews, again.

Then we went to Israel, relieved that there is at least one place where one can be a Jew. We spent about 12 days spread across Tel Aviv, Haifa, the Galilee, the Golan, down to Beit She’an, to the Dead Sea, Ein Gedi, and of course Jerusalem, plus a brief one day trip to the Gaza border near Ashkelon. We had a wonderful ‘motherly’ guide for three days, Chava, and her able substitute Dorit for day 4. We slept on three different kibbutzim near Haifa and in the Galilee, spent three days in the Tel Aviv apartment of close friends, and stayed near the Old City in Jerusalem for four days. We swam in the Dead Sea, saw vultures at Gamla, talked to soldiers from a tank unit, and at Ein Gedi were crowded out by hordes of school children in the pools but did swim at Gan Hashlosha, and tasted the waters of the origins of the Jordan River. And, of course we walked everywhere in the Old City, prayed at the Wailing Wall, walked the ramparts with old friends, and had afternoon tea with an old friend and his family at their apartment in the Jerusalem hills, which he says so ‘eloquently’, is a front row seat for the Third World War, as it looks out over the Old City and much of the New Jerusalem.

Much of our visit was punctuated by the unique politics of the Middle East. The infamous “wall” is easily visible from most places in Jerusalem and appears to have successfully reduced terrorist activity from the West Bank. When we were gazing into Gaza, right next to that “wall” between Gaza and Israel, my cousin, a resident of the border moshav, Netiv Assara, asked us to avoid standing out in the open for fear of attracting ‘fire’. One sees soldiers everywhere in Israel and of all types. There are security personnel at every public place including shopping malls, stations, hotels, and banks. Despite this, we were able to move easily anywhere in the country; the only time our passports were checked was when we entered train stations. And the Arab population seemed engaged in community life and were helpful when we asked questions. Having lived in South Africa for my first 22 years, I could not help but feel the similarities to the apartheid period of South African history despite all the protestations by Israelis to the contrary.

I certainly remember what it felt like to be a privileged white South African in a country when the less-privileged were growing in number, and becoming more educated, and starting to prosper, and feeling the shackles of an unfair system even if all the reasons for the shackles can be explained as necessary. During my stay in Israel I was disheartened by reports in the mainstream newspapers of unkind and occasionally inhumane treatment of Arabs by Israeli soldiers; for example, preventing pregnant Arab women in ambulances from entering the hospital because of fear of terrorists using ambulances to gain entry. I have seen the much touted You Tube video showing Arab gunmen hiding in such an ambulance, but that does not justify this barbaric behavior. It smacks of such arrogance.

Our trip to Yad Vashem included an insightful overview by an insider ‘friend of a friend’, enabling us to see several garden sites within the morning’s allotted time by his driving us to the ‘Cattle Car’ railway coach and the “disappeared communities” as well as the Righteous Persons forest. Later the same morning we walked through the new museum, spending too much time at the front end, and fading badly as time passed. We were embarrassed by our weariness given the nightmare that engulfed these ordinary people for so long. Before we left the museum, we searched the Yad Vashem databases which I understand are actually the same databases available on the web under Jewish Genealogy sites. However we did find two reports new to me of Eliastam relatives living in Israel, and have since learned they are cousins of my mother, who fled to the Soviet Union and came to Israel in the early seventies. These Israeli cousins helped me find a long lost cousin whom my parents helped
leave the Soviet Union in the early seventies. She had come to Israel in 1973 and then disappeared. Recently I was able to talk by phone with her in a German retirement home and I email her nephew regularly - another new cousin of mine. I have just learned that he is the only Jewish member in the current Estonian parliament.

