

# Žagarè Jewish Families Album



**Jewish Culture Days Žagarè  
2015**

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## INTRODUCTION

Žagarė (Zhager in Yidish and זשעגער in Hebrew) had one of the oldest Jewish communities in Lithuania. In 1914 approximately 8000 Jews lived here forming 57% of town's population. According to Cliff Marks, in its heyday Zhager was known as a city of Torah and wisdom; It produced famous scholars, writers, and rabbis. ChachmeiZhager they were called: the wise men of Zhager. As Josef Rosin notes, while quite a small town Zhager "produced a long line of erudite men, intellectuals, writers, researchers and public figures who were well know in the Jewish world."

Due to the wars and holocaust there is little records left about the daily Jewish life in our town. Therefore the organizers of "The Jewish Culture Days Žagarė 2015" decided to start collecting the memories, heritage, photos and other historical materials about Žagarė Jewish families to preserve them for future generations.

We hope this album will help to pave the way for future relations and cooperation restoring history of Jewish life in Žagarė.

Organizers of The Jewish Culture Days in Žagarė

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## FROM MYTH TO MIRACLE

*By Joy Hall*

Early in May in 1995, my sister and I went to the Baltics to search for, and discover, our roots. The resulting story became an illustrated talk which was given many times; it's become a sort of evolving fairy story which I'm pleased to share now with my fellow descendants from Zagare.



My father, Louis Towb, the youngest of seven children, was a charismatic, generous, warm man, who I adored. As a little girl, I used to love sitting at his knee, and ask him again and again about HIS father. "Where did Grandpa come from?" and he would raise his fine head, and with great authority and aplomb he

would answer each time "From Zager in Courland - which is a part of Lithuania".



Grandpa Towb, who I never knew, was indeed very proud to come from this town, and later in life, after he'd settled on Tyneside, he enjoyed the fruit liqueurs from Lithuania which occasionally came from Baltic ships calling at Newcastle's quayside. His life must have been

colourful but distressing much of the time - he was a Jewish refugee with a growing family, and after his wife died when my father was only 3 weeks old, he was responsible for 7 young children. He had left Zagare because of conscription.

Louis was a romantic and he had no idea about geography. He'd never visited Lithuania - he didn't know where it was, & he really didn't know anything at all about Zagare, except that it was apparently a wonderful place (as a small child, I imagined it to be absolutely magical). Nor did he know where Courland was (the duchy had disappeared from the maps over 100 years ago); and none of us knew where Lithuania was. I had always assumed that the Baltics were the same as the Balkans!

In 1994 the Lithuanian Philharmonic Orchestra came to Carlisle (our local city in the north of England). I had a particular note of this in our diary, for I wanted to see if, unlikely as it might be, I might find some relations in the orchestra! Many of my family are musicians or actors, so a group of real Lithuanians, in Carlisle - playing! - it seemed too good to be true! I went down to the Centre in time for the beginning of the rehearsal, and collared, with some trepidation, one or two of the musicians. Most of them spoke no English, and I certainly didn't speak Lithuanian, but I was introduced to the Principal Cellist, who spoke excellent English. I told him why I'd come, and asked whether there were Jewish people in the Orchestra. He was one of the two, and no, of course, we weren't related! But he was thrilled that I had made the approach - he was so full of the new Lithuania - such pride and optimism following Lithuania's recent struggle for independence. He said "you must come, you must come to Lithuania!". We met him during the interval, after the concert, and again the following morning. He said again "you must come!". So I began to think - I think I might go! - a real country, with real people, and a welcome!

So then I started the research in trying to find out where "Zagar" was. This was no easy matter. We bought a good map of the country, and found at least 4 places with a similar name. My cousin in Israel searched the resources there, and she came up with the little town on the border between Lithuania & Latvia. A subsequent telephone conversation with a small travel agent resulted in him running to his drinks cupboard to find - yes! - a bottle of cherry brandy from Zagare. So, the two names corresponded - ! (Zager is of course the Yiddish pronunciation.) The only guide book which existed at this time had no mention of the place. The Lithuanian Embassy in the UK was as helpful as it could be with its very meagre resources. My sister said she'd come with me for no more than a week. Because the time available was so short, we decided to fly to Riga, hire a car, and find somewhere to stay in the Latvian countryside, from where we'd drive to Zagare.

We spent two separate days in Zagare (a large part of the first day was spent getting there and back). My sister did the map reading, and I did the driving. We had written to the mayor of Zagare to say on which day we were coming, but alas, the letter arrived after we did. The distance was only some 20 or 30 miles from

where we were staying, but the roads then were very bad indeed. Here is my sister, Suki, at the signpost for Zagare.



The road to Zagare. We imagine that Grandpa Towb walked up this road on his way to freedom.



In the trees for a loo stop, when the soldiers came along with their guns - completely oblivious to us, I'm glad to say.



The Border between Latvia & Lithuania on a minor road. Notice the tulips. Everywhere were flowers - they redeemed the poorest dwelling, office, or badly lit museum. The border guards were very young, drunk, unhelpful, uninterested, and had certainly NEVER seen 2

middle aged English women with a big white car before! We thought we wouldn't get through the crossing. They searched the car. My sister was in charge of communications, and with her 4 words of German, coped with the language problem.

We got through!

This talk is entitled "From Myth to Miracle" - well it is at this point, that the myth becomes a reality, for here we were in Zagare - one of the Miracles of the Title.





We drove slowly, most things were obviously unchanged over many years, except for the deterioration and the poverty. What had been a prosperous trading centre in the 19th century, had deteriorated after the railway was built - because it didn't come to the town - and also because of the general decline in the economy. Much of the old town was in a very poor state.



This former grand manor house was used for storage (it has now disappeared).



Everywhere we went - the gardens, the growing, and the tending were superb. The tulips were nearly always red - there were no fancy varieties here.



We drew up beside the Mayor's office and enquired within - but he wasn't there, and no one appeared to be very interested in us. In any case, no-one spoke English. We went for a little walk and saw more of the town - it seemed very empty. We saw a young woman doing her washing outside on a cold day. There were signs of poverty everywhere.



We spent some time sitting in the car waiting for the Mayor, and watched life go by.



Still no Mayor. So we set off in the car, with the map sent earlier by him, and found the so-called Jewish Cemetery.



In fact, we learnt later that this was the site of the final massacre of the remaining Jewish population in 1941 (the rest had emigrated or fled). A gloomy, dark place,



despite the myriads of cowslips and wood anemones and all the birdsong. Suki made a posy with the cowslips in memory of all those who had died (& so many, and so horribly, as we discovered later).



We returned to the Mayor's office for the 3<sup>rd</sup> and last time, thinking we would just leave quietly. We'd seen Zagare, we'd seen the "cemetery" or so we thought, and we felt that maybe there was still lots of anti Semitism lurking around. Anyway, we couldn't speak the language, and the few people we had seen, didn't exactly welcome us.

However, 3<sup>rd</sup> time lucky! A rounded secretary, who realised who we were, insisted we sat down, made some desperate telephone calls, and in 10 minutes a fine young woman, with a huge smile and with good English appeared - Zivile!

She was one of the two English teachers at the local school. She was thrilled to meet some real English people, wanting to know why we'd come, who we were etc etc.



The Mayor then appeared (note the cherry brandy). I thought he might have been a dour leftover from the Soviet regime, But no, he was an intelligent, kind & gentle man. They insisted on taking us out to the café. This was apparently no more than a kiosk, perhaps selling cigarettes. We went inside. An order for kebabs was made - there was much laughter and good cheer! The relief was colossal - real people making us welcome in the town of our grandfather! A gypsy family sat at an adjoining table. An old grandmother, a thin dark father of about 45, sour & glum, with a face full of despair, and a daughter in her late teens, mentally retarded, dark, and drunk (on the cherry brandy) making a big ugly noise, & laughing. It was so sad, so hopeless. Zivile explained how the authorities try to help the gypsies, but because they do not stay in one place for very long, the resources can be wasted.



We ourselves, as you see, sampled the cherry brandy (which my grandfather had so enjoyed) and we've been sampling it ever since!

Our meal appeared - delicious and most generous. Whilst we were eating, an almighty scream and tremendous shrieks came from the kitchen. I could see huge flames shooting out from the electric cooker! It had caught fire! (no health & safety here, and no reliable electricity supply). A tragedy for those trying to make their living from it; but for us (with the cherry brandy inside us) hysterically funny.

We agreed to return 2 days later.

On this occasion (after another battle at the border) a gentleman was



unexpectedly waiting to meet us in the town. Standing on the pavement, an older thick-set man started speaking to me (the driver) before I'd even switched off the engine. He was asking me a question repeatedly, and looking very anxious. I thought "he's going to mug me" but he didn't appear to be aggressive. I opened the car door to step onto the

pavement. The question, the question - I thought - he's asking "are you Jewish" "are you Jewish?". And I thought, but HE CAN'T BE - we know that there is no one left. Just then, Ziville ran up, and explained that this man, Izaacas Mendelonas, was in fact the last surviving Jew in this area. During the war he was away for 3 years, fighting for Lithuania with the Russians, and during that time, the Nazis came to his town, and with the enthusiastic collaboration of the Lithuanians, tortured his mother and 2 sisters and 6000 or more other people and then shot them, in October 1941.

On his return to remained, nothing was left had stayed in the town, trader. He married a local that day (one of those who've experienced imagine). And here he



Zagare, none of his family of his community. But he earning his living as a girl, whom we met later people with very fine faces things one can never was, coming to greet us

and welcome us to Zagare. So! A real link with the past! His father and my

grandfather, must have known each other. I could not communicate with him without Zivile, he did not recognise the few names I did remember. But it was a real tangible link with the past -

The Myth, and now another Miracle! It was very moving. The Mayor then appeared (although it was his day off); we were taken to the site of the massacre (which we'd already visited 2 days previously).



Many more tears were shed. There was much good discussion. Then we were taken to the “new” cemetery (this really WAS a cemetery).

On the outskirts of the town, it covers about 4 hectares. And despite the cold, and the drizzle, it had a happy atmosphere.





It was untouched, undamaged - an open secret. Wonky tombstones were everywhere, birds were singing their hearts out, and so many wild flowers everywhere. A Happy Place! I met my family - my ancestors - they were all here!

Then to Izaacas' home - a flat overlooking the town square. His wife, Aldona, produced Nescafe and salami. Home made salami - never have I tasted such wonderful salami - made by Izaacas and his wife. But I said tentatively "isn't it pork?". Yes, he said, but the good Lord doesn't mind - he wants us to eat!

I took happy pictures of them, but alas at this point in the story, the film was spoilt.

We departed with such very warm and happy feelings on all sides; and I promised I would try to seek out help for them.

After this visit, a lot happened. We started an NGO - an organisation of friends - calling ourselves "Lithuania Link" with the aim of helping, in a very small way, this newly independent little country.

And help we did.....

I quote Alex Gibb "...My role a director of Lithuania Link was to nurture links with local partners, identifying projects and opportunities for shared experiences. We had the good fortune to undertake a great number considering the largely voluntary nature of the work. We raised tens of thousands of pounds and even more thousands of hours of time and energy to engage in diverse activities in cultural, environmental, social development and youth spheres. I am extremely grateful for this tremendous learning experience. The output has exceeded the input

many times over. Without a doubt, the single most important factor has been and continues to be the people.” We sent out two containers of aid. (I never thought I could get emotional about a lorry, but I did on this occasion!)



The people of Cumbria had been incredibly generous. A party of 11 people, many from Cumbria, helped the town celebrate the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation, along with 10,000 other visitors, including The President of Lithuania.



The Wordsworth Singers, a high quality chamber choir from Cumbria undertook a tour to the Baltics, which included Zagare, in 2006.

