

My Ancestors and my Descendents

# 1. The Bernitz Family

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Latvia to South Africa

**Charles Bernitz**

February 2010

## Foreword

### THE FAMILY OF CHARLES AND RUTH BERNITZ

I have always wondered where my family came from. I was too young to understand the concept of multiple lines of descent; I simply wanted to know where the Bernitz name had its origin. I was told that we came from Russia. This was a distant and fascinating place that increased the mystique for me.



Later I came to understand that there were four sets of relevant ancestors – my father’s parents, one born in Latvia, the other in London, together with their own respective parents; and also my mother’s parents, both born in Lithuania, together with their ancestors.

I will follow the histories of:

My fathers’ father - Herman Bernitz, and his parents Michel Bernitz and Ernestina Herzenberg, both from Latvia

My father’s mother - Kate Cohen, and her parents Maurice Cohen, born in Latvia and Louisa Cohen, born in Holland.

My mother’s father - Chaim Abelson, son of Yehuda Leib Abelson from Lithuania.

My mother’s mother - Sarah Tsipe Chasan, daughter of Meyer Moshe Chasan, and his second wife Ita, both from Lithuania.

I was particularly interested as to why they each left their homelands to go to South Africa. Later I met Ruth’s parents, who had fled Germany. Too inexperienced to truly grasp the horrors of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, my fascination with our foreign heritage nevertheless grew.

For Ruth's family I will follow the histories of:  
Her father's father – Benjamin Blum, son of Meier Blum and Marjamme Plaut.  
Her father's mother - Rickshen Hammerschlag, daughter of Moses  
Hammerschlag and Margolies Katzenstein  
Her mother's father - Jakob Goldschmidt  
Her mother's mother – Jetchen Plaut, daughter of Wolf Plaut and Betty Moses  
Frank. They all lived in Germany.

As adults with children, we too decided to emigrate. We knew why we chose to leave South Africa - and I added to my growing list of queries the question of whether or not we were repeating the actions of previous generations of Jewish ancestors. When I started the process of retiring, the opportunity to seek answers finally presented itself. I hope that my children and grandchildren will read this, and better understand their origins and heritage. I have tried to discover where my and Ruth's ancestors originated, how they lived, and how they were influenced by the circumstances that affected them and the Jews of their time.

# **The Bernitz Family**

## A Brief History of Latvia, Courland and the Jews

As a child I had been told that my grandparents - Bernitz, Abelsohn and Chasan - had all immigrated to South Africa from Russia. Many of my friends spoke of their fathers and grandfathers as also having come from "Russia" - a fact that was recorded in shul records, naturalisation certificates, passports, etc. As an adult I realized that "Russia" was a convenient collective name for a large Eastern European territory with a complex and ever changing political history, which officials in South Africa (and indeed England and the USA) simply did not understand; they conveniently called this diverse region Russia. I noticed also that each immigrant had a fierce loyalty to their Jewish roots in their own home countries. They would proudly proclaim that they were Kurlanders, or Litvaks – certainly of better stock than fellow Jewish immigrants who were not! My Grandfather was a Latvian Jew, specifically a Kurlander (Courlander); we are therefore partly of Latvian Jewish descent. So what is a Latvian Jew?

Prior to the arrival of Jews in Latvia the country was ruled by a German Knightly Order (1201-1561). They imposed a total ban on the presence of Jews (1306). Neighbouring Polish Lithuania had a large Jewish population from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In 1561 Poland annexed the provinces of Livonia and Latgale, but Kurland remained an independent Duchy. The history of the Jews from then on was different in each of the three Provinces as they were ruled by different people.

Present day Latvia has four regions:



- (1) Kurzeme in the North West and
- (2) Zemgale in the south west were previously named Kurland (Courland). The largest towns were Libau and Mitau. Courland was a semi-independent duchy linked to Poland (from 1562-1795) but with a prevailing German influence. The local Jews were closer to German Jews than to Lithuanian Jews.
- (3) Livonia (now Vidzeme) where Jews were forbidden to engage in commerce or act as farmers, and which was interpreted by local authorities as a ban on living in the country at all.

This resulted in Jews being treated as aliens, and nobles exploited the situation by levying all kinds of residence restrictions, license fees, etc. This continued for hundreds of years under the rule of Poland (1561), Sweden (1621) and Russia (1710). There was a fairly modern Jewish community from 1840.

(4) Latgale. Unlike the rest of Latvia, it was included into the Pale of Settlement that was established in 1804 (the Pale is discussed later. It was an area outside of which Russian Jews were not allowed to settle.) The Latgale province of Latvia was home to many Yiddish speaking Jewish communities identical to those in Lithuania-Byelorussia, though the intelligentsia spoke Russian).

### **JEWS IN COURLAND**

This is the most ancient Jewish community in Latvia. Courland was never part of the Pale of Settlement. From an early stage it consisted of two separate political entities.

The Province of Piltene (Pilten) included the districts of Grobin and Hasenpoth (from where the Bernitz family originated). It is believed that the first Jews arrived in Piltene around 1571 and settled in the districts of Grobin, Hasenpoth (now Aizpute) and part of Windau (now Ventspils). When the Piltene district was sold to the Polish king in 1685, Polish legislation was extended to the Jews of the Piltene region and its neighbourhood. Wealthy Jews were allowed to settle in and contribute to the region's development. Since Pilten lies near the sea, Jewish merchants probably settled there from Prussia. Politically, Pilten was ruled directly by Poland while Courland Duchy (capital Mitau) was ruled by local nobility. The reason for Poland's special interest in Piltene was obvious – all-season sea-ports such as Libau (now Liepaja) and Windau were of utmost importance to trade. In Pilten, taxes were not imposed on Jews until 1717. Decrees of expulsion followed, between 1727 and 1738, but were never fully enforced. In 1708 permission was granted for the establishment of Hasenpoth's first synagogue.

Jews were given the right to permanent residence in Courland in the 18th century. Especially favourable was the ruling of Duke Ernst Johann Biron who had nominated a Jew to be his chief financial advisor. In the 18th century many skilled Jewish workers and artisans (construction workers, roof-makers, inlay workers, tailors) arrived in Courland from Germany, as well as a number of medical doctors. The latter formed a core of Jewish intelligentsia, actively confirming and bearing the ideas of Jewish enlightenment (Haskala). The German way of life dominated in Courland, having a great impact on the Jews. German (not Yiddish) was the spoken language of the Jewish community - this continued until World War II.