It is now 15 months since my trip to Latvia and Israel, and about 2 plus years since I started my genealogy journey. What have I learned and what has happened to me? Undoubtedly I have a deeper understanding of the horror of the Holocaust, its wider and deeper dimensions. I had not understood the degree of participation and penetration of Jews in the cultural and business life of the major cities of Europe prior to the Nazi genocide plan. I did not know how big the Jewish population of Europe was, and how prevalent Yiddish as an everyday language was. I knew nothing about the Einzengruppen and the horror of the shootings in the villages. Nor did I know that in these Eastern European countries, non-Jewish neighbors often murdered their Jewish neighbors to ingratiate themselves with the advancing Nazis.

My personal reading has evolved too. Until recently all I read for the past two years were books and reports on the Holocaust and related Jewish history. Friends told me I was fast becoming obsessed with the Holocaust. As time has passed, and against this terrible historical background, I have become very concerned about Islamic fundamentalism threatening Jews again, and the resultant xenophobic behavior this fundamentalism is engendering in my Jewish colleagues in Israel and the Diaspora in the USA and South Africa. The recent article by Peter Beinart in the New York Review of Books, June 2010, introduced me to the book, *The Holocaust is Over, We must rise from its Ashes*, by Avram Burg where to my relief I was offered a different perspective by an Israeli pioneer with safe credentials. I have also started reading about religious fundamentalism, trying to understand how it happens in western democracies in Western Europe. Books such as *What’s Right with Islam*, and *The Islamist: Why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside and why I left*, have been very helpful to me in understanding Islamic fundamentalism and the opposition to it inside the global Muslim community. I attended the inaugural meeting in Washington, DC of J Street, supporting opposition to the AIPAC policy of blindly supporting any incumbent Israeli government irrespective of its policies. I fear for Israel’s survival. As I write today, reputable American journalists are reporting that Israel is likely to attack Iran’s nuclear program because its threat potential is equal to the Holocaust, which we Jews agree cannot happen again.

To keep my personal perspective in balance, albeit somewhat artificially, I have read every novel Daniel Silva has written with Gabriel Allon as the hero because they focus on the Mossad and Shin Beth and their struggle to stop terrorism against Israel. The stories are structured around terrorists inspired by Islamic fundamentalism and European anti-Semitism. Fortunately for my mental health, the good guys always win, though often after very tough going.

As I brought every finding of new possible connections to our family tree to my family’s attention, I have learned that this genealogy is not everyone’s cup of tea; one of my sisters is really interested and the other is totally bored by my finding these relatives. My search for my roots continues though I have not even answered all the simple questions I set at the beginning. I do now know when each of my maternal grandparents arrived in South Africa, but I do not know their route from Latvia. I still know almost nothing about my paternal grandparents’ journey to South Africa. I desperately want to know exactly when my maternal grandparents heard about the murder of their family and friends in the streets of Riga, and how did they learn? Did they believe this horror story? If so, why?

I did have my DNA blood test, discovering many matches that seem meaningless, but one poignant one resulted in me being identified as the sole living relative of a Canadian Jew on his father’s side. He and I have communicated by email and phone, planning to meet one of these days. But so far this DNA stuff is too complex and obtuse for me. I have attended two International Jewish Genealogy conferences and am exploring taking a
leadership role in the Latvian SIG as a way to interest more younger Jews in looking for their roots! Will Face Book be the way the next generation joins the genealogy hunt? And this week my daughter, who inadvertently started all this for me, received an email from a woman originally from Riga, now living in London. Exploring her family history she found my daughter’s blog describing the Latvian trip and then saw the name Eliastam. She has Eliastams in her family tree and we are now inspired to figure out what this relationship is. And so it goes.