Alex, who had read modern languages & business studies, has made a very significant difference, through various small projects, to the quality of life for those living in Zagare. These included organising exchanges for young people, and visits to Zagare by teachers of all ages & from all backgrounds, who went out, usually for month, to reinforce knowledge & skills & initiate new enterprises (folk textiles, the establishment of the Cherry Festival, improving the quality of English teaching, and strategic planning, to name a few); the establishment of Zagare Youth Club; two young adults came to Cumbria for several weeks - Zivile, the teacher of English visited Cumbrian schools, learnt about community sport, girl guiding, WI Markets

and Cumbrian cooking. Valdas, a linguist, studied at Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh for a short time, he met people connected with farming, spent time with an accountant in Carlisle, with youth club leaders and learnt a lot about tourism and the hotel trade, conservation of old buildings and WI Markets. Both Zivile and Valdas gained enormously from these visits. Others subsequently came to Cumbria. Many people and numbers of organisations in Cumbria such as Rotary, helped Lithuania Link to develop ideas about how we could support and encourage the people of Lithuania.

Lithuanians have been so affected by the communist occupation of 50 yrs, that common sense (which is based on experience) has been in short supply, the value of the individual has been eroded, the economy early in the '90s was in a poor way..... Suffering repeated occupation has only strengthened their sense of identity and their determination to become a part of the "west". "There but for the grace of God go I" - I said - "they're just the same as us, I told people, only they have better legs, and blonde hair!" We are just so fortunate to live in the UK (Thank you, Grandpa Towb!) - in comfort and security - surely we have an obligation to help? "No man is an island" said Shakespeare.....

What began as a myth in my childhood has turned into a rolling saga of continual surprises & adventures, some wonderful, some desperately sad. There are many more stories I'd love to write about, of co-incidences, generosity, inspiration, disappointments, support; & meetings & conversations with people at the other side of the world, to whom I've felt so close.

Never a dull moment; we worked very hard; we had so much fun, and laughed such a lot. It's been the most incredible journey for me, for my family & friends, and I hope that readers can sense this. The more knowledge we gleaned about Lithuanians, their difficulties & their strengths the more we were able to help them help themselves.

Even after Lithuania Link was wound up in 2009, developments continue. And friendships become ever stronger.

During the “life” of Lithuania Link, I always used to used to ask myself “Yes, but what about the Jews - ?”. Some years ago, Valdas and I talked through the night about how those innocent and tragic people could be remembered and honoured. He came up with the idea of a Memorial Day, which took place in July 2012. Over 150 people, including locals as well as descendants of the Jews who used to live in Zagare (and who are scattered now all over the world), as well as numbers of dignitaries, took part in a most moving ceremony, marked today by a plaque in the town's square - written in Lithuanian, Yiddish and English. THEN I felt the story was complete - the proper, permanent and public acknowledgement of what happened in 1941.

## THE ARONOWITZ FAMILY

*By Richard Aron, Helene (Aron) Reiff, Alysa (Aron) Hoffman*

Sometimes around the year 1910, our grandparents – Benzion Aronowitz and Rose (Reizel) Aronowitz journeyed from Zagare to Chicago, in the United States where they made a new home and raised their family. They went to Chicago, because they had many relatives there, almost all of whom had made the journey from Zagare before them. A picture of our grandparents, from their days in Chicago, is attached (photo number 1).

Our own knowledge of our family history extends back to our great-great grandfather, whose name was Hillel Jacobson. Hillel Jacobson had eight children, and those eight children were the beginning of eight lines of descent, which gave rise to almost all of our relatives. My grandparents came to Chicago because many of their Zagarean relatives had already moved there.

One of those relatives was a son-in-law of Hillel Jacobson, named Dov Baer Weiner. Dov Baer was a builder, and I have heard that when the town of Zagare spread to the other side of the river, Dov Baer was one of the active builders who built many of the properties of what many in the town were referring to as “New Zagare”. A picture of Dov Baer (known to the family as “Uncle Berchik”) Weiner, taken at our father’s Bar Mitzvah in Chicago in 1932, is attached (photo number 2).

Hillel Jacobson was, as we said, the father of eight children. Our own grandmother was the daughter of Hillel’s daughter Libby Krieger. We don’t have information about the larger Krieger family, and that is a great shame. About 1905 there was a lot of unrest in Zagare and people wanted greater independence from the ruling czarist government. A young woman named Rivka Krieger apparently made a flag for the town as it sought more independence, and she was arrested by the government, though she later escaped from prison. Our information about our grandmother’s siblings does not include anyone by the name of Rivka, but we have always wondered whether Rifva Krieger, the “Betsy Ross” of Zagare, was a cousin of our grandmother. We are hoping that there might be some genealogical information at the event in Zagare that will help us answer that question.

Our father, Harry B. Aron was born in Chicago in 1919. He lived in Chicago his entire life, where he was a lawyer and later a judge, and unfortunately, he died about 7 years ago. Our father would have been so keen and excited to make the trip to Zagare with us, and even though there is much joy in looking forward to our visit in Zagare, it is sad for us that our dad won't be there to share this experience with us. A picture from our father's bar mitzvah is attached (photo number 3).

What is interesting from the point of view of Zagare is that almost everyone in this very large family picture had either moved personally from Zagare to Chicago or was the child of someone who came to Chicago from Zagare.

We are looking forward with great anticipation to the coming event in Zagare where we hope to meet many people and where we hope to learn more of our family history and to learn about the place which was so important in forming the family to which we are so attached.

#### PHOTOS:



1. *Benzion and Rose (Reizel) Aronowitz*



2. *Dov Baer Weiner (Uncle Berchik)*



*3. Bar Mitzvah Picture of our father, Harry B. Aron – and his family, almost all Zagareans and children of Zagareans, May, 1932*

## THE BER FAMILY

*By Chris Milton (New Zealand)*

Today there are many people, found all over the world, descended from my great great grandparents, a couple from Old Žagarė: Ber Zavel Ber (probably born about 1834, died 1919) and Ita Ber née Aronson (born 1843, died 1923). After moving to England they took the AngloSaxon name 'Beare'. They had seven children that survived childhood: Tirza Bassa Laserson (Theresa Bertha), Feiga Lessik, an unknown daughter Ber, possibly Genya or Jeanne Ber, who eloped to Paris with a Monsieur Klass, Hyman Beare, Jack Beare, Sarah Ginsberg, and Harry Beare.

Ber Zavel Ber was a tailor and it was as such he jointly signed a letter to the Governor of Kovno Gubernya, dated 1885, with other members of the tailors' guild. (By the time he was in Britain he was at times described as a cutter of ladies undergarments!)

In the family Ber Zavel Ber was affectionately known as Berazava. We know that he was a very devout (*frum*) man to the extent that he slept with a basin and cup of water near his bed so that he could perform the requirement of *negel vasser*, washing his hands directly after waking. He was also a very kindly man, remembered as much loved by children. My grandmother, Lilian Beare, recalled him as an old man with a beard who was a scholar surrounded by books. He spoke no English, only Yiddish.

In English Berazava had various names at different times including Barnet Beare, Samuel Beare and Solomon Beare. His wife Ita was variously known as Ita, Yetta, Yetty, Eda and Irene.

I believe that this couple with their descendents (except for the youngest daughter Feiga, who married Mordechai Lessik and went instead to Riga, Latvia) emigrated from Žagarė to England between 1885 and 1890. There is much family lore about when the family left Žagarė for England but the available documents support a date closer to 1890. In England the Beares lived in Manchester and Liverpool, except for Sarah who moved to Dublin when she married. In the 1891 England Census there is an entry of a Solomon Berr, or Beer or Bear (the writing is

not clear) with his wife Letty, presumably Ita. At that time they lived at 72 Gun Street, Manchester. Berazava is listed as a thread maker, Sarah a dressmaker and Harris (Harry) a joiner. The rest of the Beare family in the UK at that time appear to have been living with the Laserson family at 52 York St, Cheetham, Manchester. By 1901, according to the England and Wales Census, Berazava and Ita were living at 10 Cliff Street, Manchester.

In 1896 Berazava made application for naturalization as a British subject. The usual Memorandum with all its information is not present in the Home Office bundle. In any event the application was rejected on the grounds that three of his referees who claimed to have known him for three or four years had only known him for two years or less.

Berazava and Ita later moved to South Africa and lived in Ophirton, a part of Johannesburg. They were certainly resident by 1906 at Kimberley High Rd. Ophirton. It seems that in late 1906 a case sent from Britain, described as containing samples of cloth, was sent to an S. Beare, i.e. Berazava, in Johannesburg. When customs opened this in Durban it was found to actually contain four pairs of boots and clothing. The Director of Customs in Pretoria instituted an enquiry but the Inspector of Customs in Johannesburg found that Berazava was sent these by a son in Liverpool and that he had no idea what the case really contained. The inspector comments that Berazava appeared to be a poor man and that his occupation was that of a pedlar. Furthermore he had no reason to doubt his integrity. The son mentioned was most likely my great grandfather Jack Beare who did live in Liverpool at that time. No further action was taken.

When Berazava lived in Johannesburg he was the Shammash of the Ophirton Synagogue. By that time he was very poor and used to make and sell cottage cheese, in muslin bags. He would also buy very speckled, ripe bananas because they were so much cheaper.

Berazava and his wife Ita are buried in Johannesburg. From a list of burial sites I have found listed: Samuel Beare (1843 c - 7 Aug 1919), Braamfontein cemetery, Johannesburg, ZA, location: 2089. The same list of burial sites lists an Eda Beare (1834 c - 8 Sep 1923), Brixton Cemetery, Johannesburg, ZA, location: 397. (I believe

that the years of their births have been rotated and should be the other way round. I also believe that Berazava generally probably misreported his age for official purposes as about 10 years younger than he actually was.) Their children dispersed all over the world:

Tirza Bassa (Bertha) Laserson moved to Manchester in Britain where she became a very successful businesswoman. Many of her descendents still live there others have dispersed to Australia and the USA.

Feiga Lessik moved first to Bilderingshof, Latvia and then to the USA. Some of her children and grandchildren stayed behind in Riga and were killed in the Holocaust: Chaim Lesik and his two sons and daughter; Shmuel Lesik, and Toba Rivka Michelson and her children Leah and Leibel Michelson.

The unknown daughter Ber, probably Jeanne Ber, eloped to Paris with a Monsieur Klass. We do not know when. She had a son Robert Klass who was rescued by Berazava after her early death and brought to Britain. He became a violinist and ultimately lived in Liverpool.

Harry Beare moved to South Africa where he owned a bicycle business.

Sarah Ginsberg married and moved to Dublin, when her husband died she moved to South Africa where Hyman Beare and Jack Beare (my great grandfather) had also moved. These two brothers established a furniture factory in Durban in the 1920s. Under Hyman's sons, Aaron and Maurice, Beare this business grew. Maurice left for the USA and Aaron became a very successful South African businessman and philanthropist.

## THE FREEDLAND FAMILY

### (Profile of Rebekah Sachs Freedland)

My grandmother, Rebekah Sachs Freedland, was already ill by the time I got to know her. I would sit next to her at the kitchen table and play with the bits of hot wax she used to ease the arthritis pains in her hands. But she had not always been thus. She had been the belle of the ball growing up in Papile and visiting family in Zagare before she came to America as a newlywed in 1909.

Born in 1880, Rebekah was the youngest of the family of seven. Her sister Rachel, the only other daughter, was married to Avraham Lemchinas and raising a family in Zagare by the time Rebekah was a young woman. Rachel's daughter Anna recalled how "Auntie Rebekah" would visit periodically bringing with her a trunk of the latest fashions for her nieces to try on and teaching everyone the latest dances.