Courland had become part of Russia in 1795. The Russian Emperor Paul, under the pressure from Haskala Jews, promulgated a law in 1799 according to which Jews in Courland obtained legal status as permanent inhabitants, but were subjected to double taxation. This allowed Jews to participate in local government elections and stimulated the integration of Jews into German society in Courland. (By 1852, 22% of the inhabitants were Jewish). In 1780 the first Jewish school was opened in Mitau with 3 teachers.

In 1835 a new Code was published allowing permanent residence to the Jews living there with their families, as long as they had already been registered locally according to the last population census.

Jews paid 500 rubles per person to avoid conscription into the Russian army. In 1893 more Jews were able to move to Courland and Livonia (Riga) from the difficult conditions in the Pale of Settlement (see next page). More than 40% were involved in artisanal or industrial professions, while 35% were involved in trade. Libau port had an important role in trade. By WWI approximately 25% of all industrial enterprises in Libau belonged to Jews.

### **Culture / Education**

In 1850 there were five secular Jewish schools supported by the State (Libau, Mitau, Goldingen, Tukums), as well as religious schools (Talmud torahs).

## The Pale of Settlement

In 1804 Alexander I, intending to protect the Russian population from the Jewish people, issued a decree that prevented Jews from living outside the territories of the Pale. The Pale of Settlement was the term given to a region of Imperial Russia, along its western border, in which permanent residence of Jews was permitted, but beyond which Jewish residence was prohibited.



The Pale of Jewish Settlement 1772 -1917

Though comprising only 20% of the territory of European Russia, the Pale corresponded to historical borders of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and included much of present-day Lithuania, Belarus, Poland, Bessarabia, Ukraine and parts of western Russia. The word pale derives from the Latin word *palus*, meaning stake. (Palisade is derived from the same root - the phrase "beyond the pale" derives from this meaning, referring originally to the English Pale in Ireland). From this derivation came the figurative meaning of 'boundary', and the concept of a pale as an area within which special local laws could be applied.

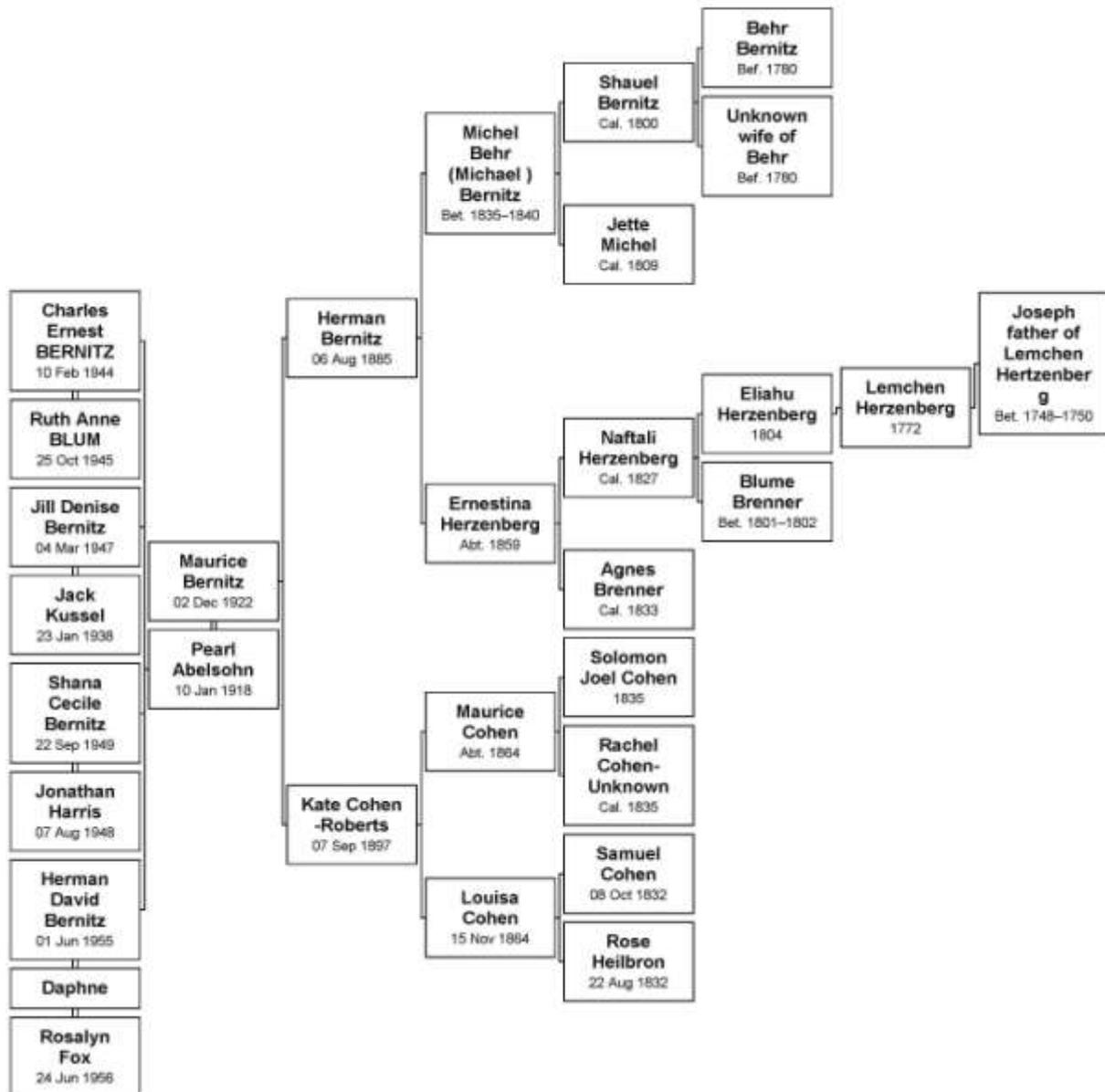
This statute was one of many designed to limit the freedoms of Russian Jewry. With more than five million Jews eventually living and working within its borders, Russian lawmakers used the confines of the Pale as an opportunity to limit Jewish participation in most facets of social, economic, and political life.

With few exceptions, Jews were forced to reside within the Pale's overcrowded cities and small towns called shtetls; they were restricted from travelling, prevented from entering various professions (including agriculture), levied with extra taxation, forbidden to receive higher education, and kept from engaging in various forms of trade to subsidize their livelihood.

Tsar Nicholas 1 (1796-1855) removed the exemption of Jews from military service, hoping that separation from family would lead them to convert to Russian orthodoxy. Conscription of Jews was set for up to 30 years. Exemptions applied only to single sons in a family and to some merchants. To escape this system, young men changed their names, moved about internally, or emigrated. By 1874 Jewish conscription was brought into general conformity and service was reduced to 6 years. The Russo-Japanese war of 1904 was a crisis point, with further conscription: Jewish conscripts feared that they would not be able to observe Kashrus, and would never see their families again – this was a huge motivating force to emigrate.