An Interview with Kalman Feyzus

Recorded September 19, 2002
Interview conducted by Ayna Antane
Center for Judaic Studies, University of Latvia
Translated by Sofia Kagna and Viktor Popow

K.F. I was born in 1917 in the city of Lipetsk (Lipetsk (Russian: Липецк) is an ancient city that is situated in the central part of Russia, about 270 miles southeast of Moscow) because the first World War touched my parents too (World War I, 1914-1918, was the second deadliest war in human history after World War II). My father was born in Lithuania. He came over and met my mother. She was a very beautiful woman, so he connected his destiny with hers and they created a family. My mother was born in Latvia, she used to live in Daugavpils (Daugavpils is the second largest city in Latvia, situated about 140 miles southwest of Riga. It was founded 1275 and is characterized by an incredible historical line of name changes: Dinaburg (1275-1656), Borisoglebsk (1656-1667), Dinaburg (1667-1893), Dvinsk (1893-1920) and finally Daugavpils (1920-today). My mother was very religious and she was a good woman. Our family was big and religious. I cannot tell you what year everyone was born. Altogether there were four brothers and five sisters. We were a very close and friendly family. I probably can not tell you everything with great detail because I was heavily wounded four times and had two shell-shock concussions. However, I can recall quite a bit. As far as I remember, my oldest brother Michael went to Palestine in 1924 (After the WW I the British acquired the mandate from the League of Nation to administer the territory of Palestine, which they already had occupied during the War. The British Mandate lasted from 1920 until 1948. In April 1920 the so-called Palestine Riots started in Jerusalem with the violent Arab riots aimed primarily against the Jews. The British military administration was unable to put the city in order quickly and efficiently. This was the beginning of the almost constant confrontations between the British, the Jews, and the Arabs that lasted for the duration of the British Mandate). My mother was worried about Michael a lot and cried when she received his letters. The letters from him came several times a year. He fought with the British there. For my mother it was joy and tears at the same time. His letters usually came during religious holidays – Pesach and so on. My second brother Uri was a leftist. He was very handsome and women liked him very much. My other brother’s name was David. He was shot to death in Daugavpils (during the WW II). There were five sisters. Bluma first studied in Latvia, and then at Tartu University (The University of Tartu, Estonia is one of the oldest and most renowned universities in the Baltic region. It was founded in 1632 by the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus. Tartu is the second largest city of Estonia. It is located about 115 miles southeast of Tallinn, the Estonian capital). Bluma was the eldest, she loved nature and after graduating from Tartu University went to Palestine in 1936.

My father was a tanner. He worked in the leather-tanning and shoe industry. He did the whole process, from rawhide to the finished boots.

I went to school and when I graduated I started working, learning the trade and it was a pretty hard trade. The leather-tanning profession is very interesting because the tanning process is very difficult and requires great precision. We were taught mostly by Germans. They achieved great mastery in that profession and taught us mostly by experiential learning. They took us to a slaughterhouse; there were live cattle there and we watched how they were slaughtered and so on. They showed us that this was a cow, and that was a calf, and that was a bull, and the height and width of their hide. Those who had enough energy and were eager to learn went through this with ease and I did it too. After school I engaged in sports.

A.A. What school did you graduate from?
K.F. The Jewish School in Daugavpils, — in Hebrew.

A.A. And in what language were you taught in trade school?

K.F. In Russian. Some of the technological processes came from Germany and Argentina. Some of the technologists were from Germany, but they knew Latvian (Lettish) and Russian languages. When I graduated from the trade school I had chosen the most difficult profession. What do I mean by saying difficult? I was physically capable, but there was a lot of responsibility in this profession. You needed to determine the thickness and durability of leather and its defects, but I was able to do all of that and I made good money. So the time had come for military service. In 1939 I joined the army. I was in a good physical condition. I could swim 1,800 meters and ski 10 kilometers cross-country. I was drafted into the Latvian Army. I was interested in learning horseback riding because I was an athlete. The sergeant major told me: “Žīdiņ, tev nekas neiznāks!” (“Little Jew, you wouldn’t be able to make it happen!”), but when I showed him my achievements in other sports he shut up. In Daugavpils we had many sports clubs, like the one where we were lifting 50 kilo heavy weights.

A.A. And who was participating in those clubs’ activities?

K.F. Jewish Guys. It was well respected. When I joined the army, I became an artillerist — I was a gun-layer for the cannon. On our cannon team there was one Jew, one German, and two Latvians.

