

The Kagan Family from Kremenets

by Norm Kagan

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My father, William (Volf) Kagan, was born in March of 1908 in the Shtetl Kremenets, some fifty miles south of Rovno in the western Ukraine. He was the youngest child of Moses Kagan and Chana (G)elfant. Chana was born in Shumsk (Wolyn) Russia, and Moses Kagan was born in Brezetz (Wolyn) Russia. We don't know how they came to be in Kremenets. My father's oldest brother, Usher, was born a dozen years or so earlier, and there were some three or four other siblings.

On a Friday night, sometime in 1910, a tragedy befell the family. They ate from a bad fish, and Moses Kagan and his middle children died. Chana, who didn't like fish and the youngest, my father, who didn't eat any, survived, as did Usher, the eldest, who wasn't at home at the time. Chana never recovered from the loss, and Usher and his wife, Shendal, took charge of the household on Szuwska Street. My father grew up in this house, never quite feeling at home. After finishing all the schooling available to him, he began work in the family businesses: a relative sold fabrics for military and civilian suits, and Usher had a small grocery store. There were few opportunities in Kremenets or nearby for Dad. In 1925, he went to Cuba where the family had a cousin and he began work as a clothing peddler. After a time, he formed a partnership and opened a small store in Havana.

My father made two trips back to Europe from Cuba. On his first trip, ca 1931, his brother Usher took him to Rovno where he bought his grocery goods. There, he met my mother, Sheyna Bluz. Her family was in the herring trade. Her parents, Zyvel Bluz and Ester Golda Erlich, were successful and well regarded in Rovno with a large house and servants. Zyvel was a religious man and served as a cantor at the synagogue near their Josielewicz Street home. Zyvel and Ester had seven children: Fivish, Blumma, Sonya, Label, my mom (Sheyna or Szejna, born in 1912), Maurice, and Yoha. It was a happy household, filled with plants growing up to the ceiling inside, and pigeons outside (kept by my Uncle Maurice). Fivish was the charmer, Label was a studious active Zionist, and Blumma and Sonya already had their own families. Grandfather Bluz often traveled to Danzig on his purchasing trips, buying herring and groceries for his store. Over a period of time, as the Nazi influence grew, he was restricted to specific "Jewish hotels" during his stays there. Worried by the growth of this Nazi influence, he encouraged his children to leave the country.

From Cuba, my father began a correspondence with my mother. When he returned to Eastern Europe a second time in the Fall of 1933, he brought with him soccer uniforms for his old

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sports club teammates in Kremenets and renewed old friendships. He stayed for some six months while he courted my mother. They married in Rovno in the Spring of 1934. After the wedding, dad had to leave early when his visa expired. He waited in Paris for two weeks until his young bride joined him and together they left for Havana. As mom had never learned to cook at home, the Cuban women around her showed her how. I grew up thinking that *Arroz Con Pollo*, *Picadilla*, and *Paella* were Jewish dishes! They came over to New York thru Florida in 1939.

I was born in New York City in 1946, but my oldest brother, Martin, was born in Havana in 1936. He came with my folks to New York in 1939 by train from Miami. He only spoke Spanish then and thought the kids he met were "loco." He became a lawyer, but it turns out my folks never included him in their naturalization applications, so officially he wasn't a citizen. A dozen years ago, some INA *wisenhiemer* wanted to deport him. My middle brother Sam and I thought that was pretty funny for a while.

[Note: After immigrating to the US Norm Kagan's father William (Wolf) was the Secretary of the US branch of the Kremenetser Landsmanschaft. In January 2002 Norm sent the following note to another Kremenetser about his father.... Ron Doctor]

I have seven family photos from Kremenets that date from my father's teenage years onward. I also have two postcard photographs of Kremenets (one of Mt Bona and the other a street scene - Ron has scans of both) and a fine picture of my dad with twelve of his friends. They are posed on a hillside with the town seen behind them (fortress to left - churches below) which was taken during his extended second visit ca. 1933 (Ron has this too). [The photos are at the end of this memoir. ... RDD]

My father didn't say much about the Old Country. Occasionally, we'd go to the lower Eastside of Manhattan on a Sunday morning, and visit the "*shmattah*-shops" to buy socks or underwear. My dad would converse in Yiddish with the owners, pleased to be back in that element again with all those shoe boxes along the walls and Jewish newspapers. Afterwards, we'd visit a Jewish delicatessen like Katz's Deli which had a self-serve seltzer fountain and a sign claiming it was the original Katz's which coined the "Send a Salami to your Son in the Army" slogan. All that is gone today; the change started in the 1960's. I recall our last trip when my dad bought me a suit at Newman Bros. The salesman said the days of *Landsmen* bargaining in Yiddish were over, we were in America now. Those pleasant Eastside Manhattan trips stopped.