Although Jews in the Pale were destined to endure a life of poverty and restriction, most managed to make their way into the local economies by working as tailors, cobblers, peddlers, and small shopkeepers. Others, who were less fortunate, survived only by committed mutual aid efforts and strong local networks of support.

## Maurice Bernitz - ancestors and children:



My father, Maurice Bernitz, the second son of Herman Bernitz and Kate Roberts (born Cohen) was born in Pyramids, Transvaal, South Africa on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1922.

His father Herman (my grandfather) was born in 1885 in Latvia. He had immigrated to South Africa in 1906. He married Kate Cohen (Roberts) in 1919 in Johannesburg. He was 34, she 22. Herman's parents were Michel Behr Bernitz and Ernestina Herzenberg, both Latvian; his paternal grandparents were Shaul Bernitz and Jette Michel; his maternal grandparents were Naftali Herzenberg and Agnes Brenner, also Latvian.

Kate (my grandmother) was born in 1897 in England, during a visit by her parents to London. They had both originated from London, but were living in South Africa where they had been married. Her father Morris (sometimes spelled Maurice) Cohen (no relation to her mother's family) was actually born in Latvia, but the family had immigrated to London when he was aged between 14 and 20. He re-emigrated to South Africa in 1890, aged 25/26.

Cohen's parents were Solomon Joel Cohen and Rachel (also known as Rala, maiden name unknown), and 9 of his 10 siblings were all born in Polangen, Latvia - the town where Solomon and Rachel were married.

Kate's mother Louisa Cohen was also born in London. Her parents Samuel Cohen and Rose Heilbron were both born and married in Holland. They immigrated to London, around 1857, with one daughter; later they re-immigrated to South Africa, with their entire family, now consisting of 11 children!

We, the descendents of Herman Bernitz are certainly of predominantly Latvian descent, with a hint of Dutch.

## THE BERNITZ FAMILY

### **A note on the Surname.**

Jews in the Russian empire received their permanent last names approximately 150-200 years ago. From the end of the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century, the majority of the Ashkenazi Jewish population was in Russia (800,000 people), Austro- Hungary (470,000), and the German states (180,000). Inherited last names as we know them did not exist. Each individual had only their own first name, to which the father's name may have been added in official and synagogue documents.

In the mid 19th century Russian authorities launched an effort to assign heritable last names to Jews. This was an extension of a practice started by Austro-Hungary in 1797 and the German government between 1807 and 1834. Last names were used in business transactions, registration of legal documents, tax and administrative matters, etc. The Russian officials, who were assigned the task of "naming" Jews, had to assign last names that reflected an ethnic association and conveyed some meaning. The authorities first employed simple German or Yiddish words, as the foundation to construct last names.

The practice of allotting people last names according to their professional activities was widely prevalent. Last names often indicated the family's place of origin. Some families kept their old German last names, which verified that their ancestors were emigrants from Germany. Jews were also named for Belarusian localities of origin. In addition many Jewish last names have Hebrew roots. The Twelve Tribes each had a sacred symbol of a wild animal which was often used to create a last name. The symbol of Yitzhak's tribe was a bear - from this symbol come the prefixes Dov (bear, Hebrew) and Ber (bear, Yiddish), and many derivatives.

There is no evidence as to the origin of our Bernitz surname, but there are a number of theories. One theory assumes that Bernitz is an indication of origin, and looks for a place of origin linked to the name.

The *Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire*<sup>1</sup> states: "BERNITS (Courland) Toponym from the village Bernotse (Shavli district)." This is possible, but unlikely.

Another theory proposes that the name had a meaning in itself and was derived from a word in one or another local language (German, Latvian, etc.); in this instance Bernitz would be an occupational descriptive name, based on the fact that the families were brewers.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from the Russian Empire (1993), Alexander Beider, Avotaynu, Inc.*

According to Robert Herzenberg<sup>2</sup> “Our family was distributed throughout the Pilten area in the estates of the barons such as Baer, Ropp, Osten-Laken, Vietiunhof, etc. They were dairy and wood retailers, but predominantly, distillers (Schnappsbrenner) and brewers (bierbrauer), as indicated by the family names Brenner, Bernitz, and Brenson.”<sup>3</sup>

The exact spelling of the surname Bernitz has no significance. Consistent spelling of surnames is a 20th century invention. Names are seldom spelled in a standard way in earlier records. For example, it is not unusual for the same individual to be known as Bernitz, Bernic, Bernica or Berniker. The languages used by our ancestors at the time included Latvian, Russian, German and Yiddish, and transliteration from one of these languages to another leads to infinite variation.

The archivist, Rita Bogdanova, does not think that the name originated in Latvia at all, but that it is of German origin. This is possible. Many Jewish Germans had surnames much earlier than in Latvia. As there had been a large influx of German Jews into Hasenpoth after the Plague (1660-1680), it is possible that a Bernitz male had arrived in Hasenpoth bearing the surname.<sup>4</sup>

Bernic (Latvian) is spelled differently for a male or a female, Bernics being the male form (German Bernitz), and Bernica the female (Berniker in German). Few families had surnames before 1800, when they became legally obliged to adopt them.

The same provisos apply to the spelling of first (given) names. Certain first names were commonly used within a family, repeated from generation to generation. There were evolutionary changes in the names and their spelling in the local languages across generations. In addition, as mentioned before, names were almost never spelled consistently in records, and transliteration between languages compounds the problem. In the translated records available we find Shaul/Shaul/Schaul/Schael for the same person, also Hirsh/Hirsch, and Maurice/Morris. The Latvian Given Names database yields the following information on Michel:

Name: Michel Gender: Male

Similar Names in Latvia: Mikhaeyl, Mikhl

Yiddish Names: Mekhele, Mekhl, Mekhle, Mikhael, Mikhal, Mikhel, Mikhele, Mikhke, Mikhl, Mikhle, Mikhoelke, Mikhol

European Secular Names: Michael, Michail, Michel, Michol, Mikhael

Local Secular Names: Michails, Mihail, Mihle, Mikelis

Hebrew Origin: Mikhaeyl - European Origin: Michael – Germany

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<sup>2</sup> and

<sup>3</sup> The Reminiscences of Robert Herzenberg, translated by Leonardo (Leonard) Herzenberg

<sup>4</sup> See page 17

### **Other Bernitz Families**

Whatever the origin of our Bernitz name, it probably had multiple origins in multiple countries, not all of them necessarily Jewish, and many of them unrelated. I have found other Bernitz families from the same period in Austria, Poland, Germany, Sweden and Russia. They can be found amongst emigrants to the USA and elsewhere during the mid- 1800's to early 1900's.