A.A. Did you serve in Daugavpils?

K.F. No, first I was served in Liepaja (Liepāja, historical variation: Libau is a city in western Latvia located on the Baltic Sea sea. It is the third largest city in Latvia after Riga and Daugavpils) in the Kurzemsk Artillery Regiment. My military service from the beginning went really well. There were artillery competitions. I won the first prize in one of the competitions. As a reward I was transferred to the German cannon, then I won the first prize again and was transferred to the Russian cannon.

A.A. What does it mean: German cannon, Russian cannon?

K.F. We were armed with German, British and Russian cannons.

So our family was comparably well off. I had a good suit and calf boots to go on a short military leave. I remember how they built Brīvības Piemineklis (The Freedom Monument is a memorial complex with a huge statue of Freedom portrayed by a woman holding tree stars. It is located in Riga and dedicated to the soldiers who perished during the Latvian War of Independence (1919-1920). It is one of the most important symbols of the freedom, independence, and sovereignty in Latvia. Opened in 1935, the 42-metre high monument traditionally serves as the backdrop for public gatherings and official ceremonies in Riga). We were required to properly greet an officer on the street, it was strictly observed. I served in the army until June of 1941. We were discharged on fourth of June and we were required to wear the military uniform for three more months. And then the War started (The Great Patriotic War is the name used in some of the states of the former Soviet Union for the part of the WW II in which the Soviet Union participated from June 22, 1941 until May 9, 1945, against Nazi Germany and its allies).

A.A. Were you in Daugavpils when the war started?

K.F. Yes. All the cities in Latvia were bombed on the same day. And I remember July of 1941 — there was heavy bombing near Rezekne (Rezekne (Latvian: Rēzekne) is a city in the Latgalia region in the eastern part of Latvia. Rezekne is located 150 miles east of Riga, about 40 miles west of the border between Latvia and Russia. The city is situated at a very important strategic point: the intersection of the Moscow, Riga, Warsaw and Saint Petersburg railways).

A.A. Whose army was it (the one you were serving in at the time)?
K.F. It was the Soviet Army. How did Latvian Army become Soviet Army? Very simple. I am often asked this question: how did that happened? Do I conceal anything (from the public)? It was like if today a Latvian officer was in charge and in three days there was another officer in charge. They often changed the officers in the Latvian Army. We did not know what happened to them. We changed from serving in the Latvian army to serving in Soviet army through the oath of allegiance. We started to serve in the Latvian Army and in 1940 the Red Army came and Soviet rule began (In 1939 the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany agreed on and signed a pact of 10-year no military actions against each other. The agreement was named “Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact” and is considered by historians and political analists as one of the most devious and trecherous political dealings of modern history. According to that agreement, Northern and Eastern Europe and its states were slashed into German and Soviet “spheres of influence.” In the “Northern Sphere” Latvia, Finland and Estonia were given to the Soviet Union. Latvia was annexed into the Soviet Union on August 5, 1940 and named the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. It was proclaimed that this was the fulfilment of “the free will of Latvian working people”). On the day that the Soviet Army came to Latvia, I was serving detention. The sergant of the second cannon told me: “You are a Zhid (derogatory term meanin “Jew”) and I am a German.” And he was supposed to clean my horse for the competition. But I could not say anything. “Zhid” was a bad word, but we could not say anything because you would be punished. Usually the punishment was to serve several days of detention. Often during this kind of detention you were forced to stand still by the wall for an hour. It was pretty difficult. You were given a privilege if they made you stand by the map of the world, then you had something to occupy yourself with. If you were standing still for 59 minutes, and then fainted, tomorrow you were required to stand still again. So the German, who was standing by the wall told me: “Hey, Zhid, I am standing here instead of you.” At that time this word was widely used. For example, there was Žīdu pamatskola (Jewish elementary school). In my passport was written “Mozus ticība” (Moses’ faith – Jewish religion). Only after the War this word (“Zhid”) became unacceptable.

