

The Story of Laura Taylor

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I grew up in Sveksna but moved to Canada in 2001, for my husband is Canadian. I live in Fredericton, New Brunswick (Maritimes). I left Sveksna in 1997. After graduating high school, I went to study in Klaipeda. I married in 1999 and left Lithuania in 2001 with my husband and a daughter. I continued studying Psychology and Education in Canada. My mother passed away in 1998 from cancer and is buried in Sveksna. She was a teacher in the local high school. Now I am raising our daughters, Dominyka and Mia.

I began to research Lithuanian Jews from the West part of Lithuania since I discovered a unique trend. Many Jews who settled in Saint John, New Brunswick, were originally from a small village of Durbenai, which is not far from Sveksna. I am very sorry for what happened to Jews during the Holocaust.

My great-grandmother's name was One Griksaite. She was born in 1890. The date comes from a book which tells about the family. She lived in the village of Sakenai, 10 km from Sveksna. She had Jewish friends from Pajuralis and Kvedarna, villages about 20 km from Sveksna. My great-grandmother told a story to her children of how she went to try to help her Jewish friend when she heard that they were being taken away. According to her story, when she arrived, Jews were being "transported". Her friend was shouting, "Vanagiene (my great-grandmother's last name), where is God?" This cry stayed for the rest of my great-grandmother's life and she would tell this story with tears.

She and most of her children also had to escape from Lithuania because her members of her family were land owners. Only my grandfather stayed.

Her first husband was Benediktas Vanagas who owned a large farm and whose village was situated between Sveksna and Kvedarna. Benediktas was a widow and had three children from a previous marriage. One of the children, Leonas Vanagas, before WWII, bought a fabric store from a Jewish woman in Pajuralis, near Kvedarna, who then immigrated to South Africa together with her son. Her name was Feige. It is not known whether Feige was first or last name. I found this fact to be very interesting as well because this type of practice (selling the business to a Lithuanian) was not common at that time. My theory is that there could be some relation between Jews and my family, whether blood related or based on pure and strong friendship... Afterwards the Soviets nationalized the store.

My grandfather's sister, Stase Vanagaite-Petersonas, who is still alive and lives in Chicago, wrote in her memoirs that when she was about 10 years of age (I believe she was older for in her memoirs she wrote she was born in 1916), there was a Jewish wedding at her parents' farm. I found that to be very interesting. The Jewish wedding took place probably in about 1930 in the village of Sakenai, midpoint between Kvedarna

and Sveksna. My great-grandmother said that the wedding took place there, because the groom and the bride were from Pajuralis (?) and Sveksna. She also remembers the Rabbi doing the ceremony and the various types of sweets that all the children were enjoying.

Petras Celiauskas is respected person in Sveksna, an intellectual who has a passion for History. He is a local historian and gathered lots of information about the town. I grew up with Petras Celiauskas in the same "teachers' apartment building", which was built in late 1970s or early 1980s and is near a present high school. The baron's orchard (which is mentioned in a Sveksna descendents' story) was close to our home. Not the whole great orchard survived. We liked to go to that orchard as children.

I have no close relatives in Sveksna. My father lives in Klaipeda/Memel. I am in contact with few old neighbors of mine and friends from high school via internet and letters. My uncle Arvydas Vanagas inherited the farm, which is about 15 km from Sveksna, and lives there.

I believe that my great-grandmother was born around 1895 (she married in 1913). I guess she could have been about 18 years of age when she got married. Her Jewish friend who died in the Holocaust was called Borak (according to my great-aunt Stase Petersonas). I searched for that name and sure found something. I found a link to a man who survived a Holocaust, and was originally from Kvedarna/Chweidan. This article tells about Gershon Young: <http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/kvedarna/kve-young.html>.

According to my great-aunt, Barak's family had a store which sold various goods and a big yard, which was convenient for parking. When my great-grandmother and her family would arrive to that town, they would leave the horse in the property of Barak's family. If Gershon lived in the same home or next to it, it is very likely that he would have known my relatives. I am not sure whether Mr. Young is still alive. I would love to ask about that.

(Interestingly Naftali Ziv corresponded with Gershon Young, until the latter got sick and his family did not respond to Naftali's letters [ESTHER]).

It is amazing that a man from Sveksna and who survived Holocaust is alive. If you are in contact with Naftali Ziv , please tell him that I say 'Shalom' and that I am very sorry that his family and Jewish people were treated so horribly. I wonder whether he recalls some happy childhood moments, children's games, activities they used to play and do in Sveksna.

Now I visit Sveksna by way of Google Maps. The synagogue and old Jewish homes still stand there reminding about beautiful lives that once existed in that community.

I am interested in the history of my family and I am also interested in the Jewish history in this part of Lithuania. I would like younger generations to learn more and more about

the fact that Jewish people were a vital part of Lithuanians. They were Lithuanians after all because they lived in the area for hundreds of years. I would like Lithuanians to understand what we lost...

Laura



Laura Taylor and Family, October 2012