Although there is evidence that a number of members of the Hasenpoth Bernitz family converted to Christianity (Lutheran and Russian Orthodox) in the 1850's it is improbable that they were the ancestors of all of the other non-Jewish Bernitz families, or vice versa. Huge amounts of irrelevant data are to be found through internet searching of publicly available data (a broad search of the databases available through ancestry.com yields over 12 million entries!). Judicious searching reveals an increasing quantity of relevant information through the Jewish SIGs (special interest groups). There is sufficient information to see that there were a substantial number of other Bernitz's who emigrated to the USA and South Africa for whom no connection to our ancestors has yet been found. It is of course possible that there was a single Bernitz from whom we are all descended, but I think this unlikely.

### **Other Bernitz families in South Africa.**

There is a record of Mr. I Bernitz, married male, who arrived in Cape Town aboard the Saxoro from Southampton in 1904. He travelled steerage, in a "cabin 3" with 68 other passengers. This was not Herman's half-brother Isidor, who had arrived earlier in South Africa. There was also a Mr. H. Bernitz, a labourer aged 18, who sailed from Southampton to the Cape aboard the Tintagel Castle in 1902. This was not our grandfather Herman, but could well have been any one of three Hirsh Bernitz's, all born in the late 1800's in Latvia, all cousins to Herman.

Other Bernitz's in SA include:

Maxim Leonid 1946 - Supreme Court records

Fruma (Fay) Bernitz 1954 – Marriage to Joseph Kolevsohn

Katrina Anna - 1927 Cape Town

Harry – Molteno Road, Oranjezicht – 1929 Telephone Book

A Bernitz - Farm Elandsfontein, Richmond Cape - 1929 telephone Book

According to Pearl there was a Bernitz family living in Cape Town – the old man was a friend of Chaim Abelsohn. He looked like and sounded like "Pop" Bernitz. She believes that they were related – they had a daughter named Edna? There was also a Bernitz family in Bulawayo, in the motor business, also relatives.

## The Ancestors of the Witbank and Middelburg Bernitz Families

We know that our branch of the Bernitz family originates from Hasenpoth, now Aizpute in Latvia. It is now possible to search archival records in Latvia for evidence of this. I have researched much of the documentation now available and that has already been translated into English.

I have also been fortunate to obtain the assistance of Elena Spungina, an extremely knowledgeable guide to Jewish Latvia, and of Rita Bogdanova, an expert researcher. I am indebted to both for unearthing much early information previously unknown to me. Rita is a senior archivist and a philologist (a linguist working on little understood languages that are no longer spoken). She has the ability to find and translate handwritten documents written in old forms of Latvian, German, Russian and Yiddish. She is also associated with The Centre for Judaic Studies at the University of Latvia. Her late mother, who tragically died in a road accident late in 2008 was a survivor of the holocaust in Latvia, and had been at school in Libau with one of our grandfather's cousins. She is descended from the Brenner family of Goldingen (as was my great-grandmother Ernestina).

### Behr Bernitz – our Patriarch

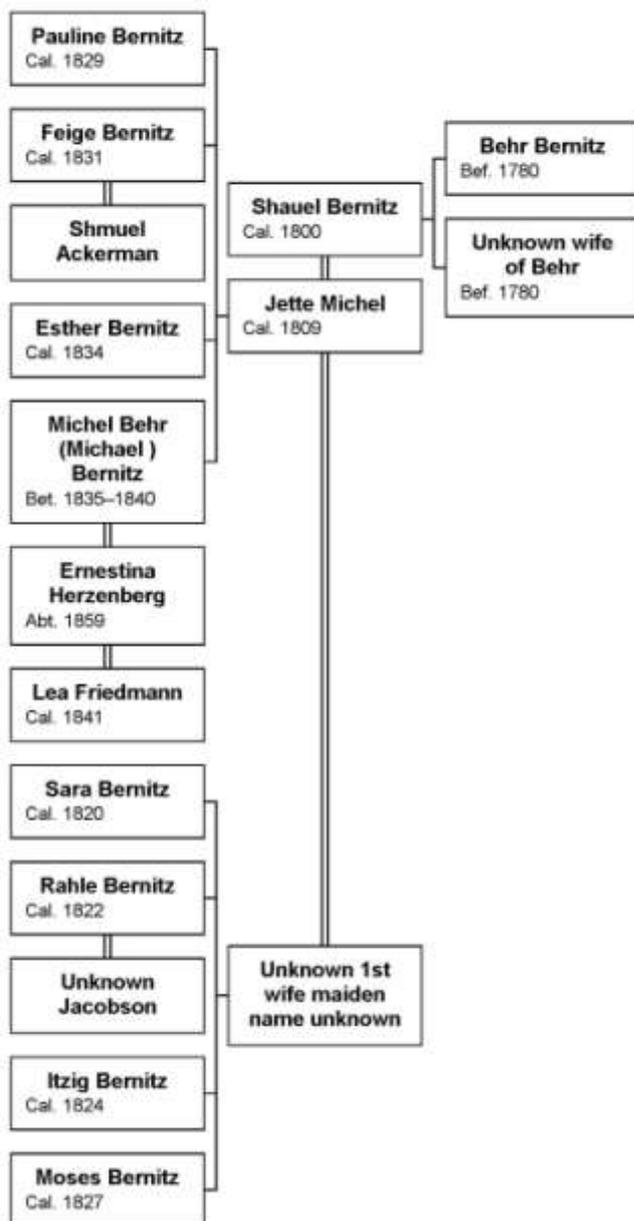
Behr (my great-great-great-grandfather was the first Bernitz found in Latvian records. He was born prior to 1780 in Hasenpoth but the only information found to date is that he had at least two sons: Hirsch born in ca 1797, and Shaul, born in ca 1800. We are descended from Shaul. Hirsch also had a large family in Hasenpoth, details of which are included later in this document. His descendents would all be distant cousins.

The earliest record of the surname Bernitz in Hasenpoth is found in a list of Jews entitled to reside there in 1834. It shows that Shaul, son of Behr, aged 34 together with his sons Itzig aged 10 and Moses (7) and his nephew Abraham (23, son of Hirsh) lived in house number 42.<sup>5</sup> The location of this house is clearly marked on a town plan of this period.

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<sup>5</sup> Jews in Hasenpoth / Aizpute 1834 This is a database of over 1,000 names of Jews lawfully entitled to reside in Hasenpoth Jewish males of all ages are listed This list dates back to the very earliest period of surnames in Latvia.