A.A. You told me that you retreated with the Russain army. What actually happened with Latvian army?

K.F. So while I was standing still for my punishment, suddenly there were military planes everywhere. Our pilots went out with binoculars: at first they thought that they were Latvian planes without the identification marks. Only after several hours did they figure out that they were Soviet planes. It happened on the 20th of July in 1940. In 1941 they issued an order about us taking the Soviet Oath of Allegiance. The ones who did not accept it were never seen again.

L.I. Could you tell us in more detail about this transition process in the army: from Latvian to Soviet?

K.F. In January 1941 they issued an order about taking the Soviet Oath of Allegiance. The Latvian Army was disbanded. I skipped the events of 1939. What did Latvia look like then? It was a 100% neutral country. I remember the following occurrence: when I was on duty, a plane landed nearby. It was a Russian pilot. He was escorted to the headquarters and was properly treated. The pilot thought that he landed in Poland. He was extradicted. At the same time in Daugavpils, in Stropy, several other Russian pilots landed. The military forces again surrounded them and took them under their guard for the extradition. They were taken to a hotel and lived there more like guests. When we were taking the Soviet Oath of Allegiance in 1941, the Russians did not have shoulder-straps or belts: in other words, they looked nothing like Latvian soldiers. We took the Oath of Allegiance: “I, the citizen of the Soviet Union... and so on...” What else could we do? When I am asked, what did the Soviets do with Latvian officers, I answer that we did not know: one day there was one person who was the commander of an artillery battery, then the next week there was another person. So maybe they were killing officers, but we did not know about it and had absolutely no idea. It was war!
When we were leaving Latvia (during the Soviet Army retreat from Germany in 1941) there was bombing near Rezekne first, and then near Sebez (Sebezh (Russian: Себеж) is a little town near the border between Russia and Latvia in Pskov Oblast, Russia). In Ivanovskaya Oblast (Ivanovo Oblast (Russian: Ивановская область) is a federal subject of Russia (an oblast)) I was mowing grass: there were four Latvians and me, the Jew. We were working hard and because of that they gave us milk, meat and bread. It was even some sort of competition: we won the first place in the area (oblast). I knew how to work at the farm pretty well. My Latvian neighbors taught me. We lived side by side with them very well. However, later one of them shot and killed my brother David. I wanted revenge and to kill this neighbor but later I changed my mind.

I took part in the first battles near Moscow, Narofominsk, and others (The Battle of Moscow is the name usually used for the two periods of strategically significant fighting on a 373 mile sector of the Eastern Front during the WW II. It took place between October 1941 and January 1942. For the first time since June 1941, the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, Soviet forces had stopped the Germans and had driven them back. Narofominsk (Russian: Нарофоминск) is a town in the Moscow Region of Russia, which is located only 43 miles southwest of Moscow). I was wounded three times heavily, and two times lightly and was also shell-shocked twice. Then was Staraya Russa (Staraya Russa (Russian: Старая Русса) is an ancient Russian town located approximately 60 miles south of Veliky Novgorod. This town was almost completely destroyed during the Great Patriotic War, Staraya Russa is now restored).

Then we finally returned to Baltika (Baltic Sea regions) – I took part in the liberation of Riga. When I was Liberating Riga, I met Janis Lipke who saved many Jews and Latvians (Jānis (Žanis) Lipke (1900 - 1987) was honored by Israel as “Righteous Among Nations,” during the WW II he rescued 55 Jews from Riga’s Ghetto. It was about one quarter of the 200 Jewish survivors of the War in Latvia. At the beginning of the war Lipke was a dock worker at the wharf in Riga’s port. According to his own words, he decided to help the Jews in the Ghetto after watching the atrocities committed against them on the streets. He went through retraining and become a contractor for the Luftwaffe (a generic German term for an air force). With that position he had a free pass to the Ghetto and was able to take Jewish workers outside during the day. In the evening some of his Latvian friends returned back to the Ghetto impersonating Jews marked by the yellow Stars of David. He had some of the Jews at his own home with the help of his wife and also on several farms in the country. He organized a network of his helpers very cleverly and efficiently, so most of these people survived the War. In 1977 he was honored by the State of Israel, and only recently, long after his death, on his 100-year anniversary the monument was built for him in Latvia). First time I had read about him in the newspaper from 13th of October, 1944.