Life for Rebekah in the early 1900's was a social whirl of trips with friends to Riga, balls, ice-skating by day and evenings at the opera. She traveled on her own through what was then part of the Russian Empire and even took courses in accounting. She was beautiful, independent, and sought after by many young men who wanted to marry her. But in 1908, she gave her hand to her first cousin, David Freedland. Their marriage put an end to her life in Lithuania and the visits to Zagare.

A picture taken before her marriage to David is the only one the family has of Rebekah and Rachel together. Much later, Rebekah's parents moved to Zagare and lived with Rachel, as this Lemchinas family picture shows. All Rachel's children but one, Chatzkel Lemchinas, followed Rebekah's lead and emigrated. The Nazis slaughtered Rachel and Avraham in 1941. Their remains lie in Naryshkin Park.

Their death closed a chapter in Rebekah's life and I never heard her speak of her sister. Now we, her living descendants, hope to continue the story.

PHOTOS:



## THE FREEDMAN FAMILY

*Rod Freedman, Sydney, Australia*

My grandparents emigrated from Lithuania to South Africa, early in the twentieth century. My parents, Sylvia and Mendy Freedman and much of our extended family emigrated to Australia in the sixties, unwilling to be part of the racist Apartheid system any longer. Three generations, three continents. As Sholem Aleichem said, "We Jews are people of the air, because we don't have roots."

Like most people, I spent most of my life focused on the present and the future, never really looking back. It was only when I found myself with my own family and a more certain sense of identity and stability that I began to consider where I'd come from. But it was so far in the past, it seemed unreachable.

I never knew my grandfathers, but both my grandmothers, Gita and Fanny, spoke with 'Jewish' accents that I never thought much about. Their conversations were scattered with Yiddish expressions that I more or less understood - colorful exclamations of surprise, sighing phrases of resignation, warm murmurings of affection for the children and our strange ways. Of course, there were the delicious names of our Jewish foods - lokshen pudding, gehakte herring, gefilte fish, kneidlach, teiglach, piroggin. Sometimes they'd say something to each other and laugh and we knew it was at our expense. But it never occurred to any of our next two generations to learn Yiddish. Why should we? It was the language of the old country. It was the past.

On her bridge mornings, my granny Gita and her elderly friends would gather around the green baize table in a special world of their own, the familiar Yiddish interwoven with the slap of the cards. I hung around for the leftover triangle sandwiches of white bread, egg and cucumber and the remnants of the bowl of Smarties.

I don't recall ever asking my granny about her past, even though I was twenty two when she died, in Sydney. As a child, I must've seen someone pointing out on the globe where we came from. It was in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics - Russia. I remember once telling a visiting friend that we came from Russia. Sternly,

Granny admonished me with a wagging finger: 'Not Russia! Lithuania!'. It was confusing.

There were other snippets of information, though they were headlines rather than stories. Some of our family had been killed in the Holocaust. Granny's parents had been rounded up and killed with their fellow Jews. People had been forced to dig their own graves. It was all rather vague and I don't recall ever asking for more information. Where did this take place? What happened exactly? How did you find out? Why haven't you ever gone back?

You didn't open that door. It was not explicitly forbidden, but still, out of bounds. So shocking that you daren't ask for details. I didn't even know if anyone knew the details. And so, I never knew where we came from exactly, nor could I imagine the kind of life my grandparents had left.

In 1980, almost thirty, I left Sydney to travel. In London, I visited Anna, my granny's sister in an old aged home. Borrowing a reel to reel tape recorder, I taped an interview with Anna, asking about her memories of the old country and her family. It was a rich source of information, even though all her siblings seemed to have been remarkably talented, each one excelling at something! I discovered the Yiddish names of the towns we came from – Shavel (Siauliai), Popelan (Papile) and Zhager (Zagare). They had a soft, nostalgic sound to them. Anna gave me a gift, the first photo I'd ever seen of our family in Lithuania – three generations gathered in front of a shuttered window for a formal portrait. It must've been around 1913.



Fast forward to Pesach (Passover) 1997. Two of my young cousins, Emile and Ondine Sherman, had just returned from Lithuania. The Iron Curtain was down and newly opened Eastern Europe was now one of the 'cool' places to visit. They'd visited our great Uncle Chatzkel in Vilnius and had some photos and a few snippets of stories. The whole family was excited and strangely amazed at the fact that these two young people had decided to visit the past. I asked myself, 'Why hasn't anyone in the family visited before?' It seemed we had a kind of psychological barrier - Lithuania was the past, unreachable. And yet here was proof that it was as simple as booking a seat on a plane.

At 93, my Great Uncle Chatzkel Lemchen was the last, fragile leaf on our Lithuanian family tree. As a filmmaker, I wanted to record whatever stories he might remember and with support from my cousin, Brian Sherman, I left for Lithuania six weeks later with a Russian speaking cameraman friend, Nicholas Sherman.

During those six weeks of preparation, I read all I could about the Jews in Lithuania. It was horrific. Ninety four per cent had been killed during the Holocaust. The map of Lithuania is covered with black dots of places of mass murder. The Nazis were responsible for most of the murder, but local Lithuanian collaborators had participated to an unimaginable extent, especially during the power vacuum in mid-1941 after Hitler invaded and the Russian occupiers fled. I began to understand why we had never talked about it. How does one deal with the knowledge of such massacres? Better not to open those doors.

Arriving in Vilnius for an emotional meeting with Uncle Chatzkel, I was immersed in the events of 1941. My priority was to record all that he remembered, but after that, I wanted to visit Zhager (Zagare), where his parents, my great grandparents had lived - and died. None of my family had ever been there. But I was also dreading it as a dark and evil place.

I remember stopping outside of the town to film the Zagare sign. A foreboding tunnel of trees confronted us, the branches joining in the middle to form a threatening canopy. I was anxious and nervous.

We'd been told to look up "the last Jew in Zagare", Isaak Mendelson. Isaak, a strong, barrel-chested elderly man with a broken nose and open face, warmly greeted us and became our personal guide with Aldona, his gentle wife. Doors to the past began to open.

Isaak took us to the house where my great grandparents, Avraham Yaakov Lemchen and Rocha Lemchen had lived. Isaak recalled that Avraham was on the Jewish Committee of Zagare and was a kind man, the sort of person who would help others. I knew from Uncle Chatzkel that the family had settled in Zagare only after the First World War, having fled to Russia as refugees and returned to find their home town of Popelan (Papile) destroyed. So they moved to Zagare and started a new life.

Entering the old house with Isaak, an old-fashioned, wood-fired stove crackled. On the kitchen bench, two trays of pasties were ready to be baked. I imagined my great grandmother might walk in at any moment, brushing flour from her hands and tending the fire. I felt like a ghost among ghosts.

In the derelict workshop at the back of the house, there were bits of machinery that they might have used. Their presence was very strong. They had stood in this doorway, walked down this same cobbled street. Suddenly, it didn't seem all that long ago. The past was just over my shoulder.

In June 1941, when the Germans invaded, all the Jews from surrounding districts were forcibly gathered in Zagare. An improvised ghetto was invoked for some days. I had read that there were many local Lithuanian fascist supporters involved in this reign of terror. For example, they asked for strong, young men to volunteer for a work party. These potential defenders of the community were taken to the Jewish cemetery on the outskirts of town and shot. Community leaders were humiliated and beaten. Imagining one's own family in these circumstances is difficult and painful.

Isaak Mendelson was in the Red Army during the war and survived. On his return, he heard what had happened to his community. On October 1, 1941 – Yom Kippur – the Jews were gathered in the town square of Zagare and addressed by a German from a balcony. A whistle blew. The shooting started. A number of

townspeople were amongst the shooters. A rebellion briefly occurred and some of the Nazi supporters were injured. Blood flowed into the river. The details can be researched if you have the stomach for it.

In the town square on this sleepy, summer's afternoon in 1997, a few locals sat on benches amongst the trees in the town square. People gossiped on a corner. An elderly woman rode by on a bicycle, regarding our film crew with hostile suspicion. Or maybe it was just innocent curiosity? In my mind, everyone was potentially implicated. I was here now, but my head was in 1941 and there was more to come. Isaak took us to the nearby Naryshkin Park, the darkness on the edge of town. He explained how here, the survivors of the town shooting were made to strip off their clothing and stand on the edges of a u-shape of pre-prepared trenches. They were shot until layers of bodies and lime, bodies and lime, bodies and lime, filled the trenches. I tried to, and tried not to imagine my own family, Avraham and Rocha being there. The confusion, the fear, the disbelief, the sounds, the cruelty and determination of the perpetrators. The men, women and children, all massacred. A community gone, their houses now empty.

Standing on that ground changed me. The knowledge that you can never unknow. The unspoken burdens of my Granny's life now had new depth and meaning.

I left Zagare bolstered by meeting Isaak, but overwhelmed with the tangible evidence of where my family had lived and how they had been murdered by their fellow countrymen, albeit largely organised by the German Einsatzgruppen death squads.

The process of making the film *Uncle Chatzkel* had connected me unexpectedly to my Jewish roots. I felt deeply the responsibility of doing his story justice. In 2000, I returned to Lithuania to show the film to him and to the local Jewish community. It went on to travel the world and today (2015) is being renewed as an educational resource for Lithuanian schools.

Zagare remained a dark place in my mind for fifteen years. Then in 2012, out of the blue I received an invitation from local resident Valdas Balciunas. Would I come to Zagare for a commemoration ceremony that he was organising with other Jewish

descendants of Zagare. in July, we gathered in the town for an event, unique in my life.

Some years before, Valdas had discovered the truth of his town for the first time. He hadn't known that so many Jews had lived there and for hundreds of years. He'd had no idea of how they'd died, nor that local residents had been 'Jew-shooters'. His education had left him completely ignorant of this history. People in the town rarely talked about the Jews, even though they'd been a high percentage of the population before the war. Valdas discovered the truth through reading Rose Zwi's book, 'Last Walk in Naryshkin Park'.

Determined to do something tangible, he came up with the idea of a commemoration plaque in the centre of the town. Not out in the forest at the massacre site, where few would see it, but in the town square, where people passed by every day.



Wisely, Valdas consulted with Jewish descendants and the result was a plaque in Lithuanian, English and Yiddish. He was supported by local authorities and it was all official. On 13 July 2012, an international group of Zagare descendants participated in a healing ceremony of acknowledgement and reconciliation. Afterwards, we stood incredulous in the local hall when visiting musicians from Vilnius sang Yiddish songs and played old Jewish tunes to rapturous applause.

On this visit, I learnt for the first time that there had been families in Zagare who had risked their lives to save Jews. We were honoured to meet Sofia and Leonas Levinskas, both children of such families. Somehow, it made a difference to me and my perspective began to change. This family was later awarded Righteous Amongst the Nations by the Israeli ambassador. Valdas suggested the ceremony take place in the Zagare school rather than in the council offices, as a lesson to the next generation. So the young people of Zagare have finally been learning the truths their town had kept concealed during the Soviet era.

Another photographic gift - Valdas discovered a photo of a 1920s street scene. A group of men gathered around a couple of carts regard the camera somewhat suspiciously. A blurred figure in the foreground gives the feeling that it's not exactly a formal shot. In the background is a sign, 'Dazykla. A. Lemchen'. This is my family's 'Dye Shop', their wool dyeing business. The photo is confirmation somehow, that it was all real.



*Zagare circa 1925, the Lemchen Dye Shop sign in the background*

Valdas also discovered that Abraham Lemchen had been elected to the Town Council. So he was a well-known, respected and active member of the community.

Unexpectedly, that visit of commemoration and reconciliation brought me into the present. Like Isaak Mendelson before him, Valdas Balciunas is an ambassador, bringing humanity and hope to those he meets, through his actions.