## Shaul Bernitz



Shaul (our great-great-grandfather) was the second son of Behr. He was married twice. He apparently married young. There are no names or dates available relating to his first wife. However documents show that they did have 4 children:

- Sara BERNITZ (b. 1820 Hasenpoth-)
- Rahle BERNITZ (b. 1822 Hasenpoth-d.1886 Libau)
- Itzig BERNITZ (1824- )
- Moses BERNITZ (1827- )

Although I have no further information, these half-brothers and half-sisters of our great-grandfather probably had children, and some at least would have emigrated.

Shaul's first wife died (possibly in childbirth), and he re-married. His second wife, my great-great grandmother was Jette MICHEL (this was her surname), 9 years his junior. He wasted no time, as there is only a 2 year gap between the birth of his last child by wife 1 and the first child by wife 2. They had 4 children.

Our ancestor and great-grandfather Michel Behr, the 4<sup>th</sup> child and only son of Shaul and Jette, was probably born a few years after his sisters. Unfortunately we have not located any evidence of his birth date as yet.

### **The Shtetl of Hasenpoth**

Now known as Aizpute, Hasenpoth is a town in western Latvia's Liepaja District, between Kuldiga and Liepaja. Teutonic knights founded it in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The imposing ruins of their castle still remain.

It had a large Jewish population. I have visited the town, the very overgrown Jewish cemetery and the museum, which has interesting exhibits on many of the trades carried out by the Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Hasenpoth lies between Riga and Liepaja, surrounded by forests of Beech, Birch and Pine, as well as large fields of wheat. These are nesting grounds to large colonies of White Storks. Their big open nests abound on high structures. The birds breed in Latvia and Lithuania in the summer, and then migrate as far as Southern Africa in the European winter. My mother always told me that I was delivered by a stork. It appears to be possible! Certainly, this bubbameister would have been retold in the shtetls of Latvia and Lithuania.

Jews bought land for the first synagogue in 1752, and founded the cemetery in 1792. Records show that in 1788 there were 140 heads of families, and a total of 209 Jews, of whom 33 were traders. (It is therefore reasonable to assume that at this early stage of the community, unmarried men were predominant).

In 1796 many privileges were extended to Jews, and there was a large immigration from East Prussia, including Jews from Hamburg, Dresden and other German cities. In 1819, when Hasenpoth was incorporated into the Russian Empire, most of the privileges were removed. It is therefore conceivable that the Bernitz family did migrate to Hasenpoth from Germany at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And then in 1840, 96 families were forcibly moved from Hasenpoth and Kurzeme to new land in Russia. Again, the possibility that the Bernitz name was amongst them and made its appearance in Russia cannot be excluded. Nevertheless, the position of Jews continued to improve. By 1863 half of the population was Jewish and the community as well as the town became prosperous.

The more affluent Jews lived in the town centre in mainly wooden, multi-level houses, with the trading premises on the ground floor, and dwelling space above. Special areas of “social” housing were built for the poorer Jews, many of whom were new immigrants from Russia. In 1870 an order was published, ordering that the Jewish population be reduced to 35%. Many Jews moved to villages surrounding Hasenpoth. It is possible that it was this event that led to Michel Behr leaving Hasenpoth and settling in Gruz-Dimene (see below).



Hasenpoth railway station in 1900. This enabled large population movements, both voluntary and prescribed.

Hasenpoth, like all other Jewish communities had a Kahal, an elected communal authority, responsible not only for administering their own affairs, but also for collecting and remitting taxes to the gentile authorities. Taxes included poll tax, householders' tax, food taxes, box taxes, etc. It was the council's job to tax each community according to its size and wealth. Poor Jews were exempt from taxes. The Kahal also collected charitable donations to assist the poor, with volunteer collectors going from door to door.



Top. A row of old wooden houses, with modern roofs. Originally they used wood shingles.  
Bottom. The Synagogue in Hasenpoth, built on the banks of the Tegra River. The Mikvah complex is being rebuilt.



In 1861 there were three shuls (described as one synagogue plus two minyanim). The main synagogue, still an imposing building, was created by combining two of the synagogues into one. It is picturesquely sited on the steep banks of the river Tegra. At the river level are the remains of what was once a large mikvah complex. Although now in a state of disrepair it was comparable in size and architecture to a modern spa complex.

The Jewish cemetery, originating from 1795, is very overgrown and in a poor state. There are supposedly about 100 graves remaining.



I was not able to find any gravestones of the Bernitz family, although records show that at least 2 were buried here, those of Abraham Dov b. Moshe Bernitz d. 5672 (1912) and Shmuel b. Abraham Zev Bernitz d. 5629 (1869). The only indication that this was a Jewish cemetery is a small plaque in the grass indicating that this had been a Jewish cemetery between 1796 and 1941.



The remains of the Hasenpoth cemetery have been engulfed by almost 70 years of forest growth. The iron headstone of Zelig Goldberg, b.1793, d.1877 is still legible, as is headstone of Rivka.



Below. A street in Hasenpoth.