Our military unit at that time stayed in Vecaki (Latvian: Vecāķi is a recreational neighborhood near Riga). I was able to visit Rumbula then (The Rumbula massacre was the second-largest killing of the Jews during the Holocaust after Babi Yar near Kiev, Ukraine, and until the beginning of death camp operations. Rumbula used to be a kind of recreational zone with a pine forest near Riga. The massacre happened on two different days (November 30, 1941 and December 8, 1941). Altogether over 27,000 Jews were killed in and on the way to Rumbula forest. Most of the victims were Latvian Jews from the Riga Ghetto and about 1,000 were Jews from Germany who were “delivered” by the Nazis by train. The executors were both Nazis and the local Latvian collaborators, some of them volunteers). None of us knew about the mass killings of civilians: we did not know until we saw it with our own eyes. In 1944 I was discharged from the army and then I met Janis Lipke. He was a wonderful person, not only because he saved Jews; he was an excellent psychologist and he could see people through and through. He possessed extraordinary abilities as no one else I have ever known. That is why it is understandable how he was able to save so many people. You can find a man of those qualities only once in 500-600 years. He had two
amazing helpers who both were women. We all became friends. I remember it was Ligo celebration (Ligo Diena is a national Latvian holiday which coincides with the summer solstice. It was celebrated on the longest day of the year [Midsummer Eve] since ancient pre-Christian times. It was connected to pagan rituals associated with harvest seasons and fertility. It is usually celebrated at home with family and friends gathered around a big meal. Later in the evening people go out to public dances, and bonfires where they again eat, drink and sing). We celebrated this holiday at his (Janis Lipke’s) garden. One of the women was called Maria. She lived at 101 Mariinskaya Street in Riga. I met her there. She told me that in 1942 Janis Lipke came to her and asked her if she could keep a secret (the expression used here literally translates as “could she keep her tongue behind her teeth” which means a strong emphasis on staying silent at all costs). She said that she would. Janis told her that in a few days he would bring with him several gentlemen. She answered: “Lūdzu!” (“Please!”). Later she asked him: “Who are the people that you brought with you? Trīs netīrus žīdus, nobadojušos. (Three dirty hungry Jews)”. Later he started to bring food with him. I asked her did she remember the names of those people. She mentioned 18 to 19 names. Later I inquired whether there were other people, in particular, I had heard about a woman with a child. She told me about that story: he (Janis Lipke) saved one doctor, Neim (Naum), the dentist. His wife was Russian. This woman needed to be saved, because in case she was caught by the Gestapo, she would have told them everything. That is why Janis rescued her. There was a large number of people in whose rescue Maria took an active part. Janis believed, that for the sake of her own safety, Maria did not need to know any information that did not concern her. I could not tell this story in the space of one hour: how Janis saved people and got them out of danger. I can only tell the abbreviated version of the story. For example, he needed to save those two Jews from Riga. He took the car with the driver that he knew, Maria told me, and then put some old furniture on top and they drove. You can ask me why I am telling you so much about Janis: the reason is that we survived and he saved so many people. Janis died after his eighth heart attack. He always called me on the phone and told nurses (in the hospital): Please, let Kalman see me.

L.I.: I wanted to ask you where was your family when the war started and you yourself were retreating (with the Soviet Army) into the depth of Russia?