After the experience of meeting people whose families had rescued Jews, realizing that there are residents who feel sorrow about the past and want now to speak the truth of what happened and meeting officials who are acknowledging the Jewish history of the town, I no longer regard Zagare solely through the prism of the past.

Such healing starts with honesty and acknowledgement of both the heritage and the horrors of the past. I now feel welcomed in Zagare and I no longer feel a stranger in the home of my ancestors, Zagare, or as they used to call it, Zhager.

## THE GANZ FAMILY

*By Roger Lippman (Seattle, USA)*

This June, my wife and I visited the Akmene area, hoping I might find some trace or record of my ancestors.

My great-grandfather (my mother's paternal grandfather), Ben Zion Ganz, was born in Akmene in 1870. He married Maria (Mire) Lahn, of Klykoliai (Klikol, in Yiddish), and the couple settled in her home town, late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



*Ben Zion Ganz*

In about 1901, Ben Zion went to Sweden in search of work, leaving behind his wife and four or five children. He returned to Klikol six years later, when his oldest son, my grandfather Maurice Ganz, was 13. Before long, Ben Zion left again, for Norway, where Jews were newly allowed to settle. This time, he took Maurice with him. At perhaps about the same time, Maria's uncle Are Ruwen Lahn also moved from Klikol to Norway, and he has many, many descendants there.

Ben Zion worked as a peddler, or traveling salesman, taking young Maurice along with him, though eventually Ben Zion got so sick that young Maurice had to peddle all over Norway by himself. Maurice had just three years of Hebrew school education, but he was very smart and often stayed up all night reading. Ben Zion's father, whose name we don't know, was a rabbi, and the children were raised on the Old Testament. When Maurice and his father traveled around Norway, they stayed in accommodations that usually had one book, the Bible. But on one occasion, as we heard it from Grandpa, there was an atlas of world history in the rented room. He read it from cover to cover and was astonished to learn, among other things, that the world wasn't, in fact, created 6000 years ago. He was so furious that he had been lied

to all these years that he rejected religion altogether. By 1914, he left Norway for the USA – the only one in his immediate family to do so for at least half a century. He married in New York, and my mother, who now lives in New Jersey, was born in 1920.

Meanwhile, the rest of my great-grandparents' family moved from Lithuania to Norway in about 1913. That included Maria and the couple's other five children – three sons and two daughters.

The family, except for Maurice, stayed in Norway until the World War II Nazi occupation changed everything. The three brothers fled to neutral Sweden to join the Norwegian exile resistance army. Their mother, sisters, wives, and children were left behind under the impression that they would be safe. It was not until the brothers returned at the end of the war that they learned that all of their families had been deported to Auschwitz and killed by the Germans – with the exception of Ben Zion, who died of poor health shortly before the deportations.

I was the first of my family or the extended Ganz family, as far as I know, to visit Lithuania since Grandpa Maurice went in 1934. At that time he saw some cousins and reported that they were very poor. We don't know who they were or what their fate was, but if they stayed in Lithuania, they almost certainly were, like their Norwegian relatives, killed by the Nazis.

Maurice took photos of the family homes of his mother and father. Here are reproductions:



*The Ganz family home in Akmene, 1934*



*The Lahn family home (with twin gables) in Klykoliai, 1934*

When we visited this year, we started in Zhagare, where we had the great fortune to connect with a young local woman, a friend of a friend of a college friend of mine who I last saw over 40 years ago. She oriented us and generously told us about the area's history.

In Akmene, we went to the museum, where an English-speaking staff person gave us a thorough tour, but had no information on Jewish history. He referred us to the local government building, which houses the police as well as an office of social workers who look after the needs of the young and elderly. We showed the social workers the photo of the Ganz house, and they gave us their full attention in trying to identify where that house might be. With the help of a couple of the town elders, we looked at two possibilities, but alas, they were not the ones. We concluded that the house must no longer exist.

The next day we went to Klykoliai, with the same objectives. It's a tiny village – maybe a hundred homes, and no retail commerce. From a friend I had heard a description of the old Jewish cemetery there, so we went to look for it. The town is literally right on the border with Latvia, just on the Lithuanian side of the Vadakastis River. (My grandfather had grown up speaking both Lithuanian and Latvian, as well as Yiddish. Later he became fluent in Norwegian and English.) We walked across the

little bridge that crosses the border – surely, Maurice made that same crossing many times. We expected to find the cemetery right along the river by the bridge, but it wasn't there. What we did find was a little picnic area, with four Lithuanians enjoying a barbecue. They spoke no English, but we showed them the words we had written down: Žydu Kapines. After a moment's consultation, they figured out where it was, nearby. Two of them jumped in their car and led us to it, not far to the east, but we never would have found it by ourselves. The cemetery was quite overgrown, though it is well known to Jews who pay attention to these things, and there is a recent monument near the entrance. But most of the grounds are overgrown with grass, wild roses, and apple tree saplings. The headstones are worn, and in any case, mostly in Hebrew script, which we couldn't read.

For years I had looked forward to visiting the land of my ancestors, hoping to learn something more about the family history. I found nothing specific, but I am delighted to have had the opportunity to walk where they walked (and where some of them are probably buried), and to get a glimpse of the environment that surrounded them.

After Lithuania, I briefly visited Norway, where I already knew that I have living relatives. I met my mother's first cousin (her father's nephew) in Oslo. Though he is my mother's generation, he is my age. That is because my grandfather's brothers, whose families were killed during the war, remarried afterwards and had children born soon after the war, around the time I was. I also met several Lahns, 3<sup>rd</sup> cousins or even more distant, but family all the same.

## THE GORDON FAMILY

Isadore Isaac Gordon

1878 (or 1882?) -1952

*By Cliff Marks*

This is the story of my grandfather, Isadore Gordon, from Zagare. His birth name may have been Isaac as that is the name on the manifest of the ship that took him to America. And he may have actually been born in Kruopiai as he indicates in a journal that he started in 1948 but never completed. I will quote from this journal extensively since who better to tell his story than he himself? He starts his journal with the title, "A Son is Born".

I was born on the first Seder night April 14, 1882, or thereabouts in the town or village of Krupa or Krupp, Lithuania on the border of Courland. How I was born I actually cannot understand till this day. This generation doesn't believe in miracles. My birth was a miracle. My growing up was a Miracle, and my whole life was a miracle of miracles. Every Jew born or brought up in Lithuania or Galicia is a Miracle - a living miracle. And if he dies a natural death - another miracle.

Born without a doctor, nurse or midwife. No diapers and no cradle, and on the third day after I was born my poor mother got out of bed and did a full days work of a peasant woman and she had no chicken soup either. Why I am so fond of chicken I don't know. They generally say that everybody is fond of the thing mother ate at birth.

You can see by the very name of my town -Krupa - and its location - or dislocation on the map, how much wealth and riches surrounded me at the day I was born and hence forward. A one room thatched roof hovel. And the same kind of straw that covered the roof was used for window shutters. Nothing on the floor except mother earth and gravel. And how clean and fresh it looked every Friday for the Sabbath after mother got through cleaning the little mansion up and strewing the floor with fresh clean sand! It was really a sweet smell and dear mother Fagie - bless her soul - would say, "Children this is holy Sabbath smell from Paradise!" And when father, whose name was Israel Zelig Gordon, a poor country tailor, a man

of very few words during the week, used to come home from Shuhl in his Sabbath coat and his face was wreathed in smiles as he entered the little hut with the sweet smell of the Sabbath cooking.

Yes, Krupa was some metropolis. One long street or mud road. Between the towns of Zagger and Akman. On both sides of which must have been about 50 houses or huts with thatched roof except those of the few wealthy peasants and the couple village officials. Majority of inhabitants were Lithuanians and about a dozen or fifteen Jewish families who, strange as it may seem, had a little Synagogue and kept up a Shochet who used to teach the children as well as fulfill the functions of "chazen" (chanter), reader of the Torah, etc. We used to call our city a "one horse town" meaning when a horse and wagon used to pass through the head of the horse was at one end of the town and the hind wheels at the other end.

And how those Jews kept up their communal religious institutions I don't know. They must have been earning some money whether by peddling or shop keeping, I don't remember. One thing I do know - my father was the richest of them all -- so rich every year Uncle Hirsh from Estland, Mother's brother had to send 13 rubles to pay for the year's rent.

Father was a descendant from the Gordons on his father's side and from the Yaffes on his mother's side hailing from Zagger and Sadi. His father Meir came from an old branched out family, in Sad, boasting of a line of known merchants, Rabbis, and scribes. Father's grandfather Rabb Elasar, a merchant of good standing and a Talmudic scholar, was quite famous, all around the neighboring communities. Grandfather Reb Mair as a young Talmudist married Racher the daughter of Reb Isaac Yaffe (after whom I am named) from New Zagger (the town of Zagger being divided by the river Sveta made up two townships New Zagger and Old Zagger) who was quite rich at one time and known for his wit and wisdom. But in spite of himself being wealthy and belonging to the pedigreed and influential family of the Jaffees, in community affairs he always took the side of the poor. He was known as the champion of the under-dog. Consequently he raised the wrath of the powerful and wealthy and at the end suffered for it.

And that is where his journal ends. I was eight years old when he died. I remember him well as he and my grandmother lived with my mother and me in the same house. But the only story I remember him telling me about the “old country” was when he told his father that he no longer wanted to go to school. His father, the tailor, said “If you don’t want to go to school then I will show you what it is like to work all day as a tailor instead.” He tied his son’s fingers together with string in the position that a tailor uses and kept it like that all day. It was so uncomfortable that my grandfather went right back to school the next day. I don’t know how old my grandfather was at the time, nor what type of school it was – although it probably was in Zagare, or how much of a Hebrew education he received. Later in life he was noted as a Hebrew scholar but how much of that was self-taught? After he died we offered his Hebrew books to a rabbi who said that he considered himself to be a Hebrew scholar but was nothing compared to my grandfather. But I am getting ahead in the story.

PHOTOS:

Photo number 1: Feige Gordon

Photo number 2: Zagare Family

The woman in the first photo is my great-grandmother Feige Gordon (Isadore's mother). Although all her children emigrated she stayed in Lithuania and died in Zagare in 1935. The other picture is a bit of a mystery - I think the woman is also Feige Gordon and I am pretty sure that the young woman standing up on the left is her daughter Rose (my grandfather's sister). Is the older man my grandfather's father? And is the little boy on his lap my grandfather or one of his brothers? But the other woman standing behind Feige is a real mystery because I don't believe that there were other girls in the family, other than Rose.

My grandfather left Zagare in 1901. I know he sailed from Liverpool to Philadelphia but I have no idea how he got to Liverpool. On September 9, 1901 he arrived in Philadelphia aboard the ship Belgenland.

Photo number 3: Picture of ship

On September 11, 1901 (exactly 100 years before 9/11) he arrived in Circleville, Ohio where his brother Harry had emigrated earlier. Rose also emigrated to the States. There may have been another brother who left for South Africa but I have not been able to trace him. My grandfather only stayed a couple of days in Circleville and then moved to Chicago. He worked for a time as a cigar maker and that is where he met my grandmother who also worked as a cigar maker. Theirs was a mixed marriage: he was a Litvak and she was a Galitzianer. Here is a photo of my grandfather as a young man:

Photo number 4: Young man

One family story that resonates with his saying that one of his ancestors always stood up for the underdog, took place in Chicago in 1906 and involves my grandfather being arrested for disturbing the peace and inciting a riot at a speech given by a notorious racist South Carolina Senator who was touring the country. Evidently the Senator said that the blood of blacks (probably not the term used at the time) was different than that of whites. My grandfather stood up and yelled that "if you cut my arm and cut the arm of a black person you will see that the blood is the same color." This evidently instigated a commotion and my grandfather was arrested. I have the letter from the publisher of a Chicago Negro magazine saying that "the colored people all over the city appreciate very much the manly stand you took and are willing to do anything reasonable to help you out of trouble."