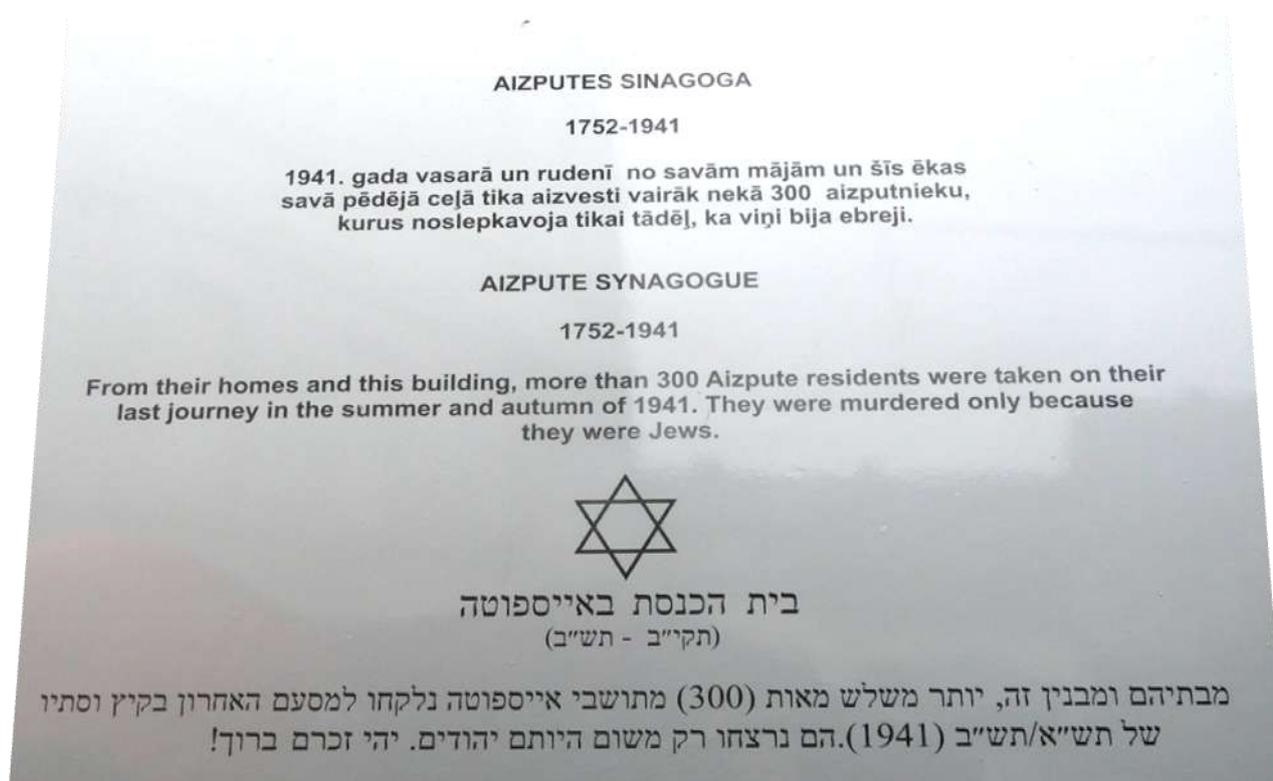


## The Holocaust in Hasenpoth

Even before the Germans captured the town, local fascists had begun murdering Jews. After the German conquest at the end of June 1941, Jews were required to wear yellow stars, and to do forced labour. The Jewish community was murdered in stages. On July 24<sup>th</sup>, 36 Jews were shot near the cemetery, having been declared “leftists and property owners”. On October 27<sup>th</sup>, 376 Jews were assembled. They were taken from the synagogue to a forest in the nearby town of Kavini, where they were all murdered. Hasenpoth was declared “Judenfrei”. (One Jew survived, having been hidden by locals). After the war a number of Jews returned from Russia, and were also murdered by anti-Soviet Latvians.



The Museum in Hasenpoth. It houses an exhibition showing details of the crafts and businesses of the towns inhabitants in the late 1800's.



Plaque commemorating the inhabitants who were murdered.  
The main synagogue.



## Michel Behr Bernitz

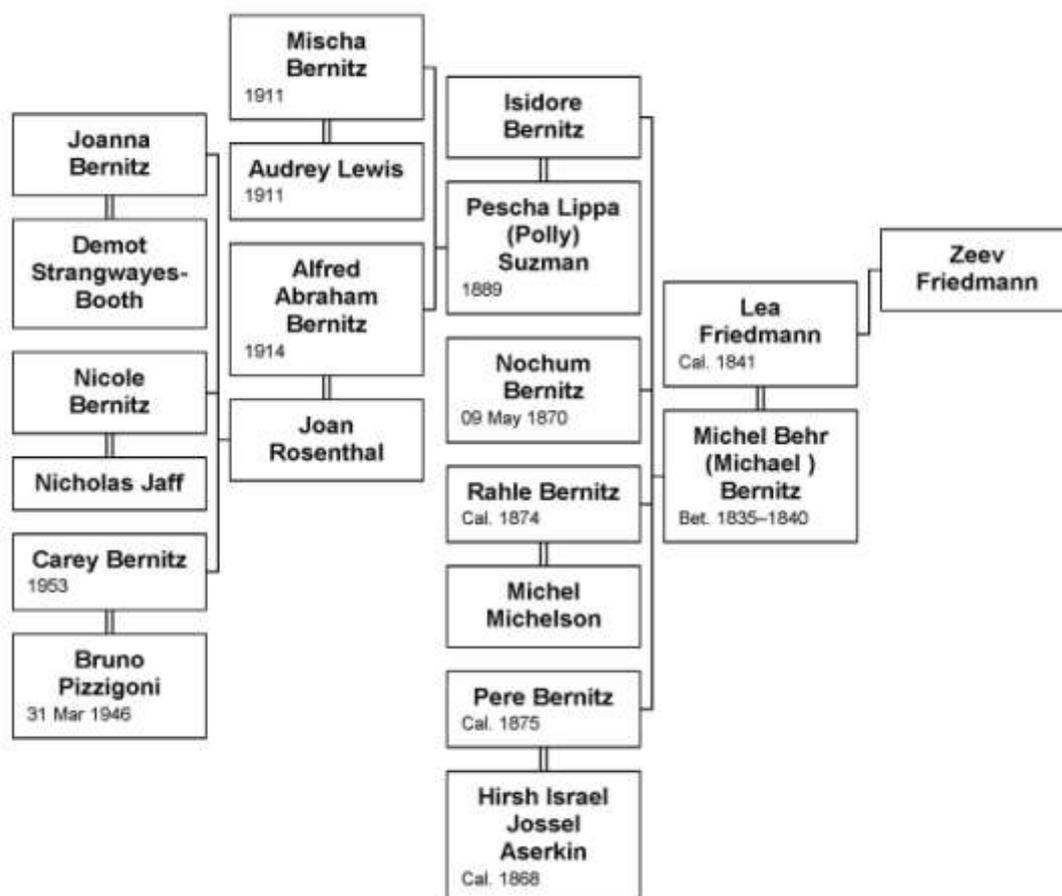


Michel, also known as Mikhail and Michael (my great-grandfather) was married twice, and had children in both marriages.

Michel's birth date is not known, but can be calculated as being between 1830 and 1840. He grew up in the Jewish community in Hasenpoth (now called Aizpute). We know that the children from his 2<sup>nd</sup> marriage to Ernestina were born in Gros-Dahmen (Russian: Gruz-Dimena), in the Hasenpoth district; we can therefore assume that he settled there around 1884. It is located 5 km from the current civil parish of Gramzda. This was a small place without authorities with whom to register births. Michel only obtained a certificate regarding their birth registration from the Rabbi of the Skude district (which is across the border in Lithuania) many years after they were born.

He was known to be a brewer, and the certificate mentioned above refers to him as the Hasenpoth petit bourgeois Michel Behr, an indication that he had been admitted to the merchant class. Gros-Dahmen was a large country estate, belonging to a Baron Nicholas Schroder. It did not have (and still does not have any large town). Michael had two marriages, with children from each marriage.