K.F.: After WW I everything that our family owned was robbed and plundered, but my parents thought that if they did not do anything bad to either Russians or Germans, why should they leave? They did not move anywhere. My father and mother were taken into prison and then shot to death at the prison square in Daugavpils. My brother David and his family were shot to death there too when I was in Russia. When I returned and learned about those events, I planned to take revenge, because David and his family were shot by one of their neighbors, but I did not put my wishes into actions. Yes, there were very many hard things that I endured during my time on the front and I remember them very well. The unending artillery preparations where there were hundreds of shells flying above our heads. Sometimes during the clear weather we were able to see how a shell hit a Russian plane, and there were nothing we could do. This was war. I had a good cannon. And I was able to shoot very well. Yes, those were very hard times.

L.I.: Please tell me about your life after the War!

K.F.: I worked at “Erglis” (Latvian: Ērgļi is a municipality in Vidzeme, in the north-central part of Latvia). It was a leather-tanning factory. I have many awards for my hard work and industrial inventions. I was appreciated and respected at work. Later I was forced to quit my job after I lost my voice because of the war-related shell-shock concussions. It was one of the hardest things that happened to me. It was a very hard ordeal. After that I went through medical rehabilitation, and gradually my voice returned to me. Later I transferred from “Erglis” to the “First Mais” factory. I worked there until my retirement, until I travelled to Israel in the 1970s. My trip to Israel was connected with saving people during the War. For me it was the greatest and the
biggest achievement in my life. Janis Lipke went to Israel too. He was received like an honorable guest. I am often asked a question whether Janis saved me personally and was it the reason of my regard of him and his great deeds. No, it is definitely nothing like that. He saved many other people. This person cannot be forgotten. He had something like a Jewish soul in the best meaning of this word – this kind of soul is very rare and very few people have it. His hands were golden. He made a boat and presented it to Kosygin during the Soviet era (Alexei Kosygin (1904-1980) was a soviet statesman during Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev rule. The Soviet Prime Minister of the Brezhnev administration in the 1970s. He was considered the second most powerful figure in the Soviet Union at the time). This boat was made using unique technology. I used to sail on that boat. This was who Janis Lipke was. He died on May 14, 1987. This is what I can tell you about my life. I hardly remember my childhood. I do not really remember anything about it, it’s like it was washed out.

L.I. Mr. Kalman, when you told me about your mother, you mentioned that she was religious, and that she abided by the strict religious rules.

K.F. Yes, it is true.

L.I. And your father too?

K.F. Yes, most definitely!

A.A. What were their names?

K.F. My mother’s name was Goda. Her maiden name was Gamza. My father’s name was Shaya. I do not know, or truthfully speaking, do not remember the names of my grandfather and grandmother. We used to live in the old house in Stropy (a suburb of Daugavpils). It was the house that belonged to my mother’s parents. The address of this house was 202 Shosseynaya Street. I also remember five weeping birches and two pine-trees. During the War this scenery was often in my dreams. My parents were shot to death at the prison plaza in Daugavpils. There was a memorial plaque that Soviet citizens were killed there. Later there were another plaque that the Army officers were killed at that place, but I know for sure that this was that exact place. And when I am in Daugavpils, I visit this place.

L.I. Your father and mother were religious people. Did they raise their children within the religious tradition too?

K.F. In order to make you understand the way the children (in the family) were... My older brother Mikhail went to Palestine. My sister Bluma went to Palestine too, and Uri was politically left-oriented. My sister Rahil was left-oriented too. Often we had political discussions at the family dinner table, and even from time to time someone was walking away from the table. I was interested mostly in sports. My father was strongly against Stalin. He always criticized him.

L.I. And people in your environment, were they also Jews?

K.F. No, next to us lived very good neighbors by the name Pavlovsky, they were Catholics. Further down the street the neighbors also were not Jewish, but they were very good. You would ask me who took my parents and my brother to the prison and execution? That was the head of Catholic cemetery by the name Boreyko. I have read in one of the newspapers, that after he had been sent to the prison camps in Siberia, he returned to Daugavpils.

L.I. Did you observe Jewish holidays at home?