Both my grandparents were ardent Labor Zionists. He attended the famous 1921 Cleveland convention of the Zionist Organization of America, which was a turning point in American Zionist history, with the leadership of the ZOA changing from Louis Brandeis to a group that supported the European ideological Zionism of Chaim Weizmann. In this portion of a photo of the event Weizmann is at the left center and my grandfather is at the right edge about one-third down from the top.

Photo number 5: Zionist convention

By the time of the convention my grandfather had started teaching Hebrew school and did so in many cities around the country including Wichita, Kansas; Loraine, Ohio; Oakland and Los Angeles, California. The usual pattern was that after a couple of years he got in an argument with the Temple administration and had to

move on. After many moves it became apparent that he was not going to be making enough money to support his two daughters' education. So he gave up teaching Hebrew and opened a grocery store in downtown Los Angeles on the site of the current County Courthouse. He achieved some attention as never having turned away a hungry person during the depression. Here is an article in the Los Angeles Times that describes that:

Photo number 6: LA Times article

However, he always felt that running a grocery store was beneath him and that he should have been a Hebrew scholar and teacher. Once an old friend from out of town came to visit him at the store and my grandfather ran away, telling my grandmother that if this friend wants to visit he should visit him at home, not at the store where he was ashamed of his position.

As I noted, our rabbi friend told us that he could tell that my grandfather was a true Hebrew scholar - maybe he could have been one of the *Chachmei Zhager* - the wise men of Zhager. This relates to another story my grandmother told me. Once she caught him burning all his writings about religion and she asked him why he was doing it and he replied, "Martin Buber has already written all this".

My grandfather died in 1952. I still miss him to this day.

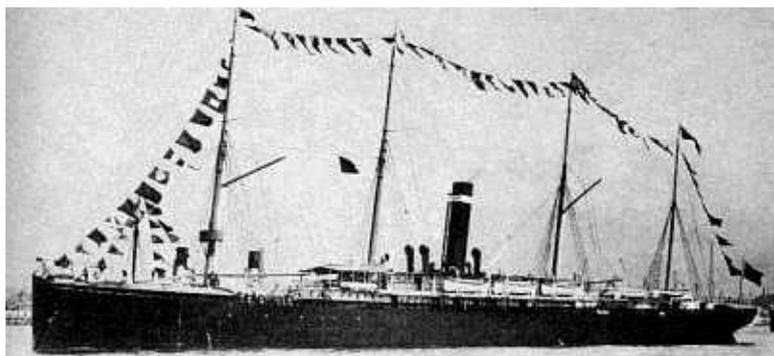
PHOTOS:



1. Feige Gordon



*2. Zagare family (The Gordons)*



*3. Picture of ship*



*4. Young man*



*5. Zionist convention*

# The LEE SIDE

BY  
LEE SHIPPEY

o' L. A.

You can't always believe in signs. On the wall of a tiny grocery at First and Olive streets is a sign which reads: "Seven Years in Business and Nobody Turned Down."

But Isidore Gordon, the proprietor, admits it isn't strictly true. It should read "nine years" instead of seven.

*Sign Doesn't  
Tell the Full  
Truth, but It  
Shows Plenty  
of Good Will*

"It has been an interesting experiment," Gordon tells me. It has not destroyed my faith in human nature, for the sign still is there and we still live up to it. Depression has been hard on me because it has made many people lose all sense of obligation. I'd like to have all the money I've lost these last few years. But I have a lot of customers who have been with me the whole nine years. I've carried them through some tough spots and they appreciate it. People generally seem to have the idea that one hand washes the other. This is not a prosperous neighborhood, but I doubt that I have more deadbeats to contend with than do lots of stores in prosperous neighborhoods. These people haven't made me rich, but they have kept me from starving, and I guess I've kept a lot of them from starving, too."

Just then a seedy man who had been eyeing the sign outside came in. "The wife and I just paid our last cent for room rent," he said. "Can you help me out for a few days?"

*Experiment  
Has Proved  
Human Nature  
Is Still Worth  
Believing In*

Gordon handed him a bottle of milk and a loaf of bread. "That'll hold you a while," he said. "Don't forget me when you get a job."

6. LA Times article

## THE KAGAN FAMILY

*By Jo Ann Goldwater (Montreal, Quebec, Canada)*

My paternal great grandparents, Rosa and Louis Kagan, were from Zhager. Their first two children, Bertha Kagan (later Goldwater) born 1869 and Dr. Abraham Ber Kagan, born 1870, were born there. Sometime around 1874, the family moved to Riga where five more children were born.



*Bertha Kagan Goldwater  
1869-1947*



*Dr. Boris L. Kagan*

All of the Kagans (or Kahns) were well educated and very intelligent. Bertha could read and write in about six languages, and when she married my grandfather and moved to Montreal in 1893, people used to ask her to read, and write letters for them in several languages.

Abraham Kagan studied medicine in Moscow, and graduated in 1893 specializing in eye diseases. At that time, doctors could specialize but they also had to practice general medicine because there were so few doctors.

Abraham went to work at a hospital in Voskresensk, about 55 miles south of Moscow, where he was known as Dr. Boris Leibovitch Kagan. He built up the hospital and even today he is remembered by the people as the father of modern medicine in that area. There is a street named after him, a monument to his memory, and a plaque on the wall of the hospital that was unveiled in 2011. He died in the near by town of Kolomna in 1912 at the age of 42 after he contracted typhus from a

patient. In a photo taken weeks before he died, he looked completely exhausted and worn out, and maybe that contributed to his premature death. He gave of himself selflessly, with no consideration for his own health and welfare.

A Russian filmmaker, Svetlana Belous, has just made a movie about his life. And it will be premiered at the Zagare Jewish Festival in September 2015.

### **The Goldwasser Family**

The Goldwasser family was originally from the nearby shtetl of Akmene, but moved to Zhager, and later some of the family moved to Riga. I'm not sure of the years of these moves.



Abba (Adolph) Goldwasser

1864-1945



Ber Goldwasser

1851-1936

My grandfather, Abba Goldwater was born in Akmene in 1864 and came to Canada in 1892 with his brother Israel. In all, there were eight siblings, four of whom came to Canada. After a stop in Dublin, where their brother Woolf lived, Abba and Israel went to Canada. First they went out to Winnipeg where the Canadian government was giving out free land to farmers. The two brothers quickly realized that farming was not for them, and they returned to Montreal to become successful businessmen.

One of the siblings who stayed in Riga was Ber Goldwasser. Ber had four children, two sons who went to Montreal, and two daughters who stayed behind. One daughter was Fruma, born in Zagare in 1891, who married Aron Trumpaitsky, and in 1915 she and her family were exiled to Russia, as many Jews were at the time.

Ber's other daughter, Haya Mirel stayed in Riga, and died there in the Riga Ghetto with her husband, Itzik Notel Israelstam and two sons Jacob and David.



*Lt. Haya Mirel with her father Ber, her two sons, and an unidentified boy.*



*Rt. Rocha Goldwasser from an internal passport photo 1920*

Another of Abba Goldwater's brothers, Itzik, born in Akmene in 1847, had a daughter, Rocha Goldwasser Abrahamson born in Zhager in 1894. She died in the Riga Ghetto with her five daughters Gita, Mirjam, Asne, Sulamith, and Sara-Hasa.



*"Mayor of Zhager" - Meyer Saron?  
Ca 1810-1886  
Uncle of my grandmother, Bertha Kagan*

A relative who lives in the US sent me this photo that has "Mayor of Zhager" written on the back. After much research I think that it is probably Meyer Saron 1810-1886 who was an uncle of my grandmother Bertha Kagan Goldwater. I would like to find out more information about him.

## THE MENDELSONAS FAMILY

### The Last Jew in Zagare

*By Roger Cohen*

Zagare, Lithuania – The last Jew in Zagare, a small Lithuanian town renowned for its cherries, died in September of 2011. His name was Aizikas Mendelsonas, born in 1922. He was not buried in either of the two Jewish cemeteries, with their lurching gravestones, faded inscriptions and advancing lichen. Nobody is any more, not even Jews.

At his birth, Mendelsonas was one of almost 2,000 Jews living in Zagare, with its seven synagogues, its Hebrew school and its Jewish People's bank. Jews made up about 40 percent of the town's population. Then, in swift succession, came Soviet annexation, blamed by many on "Jewish Bolsheviks," and Nazi occupation, bent on annihilation of the Jews.

The Nazis wasted little time after pushing into Lithuania in June, 1941. The Jews of Zagare were herded into a ghetto. Almost 1,000 Jews from nearby towns, including Siauliai, were forced to join them. On Oct. 2, 1941, they were ordered into the main square before being taken into the woods for execution by Nazi SS killers and their Lithuanian accomplices.

SS Standartenführer Karl Jäger stated in a report that day that 2,236 Jews were killed in Zagare. In 1944, the Soviets, having fought their way back, examined a mass grave and found 2,402 corpses (530 men, 1,223 women, 625 children, 24 babies). Today, a visitor to Zagare – there are not many – is greeted by a sign pointing to woods of birch and pine: "Graves of the Victims of the Jewish Genocide."

I recount these events for two reasons. The first is that my grandmother Pauline ("Polly") Soloveychik was from Zagare, and my grandfather Morris Cohen was from Siauliai, and so I have a natural interest in what would have befallen them had they remained. Their hypothetical European fate was to die nameless in a nameless ditch.

Even at the end of her long life, lilacs could bring Polly to tears because they recalled Zagare; even then she spoke Russian to her parrot. Memory thrust her back in the woods where she had wandered.

The second reason is that I have been pondering the Zagare-Zionism link. The resilience of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – its capacity to last through the Cold War, the post-Cold War, the digital revolution, the rise of China, the Arab Spring – is due in part to the near-perfect equivalency of moral claim to the same land.

What emerged from the Holocaust – from the agony of every little Zagare – was the success of Zionism. Benny Morris, the Israeli historian, has written, “As the pogroms in Russia in the 1880’s had launched modern Zionism, so the largest pogrom of them all propelled the movement, almost instantly, into statehood.”

Through its vote of Nov. 29, 1947, calling for the establishment of two states in the Holy Land – one Jewish and one Palestinian Arab – the United Nations sought to expiate Nazi crimes by granting the Jews what Morris calls “an international warrant for a small piece of earth.”

The thing is, that piece of earth, birthplace of the Jewish people, was not empty. In fact, at the time of the U.N. vote, about 630,000 Jews faced about 1.3 million Palestinian Arabs in the Holy Land. Palestinians failed to see why they should pay for the Holocaust. Arab states, invoking Saladin’s triumph over the Crusaders, seeing in Israel a new expression of European colonialism, went to war against the U.N.’s will – and lost.

Einstein, arguing for Israel, wrote that, “In the august scale of justice, which weighs need against need, there is no doubt as to whose is more heavy.” The Arab League put the opposite case: “There can be no greater injustice and aggression than solving the problem of the Jews of Europe by another injustice” – against the Palestinian Arabs.

Solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict begins with accepting that there is no just outcome, none. Enough Jews and Arabs have died trying to prove the rightness of their cause. Imperfect compromise is the only way out of the spiral.

Carrying Zagare in my blood, aware of what centuries of Jewish precariousness have wrought, I believe the case for Israel was and remains overwhelming, but an Israel that condemns another people to permanent exile is not the one its founders imagined.