## First marriage to Lea Friedman.



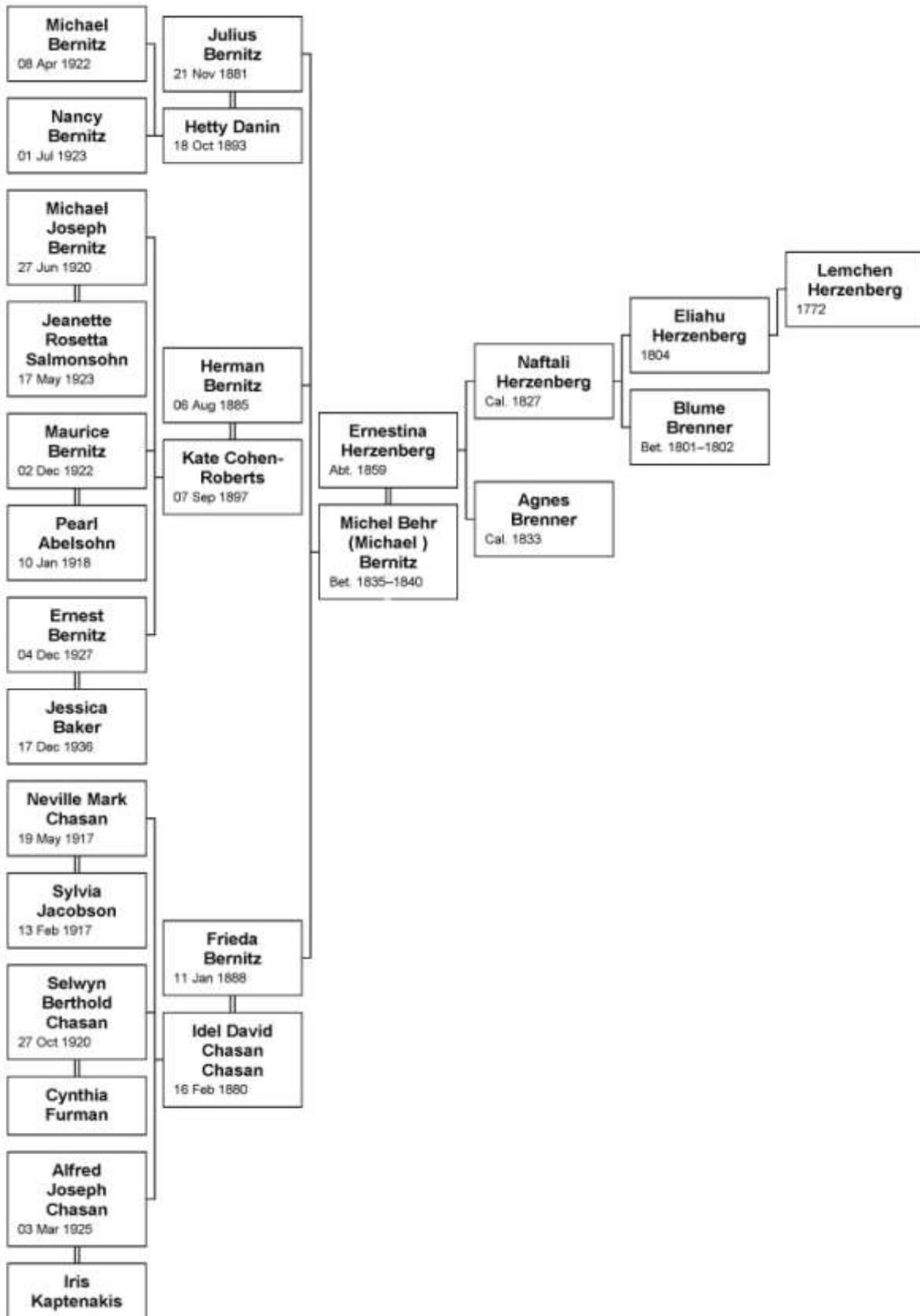
Michel married Lea Friedman in 1862, when she was 21 years old. He was either of a similar age, or up to 10 years older. They lived in Hasenpoth, and had 2 boys and 2 girls – Isidor (birth date unknown), Nochum (1870), Rahle (1874) and Pere (1875). Both daughters married in Latvia.

No further records have been found for Nochum – he probably left Latvia.

As we have not yet located any birth documents for Isidor, there is a possibility that Nochum and Isidor are the same person.

Lea died on the 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1875, the year that Pere was born. I suspect that she died in childbirth.

## Second marriage to Ernestina Herzenberg



I have been puzzled by a number of issues relating to Michel Behr's history.

1. The lack of birth documents for himself, as well as for the second son from his first marriage.
2. The fact that he chose not to register the births of any of the children of his second marriage for many years (I believe that the birth certificate that was eventually issued by the Rabbi in Skude was only issued after Michael had died, probably at the request of his then widow Ernestina).
3. The fact that he moved from Hasenpoth, where he had been an established merchant (brewer), to Gruz-Dimene after his second marriage to Ernestina.
4. The stories, retold independently by both Ernie (as heard from Herman), and by Joanna (as heard from Isidor), that Michel and Ernestina socialized with the nobility, or that he was possibly even ennobled himself, with the title of Baron. Though intriguing, this is extremely unlikely. But was there any basis for the stories?

The fact that neither the birth of his second son, nor subsequent children's births were registered was not in itself unusual. Records may simply be lost or destroyed. As described elsewhere, conscription laws for Jewish boys were draconian, and parents took many risks and used many ploys to protect their sons from this. Failing to register a birth was one device; it exposed the father to financial punishment, but possibly protected his son. Moving away from Hasenpoth with a new bride certainly provided an opportunity to hide his new sons from birth and conscription registers. Whether this was the reason that Michel Behr moved is not established, but I think that it may have been.

The move to Gros-Dahmen is itself of interest. Situated in Courland, close to the current Lithuanian border, it was a large country estate belonging to a Baron Nicholas Schroder. It is known that on the estate he farmed sheep, pigs, carp, and honey. There was a large mill, and also a very large house. There are early descriptions of large buildings that provided housing for hundreds of servants and farm staff. The estate itself was one of many similar ones. There are descriptions of large parties held by the landowners, horse riding and hunting and other entertainments.

The Herzenberg's may well have facilitated the move to this estate. Robert Herzenberg had recorded that "Our family was distributed throughout the Pilten area in the estates of the barons such as Baer, Ropp, Osten-Laken, Vietiunhof, etc. They were dairy and wood retailers, but predominantly, distillers." He recalls further that ". . . there was a converted (from Judaism) "frau", the cousin of my mother, Rosa Herzberg, the daughter of great-aunt Balkan Herzberg (born Herzenberg) who had married the Baron Lowenstein of Kokenhusen. I knew this baroness personally."