My mom's younger brother, Uncle Maurice, learned to make false teeth at a dental school in Rovno. However, being the son of a wealthy man, made collecting his payments difficult. Around 1936, he decided to move to Kremenets where he wasn't known into the house of Usher and Shendal Kagan, and began dental working there. Every few weeks, he would return by train to

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Rovno for a visit. On one weekend, his father, Zyvel Bluz, visited him unexpectedly. The Polish military police had come to the house in Rovno for Maurice; he had been drafted into the Polish Army. He couldn't return home anymore. Rather, my grandfather advised him to leave Kremenets at his usual travel time and go to Danzig instead of Rovno. There he should buy passage on a particular ocean liner leaving for America (being an unknown in Kremenets, he could get the necessary papers that would be very costly for him in Rovno as he was known there to be a wealthy man's son). As told, Maurice went to the busy wharf at Danzig and boarded the ship. Looking down upon the hectic crowd below, he saw his father, well dressed as always, looking up at him from the recess of a steel beam supporting the wharf's roof. In a last gesture of farewell, grandfather took from his pocket a white handkerchief and pretended to blow his nose as he waved goodbye to his son. Such were the fears that Nazi spies were everywhere, watching.

Also surviving the war was my first cousin, Moshe Kagan (b. 1922), the son of Usher and Shendal Kagan. Moshe had learned about the dental trade from Maurice, and he took up the trade after some schooling in Rovno. Moshe had graduated from the Kremenets Gymnasium in 1938 and went to live with the Bluz family in Rovno to attend the Rovno Dental School. After a year of training, a notice asking for dental workers to go to a clinic in Baku drew his attention. Baku had a rich oil industry and they needed skilled medical people to replace those professionals sent to the Russian-Finnish front, good pay was being offered. As his parents in Kremenets were unable to stop him, he went - he was just seventeen. Until the War began in the Summer of 1941, all went well. But afterwards, food became scarce, and scurvy and other illness took hold in Baku. The move to Russia had saved Moshe's life but as a foreigner he could not enter the regular army. Late in 1943, a second Polish army was formed within Russia. With his education, Moshe was accepted as a minor officer. He entered Berlin with his Polish regiment in 1945. At the war's conclusion, he slipped away from his comrades to join a Polish underground that helped Jewish refugees escape to Israel. In 1948, he too left for Israel where he joined a pioneering Kibbutz, Shamir, and met his wife Sali. They have two children (a third died). Moshe is a well known artist and regional archeologist.

[Note: Moshe did the line drawings that appear in *Pinkas Kremenets*. His daughter, Nava, lives in Israel and is a member of the Kremenets District Research Group. She sent a photo of her family. It is in the Photos section at the end of this Memoir. ... Ron Doctor]

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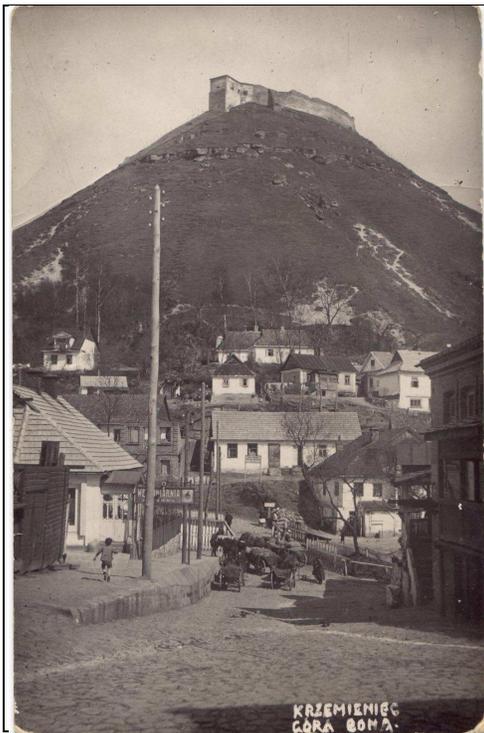
Photos



William (Wolf) Kagan (Zev Kahan), 1922



Asher, Shendal, Moshe and Tunia Kagan
June 1932



A Kremenets Street, Gora Bona in background, 1929.
The building sign at lower left means "smokehouse".



William (Wolf) Kagan (back row, 4th from left) with Kremenets friends, 1933.

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Szeroka (Broad) Street, Kremenets, 1929