An Israeli state, a Palestinian state, economic union between them, international oversight of the holy places in Jerusalem and Bethlehem: The U.N. idea of 1947 is not a million miles from what any lasting peace must involve.

The second stage of solving the conflict is realizing there are no new ideas, none. The only option is gathering the will to reach the known trade-off.

I went to see the grave of Mendelsonas – the last Jew in Zagare. So, I thought, Zagare is finally Judenrein. In a sense the Nazis have won.

Then, nearby, I saw a European Union flag and thought, no.

Mendelsonas, in his 89 years, lived through five Lithuanias – independent, Soviet, Nazi, Soviet and independent. The last was best, a small state, secure, in NATO, tied in economic union with its neighbors, at peace even with Russia.

It's amazing what putting the future above the past, jobs above some unattainable justice, can forge.

## THE LURIE FAMILY

*By Prof. Samuel Lurie MD (Tel Aviv University, Israel)*

Lurie family lived in Zagare on Vilnus street number 44.

Shmuel Lurie (fig 1) was the head of the family. He was born around 1880 and was a Shoicheht (butcher). He was married to Malka Tankel (fig 2) born after 1881, daughter to Shia Tankel (1848-1930?) and Reisa Intiligator (1852-1930?), who also lived in Zagare. After the Nazis had occupied Zagare in 1941, they were hiding for about two years until they were exposed and shot.

Shmuel and Malka Lurie had 16 children, some of the names remain unknown. Except for 4, the rest died at Holocaust, most on October, 1941 in Narishkin Park. Nosan (male), Nota (male), Asher (male), Sheva (female), Sara (female), Chaike (female) and Zvia (female) and their families were martyred. The ones who survived are: Tzila (female) who went to Montevideo, Uruguay around 1920; Yitzchak (male) who married with Chaia Sarah Matroz in Zagare and went to South Africa around 1930; Oscar (male) who also went to South Africa around 1930; and Zalman.

Zalman Lurie was born in Zagare on September 19, 1915. He was a member of Betar movement as can be seen in a picture taken on January 19, 1927 (fig 3) and played soccer for some local team and served in the Lithuanian Army as can be seen in picture taken in 1933. Shortly after the Nazi invasion of Soviet Union, my father escaped to Russia where he was mobilized to the Red Army and combated in the 16<sup>th</sup> Lithuanian Brigade. He was wounded 11 times. After the war he came back to Zagare, just to find out that all his family was martyred. He left to Riga, from where he immigrated to Israel in 1971, where he passed in 1983.

PHOTOS:



*Shmuel Lurie*



*Malka Tankel*



## THE MOELLER/MULLER/MILLER FAMILY

The earliest record of the Moeller/Muller/Miller/Meller family of Zagare is a birth certificate issued by the Siaulai Rabbinate. It notes that Leib-Shmuel (Leopold) Wolfovitch is son of "Wolf-Shmuel Meller and his wife Sara Malki" of the Old Zagare community. Wolf Shmuel Meller & Sara Malki were born and married in Zagare and had three children, all born in Zagare, Herman (1856), Berthe (1865), Leopold (1869). Hermann settled in New York, married Lena, born 1862, no children. After Lena died in 1930 her brother (also called Hermann) was in charge of the family business in New York and quarreled with the Meller family.

Hermann's younger brother, Leopold, left Lithuania in 1898, to study dentistry at Tartu University in Estonia. Estonia was then under Russian rule so his Dentistry Diploma was issued "on behalf of Nicolas II". He moved to St. Petersburg. Here he met his wife Leja Aronoff, and here their three children were born - Vladimir/Yadya Leopoldovitch in 1903/1904, Berta/Beba in 1905, and Julia/Judith in 1909. As a Jew, Leopold was not permitted to work as a dentist in St. Petersburg and he became a trader. He acquired a Soviet passport and started travelling in 1924 to Germany. In 1925 together with his wife and their two daughters he left Russia and moved to Riga, acquiring a Lithuanian passport in 1928. In Riga Beba studied at university and Julia completed her high school education. Vadya had studied in Leningrad at the Emperor Alexander School for Bridges and Roads. Although he passed all examinations he didn't get his diploma as a Jew due to numerous clausus. As he didn't want to go to the army he left Russia, crossing the border on foot. He joined the rest of family in Riga but got a visa for Palestine. Crossing the Lithuanian border at Joniskis he sailed from Marseille to Jaffa in 1925. He worked as a designer engineer in Palestine for about a year. In 1927 he moved to France, where he studied engineering in Toulouse and graduated in 1928.

About this time Leopold began to travel. In 1928 he arrived in Newcastle (UK) and stayed there some months. He met the English branch of the family (see below), the family of his sister Berthe and her husband David Towb. David and his son William were working as Scrap Metal Merchants. Leopold returned to Riga and in

1930 the family finally left the Baltic area and settled in Paris. Leopold needed money to start a business and asked his brother-in-law for his part of his brother Hermann's legacy but without success. In 1931 he sailed to New York with his elder daughter Beba. One week after arriving in the USA he suddenly died and was buried in the Mount Hebron Cemetery New York without any headstone or tomb. Leja his widow continued living in Paris with her two daughters who were dressmakers.

Meanwhile Vadya married but soon divorced. He was working as a designer for several companies. He lived then with his family. In 1935 Vadya married in Paris Raja Rakowszczyk born 1905 in Rakow (Poland). At that time she was a law student. Raja had a brother Arkadia, an architect living in Moscow. During the Stalin regime he was deported in Siberia as a Jew, but survived. For many years Raja had no contact with her brother and they met again only in the 1960's.

During WWII Vadya and Raja first went with Leja and Beba to Montpellier in the non-occupied zone in south France. Then leaving the rest of the family they went to Lyon and lived there until the end of the war. They had false documents changing their name to a typical French name. Leja moved to a small town, Meymac, where she was arrested with about 100 other Jews and deported to Auschwitz. Here she was murdered. When her grandsons Michel Kazatchkine and Alain Moeller erected a head stone on Leopold's tomb in New York in 2014 Leja's name was engraved in Hebrew on it to remember this tragic event of someone who never will have a grave. Her name is also engraved on a memorial stone on Meymac railway station, and on the memorial wall in Paris with the names of 76.000 deported French Jews.

Vadya and Raja returned to Paris after the war and Vadya built up a business dealing in heavy machinery. He died in 1981, Raja died in 1988. Beba lived in Paris till her death in 1982. She did not marry and had no children. She continued to work as a dressmaker. In 1939 Judith married Georges Kazatchkine (born 1899) from a Russian Christian orthodox family. He was arrested by the Germans in 1943 as a member of a Resistance group providing false passports to Jews and sent to Buchenwald. He survived the camp, returning with tuberculosis. During the war Judith remained in Paris, separated from her family.

After the war, the “third generation” remained in Paris. Vadya and Raja's son Alain (born 1946) studied engineering and took over his father's business. He married Françoise and they had two daughters Florence (born 1968) and Anne-Caroline (born 1970). Judith and Georges Kazatchkine's son Michel (born 1946) studied medicine specialising in immunology and was appointed Professor at Paris University devoting most of his career to HIV/AIDS. He married Elisabeth/Babette Bertagna, and they had three daughters - Natacha, Emilie and Cecile (born 1970, 1975, 1982).

Berthe/Batya/Bassa, the middle child of Wolf-Shmuel and Sara Malki Moeller, sister of Hermann and Leopold, in 1889 married, in Zagare, David Towb born 1863 in Baisagola. Their son Ya'akov/Akov/Jack Towb was born in Zagare in 1890. This was the period of pogroms and severe repression of the Jewish population, leading to mass emigration from Russia and the Baltic States. David Towb's brothers had already left Lithuania and were living in Antwerp, Belgium, where they had established a hotel catering for Jewish travellers. In 1890 David, leaving his young wife and newborn son in Zagare, crossed the border, probably illegally, and joined his brothers in Antwerp. From there he took the boat to Hull, and made his way to Swansea in Wales. Here he found employment as a picture frame dealer and when he was settled he sent for his wife and son. Six more children were born in Swansea - Harry, Rebecca, Leah, William, Massie and Louis. Shortly after the youngest was born, Berthe/Bassa died, in 1906, leaving David Towb with a family of seven young children. The eldest, Zagare-born Jack Towb, became a naturalised British subject, the six others were born British, and David Towb remained an immigrant with a Russian passport. Following a brief return to Antwerp, the family moved to Gateshead in the northeast of England, and some years later settled in Newcastle upon Tyne. Grandpa David Towb died in Newcastle in 1938. Jack settled in Belfast Ireland and married Bessie Sergei (children Jean and Harry). Of the British born children, Harry Towb married Rose Bernstone (no children) and settled in South Africa, Rebecca/Becky married David Landau (children Manny, Betty and Sylvia) Leah married Albert Landau (children Babs and Eric), William married Sylvia Jacobs

(children Ursula Sara and Elisabeth), Massie married Harry Brodie (children Sarah and David) and Louis married Elsie Winstanley (children Joy and Suki). Altogether the grandchildren of David and Berthe Towb numbered 13 cousins, most of them born in Newcastle.

The parents put down roots in England, worked hard to provide education and a good life for the children. During the war years, there was no contact between branches of the family living in France and in England. After the war Manny Landau, a soldier serving in the British Army, managed to locate family members who had survived the Nazi occupation. The British and French branches of the family were reunited, and members of the young generation crossed the channel to visit their new found relations. But there was no connection with Zagare or Lithuania. It wasn't until 1995, following Lithuanian independence and the end of the Soviet regime that the search for the family's Litvak roots began. Sisters Joy (Hall) and Suki (Pay) identified Zagare as their ancestral home and located it on the map. Their groundbreaking visit in 1995 set off a chain of events that continues to this day. Joy founded Lithuania Link, a charity to improve the quality of life of the people of Zagare, and established warm relations with the community. Her contribution was given public recognition at the 1998 celebrations marking the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Zagare. Joy was invited as guest of honour and addressed the people of the town. She was accompanied by her cousin Ursula Sara (Manobla) and together they explored the Jewish cemeteries of Zagare and the mass grave where the murdered Jewish population of Zagare was buried. In the cemetery of Old Zagare they found a tombstone inscribed Ze'ev Wolf son of Yitzhak Moeller, possibly their great grandfather. During their two day stay in Zagare they spent time with Isaac Mendelssohn, the last remaining Jew of Zagare, and learned much about the history of the vanished Jewish community. In the years that followed the two cousins continued their involvement with the town - Joy through Lithuania Link and Sara through genealogical research. The climax of the relationship between the people of Zagare and the Jewish descendants of Zagare origin came in July 2012. A plaque commemorating the Jewish population of the town, annihilated in 1941 by the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators, was erected in the town square. It was

a joint project of locals led by Valdas Balciunas and descendants from overseas led by Joy. The memorial was dedicated in a moving ceremony attended by both groups, followed by a concert of Jewish music, and a Friday night Sabbath gathering for the visitors. Eight months passed, and in March 2013 Joy and Sara were back in Zagare, accompanied by Sara's son Ze'ev. They came to honour the Levinkas family of Zagare, who during the Nazi occupation had risked their lives to provide refuge and shelter to save Jewish lives. The ceremony took place in the local school, with the Righteous among the Nations award presented by Israel's Ambassador to Lithuania.

The relationship between the two branches of the family deepened. Information about family history was exchanged and family trees were updated and corrected. Michel Kazatchkine and Alain Moeller, the French cousins, went to New York to locate the unmarked grave of their grandfather Leopold, and erect a headstone as described above. Sara Manobla's book "Zagare - Litvaks and Lithuanians Confront the Past" was published in 2014 in Jerusalem. Alain and Françoise Moeller came from Paris for the London book launch and cousin Sarah Joseph hosted a grand family reunion. And in August 2015 Michel, Alain and his wife Françoise followed in the footsteps of Joy, Suki, Sara and Ze'ev, and paid their first visit to Zagare, where they were greeted and welcomed and guided by Valdas.