K.F. They were very strictly observed. We went to synagogue and on Pesach the children got new clothes. It was very strict at home: everything was kosher and so on. When I was a child, my mother was petting my head and telling me stories from the Bible. However, I was interested in everything, and it helped me a great deal during the War, it helped me survive, and also helped me in the restoration of Rumbula. (The Soviet government tried to hide and disregard the mass killings of Jews during WW II. The original wooden sign that was erected after the liberation of Riga from the Nazis was removed by the local authorities. In the late 1960s and early 1970s some Jews who lived in Riga (most of them young) started the clean-up of the Rumbula
massacre site and also the marking of the graves. Kalman Feyzus probably describes those events in his interview. The participation in the clean-up required a lot of courage because it was greatly discouraged by the authorities. Later many young Jews who gathered there became the backbone of the Refuznik movement and immigrated to Israel. There were some young guys who came to work with us on Sundays from 10 AM to 2 PM. Why the young guys were doing it? When on one of the first days during the restoration very many people came, there was a bulldozer pushing people’s bones into the hole in the ground, and some elderly people fainted. Many Jews had their relatives, friends, and acquaintances killed there. Do not think that it was easy for me or for the others. I learned how to identify the graves looking at the bones, including children’s graves.

Yes, there was one detail. It is about where to locate the children’s graves. There were special flowers growing there. The local people planted them there. There were a lot of obstacles. Some people were saying that there should be no flowers, and so on. Jewish graves should be barren. But in that situation an unmarked grave would be covered with grass and bushes soon and there would be nothing left. I was often criticized. I was helping to bury gentiles according to their traditions. I believe that this kind of criticism is wrong. I often hear complaints from the synagogue. Why do I go to the cemetery on Saturdays? But I do not go to the Smerli cemetary (Jewish cemetery in Riga).

L.I. Let us return to the question about the school. Did you and your brothers and sisters attend Jewish school?

K.F. I cannot say it about everybody. Ida and Luba, they attended Jewish schools and later even taught Hebrew a little.

A.A. What language did you speak in your parents’ house?

K.F. Yiddish.

A.A. Who were the people that surrounded you in Daugavpils?

K.F. Only Jews were close. However, we were communicating with all of our neighbors on an everyday basis. They actually taught me many skills: how to make a scythe, how to mow. Those skills helped me a lot during the War, for example, to dig a dug-out.

A.A. How would you define the relationship between different nationalities in Daugavpils before the War?

K.F. I would say it was excellent. All neighbors respected our family. My mother baked Chalah on Fridays and gave it to everybody.

A.A. What were the names of your children?

K.F. My children’s names are Boris and Mark. Boris has a son Vitaly. Mark’s wife’s name is Zinaida, and his children’s names are Diana, Kristina, and Slavik.

Oh, and Israel made two movies in the seventies: Holocaust in Riga and the second movie, New Time and New Happiness. The filmmaker was Boris Mavzer from Israel, and the producer was Levin. It is a history of Rumbula and Bikernieky (the places of mass killings of Jews in Riga). Some things that I had done were highlighted there. It is a great honor and a source of joy for me.

Yes. And I skipped the story about my wife. I met her in 1939 near Tukums (Tukums is a town in Latvia. Three regions of Latvia meet in the vicinity of Tukums – Vidzeme, Zemgale and Kurzeme). I was there for the competition. I liked her, but I dated her for a long time because the War started soon and it was not a good time to get married. She was born in 1920 in Tukums. Her name was Sofía, and her maiden name was Fleiter. We got married in 1946 and we lived on Lachplesh Street in Riga where our children were born.
Membership Fees

This is the second issue of the newsletter for the 2010/2011 membership year, so if you have not done so already, please renew your membership in the Latvia SIG. 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
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Bethesda, MD 20814
USA

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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.

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

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

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Bibliographical or archival sources used in your Latvian genealogical research:

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

Cemeteries, travel experiences, etc:

Suggested newsletter topics:

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

I would be willing to volunteer for the following activities:

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