PHOTOS:



## TIESNESIENĖ MARIJONA

Marijona Tiesnesienė was born Miriam Šneiderytė on October 7, 1924 in Pašvitinys, a small town 42 kilometers northeast of Šiauliai. She had one brother, Judelis, who was three years older. Her father's name was Israel (people called him Srolis) and her mother's - Sara. The family made its living through small trading. Her father bought agricultural products in neighboring villages and resold them in Pašvitinys. Her mother owned two cows and sold milk to local dairy producers. Her brother Judelis worked as a stock boy in a small store owned by another Jewish person.

Just before World War II, only a few hundred people lived in Pašvitinys, and of these, there were only a few Jewish families. Most, like Marijona's, were traders, peddlers and craftsmen. Some forty years earlier, in 1897, the town had been much more populous - and Jews had been in the majority. Census records from 1898 list 775 people, of whom 435 were Jews. But by the late 1930's many Jews had emigrated from Lithuania, mostly to South Africa.

In June, 1941, Marijona was almost 17 years old. Because there were so few Jewish children in the town, there was no separate Jewish school or specially hired teacher. Marijona therefore attended a Lithuanian state gymnasium. On June 22, of that year she had just finished her year's studies but had not yet graduated when the Nazis invaded Lithuania on June 21. Within days local collaborators with the Nazis rounded up the town's Jews and held them in a nearby building. For a few weeks many - including Marijona's family - were taken by neighboring farmers into forced labor to help out with farm work.

On August 2, 1941, however, the Jews of Pašvitinys were transferred to the larger town of Žagarė, some 44 northwest on the Latvian border. Together with Jews from other surrounding villages and towns such as Linkuva, Joniskis and Zeimelis - as well as Žagarė itself --Marijona was forced to live in a newly established ghetto. By now, there were several thousand Jews in Žagarė.

It was here, too, that Marijona lost her family. Early on, Marijona's brother Judelis was taken together with several other young men and boys from the ghetto

to be shot outside Žagarė. He caught the attention of one of the Lithuanian policemen at the murder site – Kazys Liutikas -- and told him that he was not Jewish at all, but had been an orphan taken in by a Jewish family. He said he could work hard and begged for his life. Liutikas spared him – for a time. He took him to work on his farm. While there, Judelis sent a note to the ghetto for Marijona to come to work for this family as well.

So Marijona started work for the Liutikas family in their apartment in Žagarė – an apartment that had once belonged to Jews – doing household tasks, and looking after the children. Mrs. Liutikas liked her, and in later years, Marijona said that she was well treated by both husband and wife.

But she returned to the ghetto each evening. One night, an old acquaintance named Vladas Bieleckas, now a white-striper, came to take her out of the ghetto, telling her that the following day everyone was going to be sent away. (In fact, the ghetto was going to be liquidated.) She refused to go with him. The following day, October 2, 1941 Marijona went to the town square with her mother and heard an official proclamation where all the Jews were told that they would be sent elsewhere for forced labor. They were surrounded by armed guards, some of whom were drunk. Someone started shooting in the air, then into the crowd. Pandemonium ensued. Some people were killed immediately. Marijona's father, being tall and blond, believed he had a chance to survive outside the Žagarė ghetto and escaped. Marijona never found out what happened to him but believes that he was shot somewhere close by. Marijona's mother was shot in the leg. Everyone was ordered to lie down on the ground. Marijona managed to tie a scarf around her mother's leg. While lying in the square, Bieleckas came looking for Marijona and pulled her away. As Marijona left the square, she saw her mother for the last time. Her mother was later forced onto a truck, which then took the Jews to a forest outside Žagarė, where they were shot.

Bieleckas told a lieutenant on duty that she was not Jewish and that he was taking her to the deputy police chief – the same Kazys Liutikas. It was then she met her brother again, who told her how he had been saved. However, after he finished work on the farm, he developed an infection in his leg and could no longer work.

Then the policemen came to the farm, took him and shot in Zagare park. He lied unburied for a few days and I do not know where they dug his grave.

Rumors started to circulate that the Liutikas family was harboring a Jewish girl, and she was brought to a local jail where she remained for seven days. During the daytime, she was allowed to sit in a nearby empty classroom. The Liutikas family brought her food twice a day. It was here that a local priest, Kazys Kavaliauskas, saw her through a window, came by, and started asking how she came to be there.

Marijona told him her story. Father Kavaliauskas decided to help save her. He asked her which Lithuanians she and her family knew in Pašvitinys who could possibly help her. She gave him a few names, among them the local parish priest Teišerskis and a widow named Ona Navickiene. Kavaliauskas contacted Father Teišerskis who together with Mrs. Navickienė made up a story to prove that Marijona was not a Jew, but rather, the illegitimate daughter of Mrs. Navickienė, born after her husband had died. As she had three other children of her own, so the story went, she had asked the Jewish Šneider family to raise her.

In February, 1942, Marijona's case came before a court in Joniškis that had convened to establish her real identity. Mrs. Navickienė testified together with her older daughter that Marijona was actually her child born in 1924. Another woman from Pašvitinys, a Mrs. Beleckienė, testified that she was the midwife who delivered the baby. And Father Teišerskis testified that he had baptized her in 1924 as well. The judge accepted their testimony.

Marijona was then issued official documents saying that she was Marijona Navickaitė. This saved her life.

The Court appointed the Liutikas family as her guardians. Marijona lived with them until 1944.

In spring 1944, Marijona She married Karolis Tiesnesis, a Latvian farmer 16 years her senior who was a neighbor of the Liutikas family. They had four children, two boys ( Edmundas and Imantas) and two girls (Irena and Nijole). Marijona was fluent in Lithuanian, Yiddish, Latvian and some Russian.

After the war, Marijona lived with her family in Žagarė. She worked first at “Žvelgaitis” collective which later at the Žagarės state stables (horse farm). She performed various jobs there.

In the immediate post-war years, Marijona spoke about her experiences very rarely. Her son Edmundas recalls that “Mama didn't really like to talk about her family's past. She never spoke on her own initiative... but when someone would ask her about it (journalists, representatives of the Jewish community) she would answer their questions.” Still, after he was grown and began asking her questions, she „not only told me in detail, but also showed me where her family was buried.“.

On February 10, 2003, Marijona’s youngest daughter Nijole Jonikienė, died. Five days later, February 15, 2003, at age 79, Marijona Tiesnesienė herself died. She was survived by her three other children – daughter Irena Tiesnesytė Gecienė, and sons Edmundas and Imantas Tiesnesis.

Marijona Tiesnesienė is buried next to her husband in Žagarė.

PHOTOS:



## THE REIBEN (RUBIN)-COHEN & WEINER-ZWOFFE (SWOFF) FAMILY

*By Lisa Cohn and Lucille Swoff-Cohn*

Our family traces its roots back to Zagare through: Hinda (Kantor) and Leib Reiben, Aaron and Sarah (Aplichin) Cohen, and Tsivia (Weiner) and Avraham Eukoseil Zwoffe. They were distantly related (details unknown) and were later joined again with the marriage of Mathilda Cohen to Samuel Swoff in America.



*Leib and Hinda Reiben, Zagare*

The writing at the top right says "Beit Hamidrash" (synagogue, or the house of study). The words top center "Chai Aidash," which was the name of the synagogue. Next to that is the word, L'Zagare (of Zagare). Top left is the date, 1924 or 1925. The Hebrew writing over their heads, says "Ha Gabayim." The shorter man, with the beard, directly under the writing is Leib Reiben, Lena Reiben (Cohen)'s father. The other's name is Peretz. A gabbai distributed aliyot during public Torah reading on shabbos and festivals, and originally denoted a collector of charitable contributions.

Our earliest known ancestors, Nota and Recha Reiben, were married in Zager



*Leib and Hinda Reiben, with one of their daughters. Zagare*

and had five children: Samuel, Benjamin, Yale, Leib, and Leah Miriam. Our ancestor was Yehuda Leib (or Leba or Louis) Reiben, who married Hinda Kantor. They had ten children, including three sets of twins: Sara, Nathan and Louis, Morris and Matlitska, Anne, Sefka and Menucha, Jacob and Tsippah Leah. Of the siblings, we know that Matlitska died in Montevideo, Uruguay in 1971. Sefka stayed in Europe, Menucha married and moved to Israel by way of Uruguay. Jacob (the oldest) and Tsippah Leah

(Lena), our ancestor, would come to America.

Also in Zagare was Aaron Cohen and his wife Sarah Aplichin (rumor has it that her family owned apple orchards, hence the maiden name). Arthur had a daughter, Florrie, from a previous marriage. Aaron and Sarah had nine children: Jessie, Gabriel, Joe, Harry, Rachel, Abraham, Itzik, Emanuel, and Shmuel (Samuel). We know that the siblings left Zagare except for Itzik who remained behind and was probably killed with the rest of the remaining Jewish population on the day after Yom Kippur, October 2, 1941. Abraham moved to New Zealand. Emanuel lived in England and worked in or owned a factory. The rest came to the USA and settled in or near New York

Tsippa Leah (Lena) Rubin and Shmuel (Samuel) Cohen came to America as a young married couple. Tsippa Leah came straight to America after their marriage, while Shmuel went to England first, to visit relatives. He immigrated from Liverpool, England through Boston, Massachusetts in August 1903.

Their apartment in Brooklyn, New York, was the first stop for their siblings as



*The Cohen family. Parents Sam and Lena with daughters (left to right): Rose, Edith, Mathilda and Anne.*

they arrived and they were very loving to their four daughters: Rose, Annie, Mathilda and Edith. Sam Cohen supported his family working a knitting machine and holding down other jobs such as selling sandwiches to sailors near the pier and opening a restaurant. His daughter, Mathilda, would marry a distant relation whose

family also hailed from Zagare, Sam Swoff (Zwoffe).

Our knowledge of the Zwoffe family of Zagare begins with Sam's parents: Celia (Tsvia) Weiner (daughter of Avraham and Henna Weiner) and Abraham Eukosiel Swoff (Zwoffe) (son of Yehuda Leib Swoff). Celia and Avraham married around 1883 in Zagare. They had a son, Beryl, born in January 1884 in Zagare.



*Celia and Eukaseil Swoff and their children (left to right): Lena, Barnett (top), Samuel and Louis. Not pictured are the youngest two daughters, not born yet, Channa and Mollie.*

When Barnett was about 5 years old, they emigrated to the United States. Abraham arrived in 1887 and Celia followed with Barnett in 1889. Life was difficult. Work as a tailor was hard to find, and Avraham died not long after their arrival in 1906. Barnett had a short and difficult life. An early bout of Scarlett Fever would leave him deaf and mute as a child. Still, he graduated the NY Institute for the Deaf and Dumb with honors and found a job as a compositor, before an influenza going around killed him in 1915. Barnett's siblings, were all born and

raised in NY: Lena, Abraham, Bernice, and Blanche, Molly, Channe (Anne), Louis and Samuel.

Samuel, our ancestor, enlisted in the Navy in 1918, where he served on the USS New Jersey as a stenographer and an apprenticeship as a gun captain. Sam received an honorable discharge from the Navy on September 30, 1921. He had reached a rating of Yeoman 2nd Class, provisional. The reason given was lack of funds. He was awarded the victory button and the Victory Medal with Atlantic Fleet Clasp. Ratings held during enrollment Seaman 2c, Yeo 3c, and Yeo 2c. After his tour in the Navy, he worked as a CPA. He was the accountant for his Uncle Morris' jewelry store, which is where he would meet his future wife, Mathilda Cohen.

Sam and Mathilda Swoff had one daughter, Lucille, who married Charles Cohn. They had two children, Stephen and Lisa.



## THE SCHULDINER FAMILY

*By Mark W. Gordon (Maplewood, NJ, USA)*

A legend in my family states that a relative deserted from Napoleon's army in Lithuania. He became a synagogue sexton (caretaker) and took his surname of Schuldiner (Schuldiener, Shuldiner) from his new occupation.

This branch of my family lived in Žagarė, Lithuania in the 19th Century. David Schuldiner, born in 1792 as the oldest son of Yankel, may have been the relative described in the legend. David is my great-great-great grandfather.

David Schuldiner is documented in the 1834 and 1858 Revision Lists (census records) for Žagarė located in the Lithuanian Archives in Vilnius. However, consistent with the legend about Napoleon's army, David is not included in the 1795 Revision List for Žagarė.

His daughter Chana Taube, born in 1825, married Leib Kaplan of Šiauliai, Lithuania. She was known as Taube most of her life. The couple lived in Riga, Latvia in the mid-1880s and later immigrated to New York City where they both died in 1909. Her adjacent photo was taken in New York.



*Taube Schuldiner  
Born in Žagarė in 1825*

## THE SEGAL FAMILY

*Aron Segal & Carmella Prideaux (Melbourne, Australia)*

Harry Jacob Segal: born 1909 *Zagare Lithuania* – died 1988 *Melbourne Australia*

Our father, Harry (Hirsh/Zvi/Segal) was born in Zagare, Lithuania. He was never sure of the exact date as all the records were destroyed in a fire so he settled on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1909. He was the youngest of three children of Mosze and Leja Segal and was preceded by his sister Malka (1905-1984) and brother Aizyk (1907-1964).

Our father rarely spoke about his family and childhood in Zhager (he only used the Yiddish version) but this was possibly more by circumstance than design as he probably assumed that his family was not interested in his early years. However, he was happy to reveal some details when approached by his grandchildren to contribute to their school family heritage projects.

So we are indebted to our children for what information we have and regret never having asked him ourselves during all the years that we had the opportunity. Our grandfather Mosze Segal was the son of Shlomo and Yokhvet (nee Shmueliwicz) Segal and had four siblings, Yudel, Avraham, Rachel and Ita. Nothing further is known about Mosze except that he was a grain merchant and that he died in 1914 when our father was only 5 years old. We know even less regarding his siblings and what became of them.

Our grandmother Leja (nee Zusman) was the daughter of Aizyk and Malka (nee Hurwicz) Zuzman. She had eight siblings, Hirsh, Hanna, Bezalel, Abba, Chanan, Anna, Joseph and Doba. We know that Hirsh migrated to Australia in the late 1800s and became a prominent jeweller in Melbourne and that Doba married Ovsejus Shuster but that is all that we know about Leja's siblings.

Leja supported her young family by selling eggs at the market. The family lived on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of a building. The apartment contained a kitchen and a dining room which also served as a bedroom for the family. There was a communal toilet behind the flats. The family diet consisted of black bread, eggs, white cheese and meat (beef and lamb) with fish Challah and cholent on Shabbat. Disease outbreaks were common and many children died from measles, chick pox and pneumonia.

Harry attended the Zagare Folk School, a school for boys up to the age of 14 which he entered in Grade 3, with lessons taught in Hebrew and Yiddish. He was considered to be a well disciplined and smart boy, excelled in all subjects and could also speak Lithuanian and some Russian. In his final year he was made dux of the school and his prize was a book of Hebrew literature.

His schooling was interrupted by WW1 which saw the Jews of Zagare expelled by the Russians ahead of the German advance. We don't know which part of Russia Leja and her family ended up in but by 1921 they were back in Zagare and living in Vilniaus g. 8.

When he graduated from the Zagare Folk School, Harry was sent to study at the Panevezys Hebrew Gymnasia where he graduated in 1927. He then enrolled in Humanities at the Lithuanian University and supported himself by becoming a tutor across a range of subjects as well as Yiddish and Hebrew.

However he was too poor to continue on at university and having come to the conclusion that there was no future for Jews in Lithuania, decided to leave. His elder brother, Aizyk, who had left Lithuania for Palestine in 1925, was now in Australia along with his uncle Henry Sussman (Hirsh Zusman) so he asked them to sponsor him which they duly did.

Harry left Lithuania in 1929 and travelled to London leaving behind his mother Leja and sister Malka who could not afford to leave with him. Harry sailed from London to Melbourne Australia on the SS Hobson's Bay, arriving in Melbourne on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1930 after a 4 week voyage.

When Harry arrived, Australia was in an economic crisis which made work very hard to come by. He became a teacher at a religious school in Melbourne and also worked as a Hebrew tutor. He also opened up a market stall selling socks and haberdashery and by 1935, he and Aizyk had raised enough money to bring his mother and sister out from Lithuania.

He served in the Australian Army, was headmaster of a Jewish school where he met and subsequently married Sara (nee Wajcman), became a partner in a clothing factory, had two children (Carmella and Aron), and lived a very full life.

He retired in 1968 and spent the next 20 years reading books, engaging in intellectual discussions and teaching his friends Hebrew. He was known for his wonderful Yiddish, his clear Hebrew and in depth knowledge of ancient and modern Jewish history and much admired for his understanding and intellect.

He passed away on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1988.

PHOTOS:





## THE VIGODER FAMILY

This is the story of the Vigoder family that lived in Zagare in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Unfortunately, most of the details vanished along with most family members during the war, thus the information that we have today is only a short synopsis of the history of this family.

From what we know, it was a quiet large Jewish family based in Zagare, but also with relatives in Riga and Limbazi. Some relatives left to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and have started their life there, but our story lies with Israel and Hannah Vigoder that stayed in Zagare. Hannah born Goldblat, her parents Liba and Mihil, with brothers Shmuel, Zalman, Haim and sister Rachel, that also lived in Zagare.

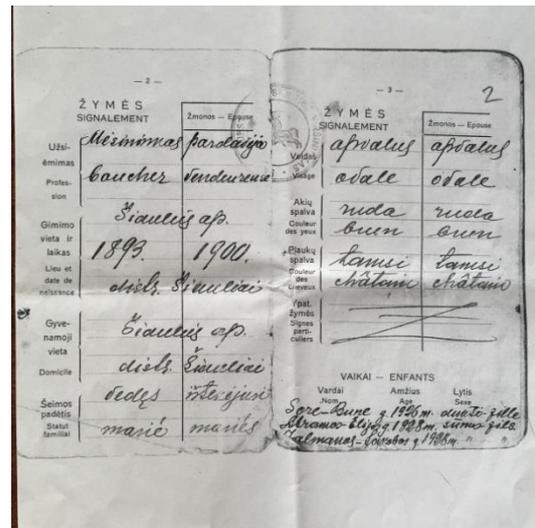
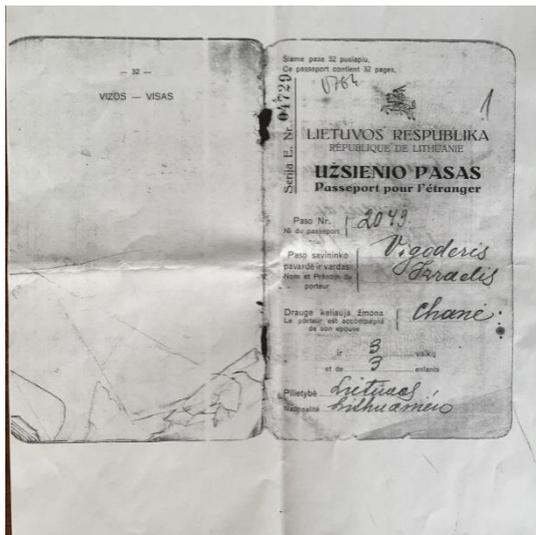
Hannah married Izrael Vigoder and their first child was a girl named Sore-Bune born in 1926, the second were twins Abraham-Elia and Zalman-Jacob born in 1928. Hannah was pregnant again in 1939 with twins. During labor there were complications and she was taken to Riga. Only the first child survived during this difficult delivery. The boy was named Honeh-Gersh. The grieving husband, who just lost his wife, left the boy at Hannah's brothers, Meir Goldblat, house in Riga.

Izrael went back to Zagare, he visited his child in Riga but did not take him back to Zagare. When the WWII started, luckily the Goldblat family was evacuated to the North of Russia and they survived, and came back to Riga only after the war. The rest of the relatives that remained in Zagare, the Vigoder and Goldblat families did not survive the war. We do not have any exact information, but one can easily guess what happened.

Attached you will find the only picture that we have of the Vigoder family, and the passport copy of Izrael Vigoder that was found in the Lithuanian archives. On the photo, Hannah and Izrael are standing behind, Izrael's parents are seated and two sisters on each side (their names not known).

The son of Hannah and Izrael who survived, took the last name of his adopted family and lives in Riga.

PHOTOS:



## THE WOLFZON FAMILY

We have documentation that shows that my family lived in Zagare for about 100 years from about 1785 until about 1890, when they left Zagare for Glasgow. Almost certainly they lived in Zagare for about 400 years (from about 1500) but no specific records exist to prove this.

My three times great grandfather was called Wolf, which is probably why my surname is Wolfzon (Woolfson) because in about 1804 the Russian authorities required all citizens to have a surname, which they had not previously had. We know that Wolf had two sons, Leyb Fayvush, born in 1803 and Israel who was born 17 years later in about 1820. They were both born in Zagare. Almost certainly there were more siblings than the two brothers but we have been unable to trace these.

Leyb Fayvush married Chaya Leah and they had a son in 1839 called Shaia, also born in Zagare.

Israel, my great-great grandfather married Etta Jakobson. He was a watchmaker. They had 5 children that we know of. Their names and birth dates were:

Moses	1847, 18 August
Yakkha Freyde	1856
Louis	1860, 23 May
Nessie	1865
Jacob	1869

Apart from Yakkha, the 3 brothers and one sister left Zagare and settled in Glasgow between 1885 & 1890. Moses was the last of his siblings to leave in 1890.

Yakkha married Shmuel Montoriski, who was a dyer in Zagare. The family later moved from Zagare to Skuodas. Their 5 children later emigrated to the UK, USA and Australia.

Service in the Russian army of 25 years became compulsory and this was the main reason why my family left. They always referred to Zagare as their home, Der Heim, in an affectionate way.

Jacob, the youngest child, was the first to migrate to Glasgow, followed by Louis and Nessie. Moses, my great grandfather, was the last to migrate to Glasgow with his wife and his six children.

Moses married Pesha Leah Tankel in Zagare on 21 October 1872. 6 of their 7 children were born in Zagare (the 7<sup>th</sup> was born in Glasgow in 1892). Israel Philip was my grandfather. The names and birth details and age on arrival in Glasgow were:

Sarah Etta	1 August 1875	15 years
Tilla	18 January 1877	13 years
Israel Philip	15 January 1879	11 years
Barnie	25 December 1881	9 years
Willie	20 August 1883	7 years
Nathan	15 June 1890	3 months

For Moses and Pesha Lea, it must have been a difficult decision to leave Zagare for Glasgow with their small children (the youngest, Nathan, was 3 months old) although it was clearly helpful to have his two brothers and his sister already settled in Glasgow. The three brothers started off their new life in Scotland working as tailors.

Moses and Jacob were highly religious and Judaism played an important part of their lives.

Not listed here are the most prominent of our relatives, namely three sisters, daughters of Leyb Jakobson, called Etta, Leah and Sarah. This brought together the Wolfzon, Gerber, and Tankel and Sussman families originating from Zagare, Siaulenai and Riga.