Schroder was a Christian German landowner. Ever since the crusades, many Germans had lived in the Baltic provinces of the Russia Empire. Rīga was practically a German city. They were not the majority but they were the rulers. The German nobility as well as German members of the Great Guild (merchants) and the Small Guild (organized craftsmen) were responsible for promulgating the laws and rules in the cities and provinces.

The Baltic Germans, especially the nobility, also frequently held high positions in the Tsar's government. This is not surprising, as almost all of the Tsars of the Russian Empire during the 19th century were ethnic Germans.

Nicholas Schroder had acquired the estate in 1878, and the family continued to own it until the Russian occupation in 1940. This estate as well as the surrounding estates, together with their employees, required the supply of numerous goods and services. These were provided by traders and artisans living on small settlements on land belonging to the estate.

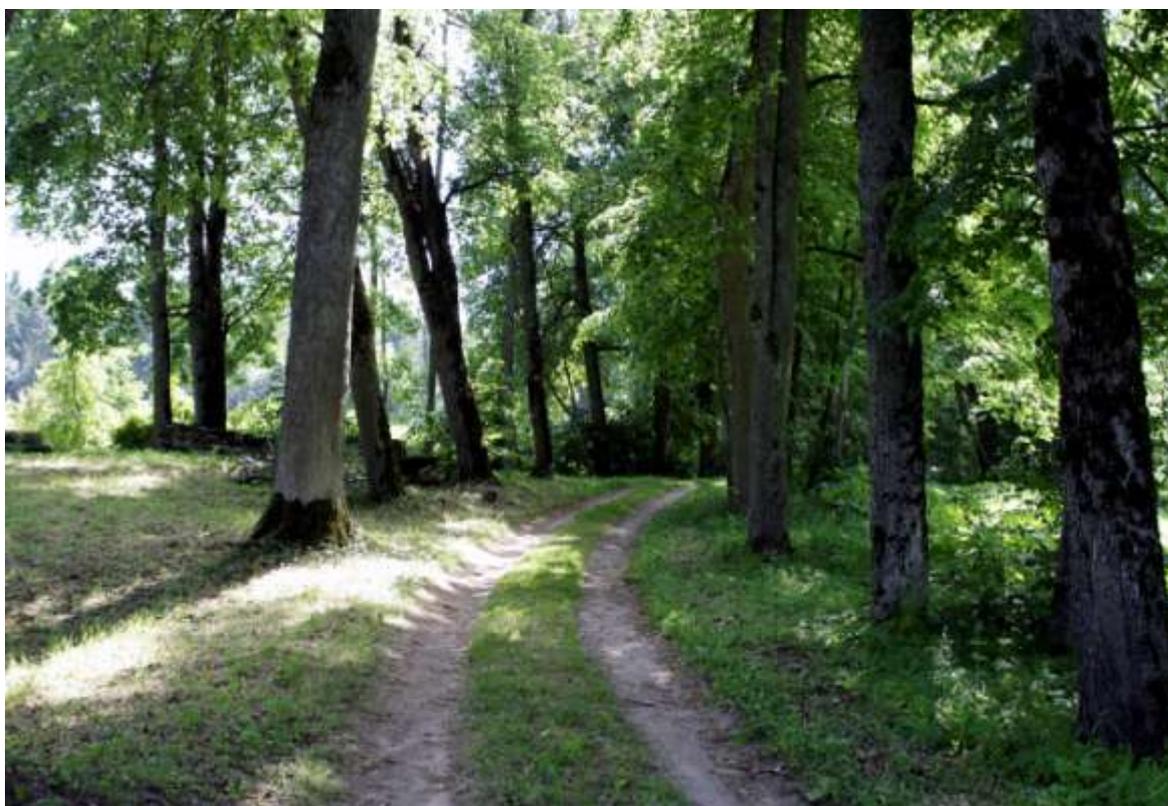


Gramzda, where Michel Behr had his business, and where Herman and Frida were born.

Gros-Dahmen, as it was, no longer exists, and cannot be found on a modern map of Latvia. With the aid of Rita Bogdanova and Elena Spungina we were able to narrow the search to a small town with the modern Latvian name of Gramzda. I visited this, found the local municipal offices, and through the translation skills of Elena, I received confirmation from the “mayor” of the town that the site of the estate still existed.

With his kind assistance I was able to meet the current owner, Irena (no surname given) and her family who have been living there since 1953. They now occupy a very much smaller house that was built above the previous cellars of the estate, and which they built themselves over many decades. They have also restored the fish ponds. She was visited in 2000 by a descendent of Nicholas Schroder, a man at that point 99 years old. As a boy he had lived on the estate and she told us how he vividly described life on the estate.

The house was very large. It was built at the water's edge, and was surrounded by water. There was a large carp pool, servant's buildings, and a timber workshop. The beautiful garden was huge, and had many gardeners. Irena remembers that when she was still a child that the gardens were still beautiful.



The remains of the tree lined carriage drive to the estate, over 1km long.

The house and all of the buildings were burned down in 1905. They were rebuilt, but then destroyed by the Russians, who then erected a small number of military hangers, still to be seen. Very few people lived in the area during communist times, nor live there now. The countryside still consists of forests and open fields. Around the estate the remnants of the gardens and ponds can clearly be seen, with beautiful winding drives lined with 200 year old trees.

With this information available, I believe that there is now a plausible explanation for the previously mentioned puzzling issues. Michel Behr never did register the birth of his son Isador, in order to protect him from conscription. After Lea Friedman, his first wife died (1875), Michel remarried. He used the opportunity to leave Hasenpoth with the children from his first marriage. With his new wife Ernestina, he settled on the estate of Baron Schroder, around 1880/81 (probably soon after Baron Schroder himself arrived in 1878). He was able to establish a business based upon brewing. Typically in those times, licenses were granted to Jewish merchants to own a tavern and brew beer. They were heavily taxed for this privilege, whilst at the same time providing a useful service to the workers in the area. Michel and Ernestina had 3 children - Julius, Herman and Frida.

They were far from any Jewish community. The closest was at Skude, now called Skuodas (and in Lithuania). It was about a day's journey away. They would have had to travel about 10 kilometres. by carriage, to join up with the railway line from Libau. Skude had a sizable Jewish community, and was under the auspices of the district Rabbi of Telz. Telz, now also in Lithuania, was a major centre for Jewish study, with a number of famous yeshivas.

They would not have had much opportunity to attend the synagogue, but at the same time would have been "conveniently unable" to register the births of their children. Michel died around 1889 while his children were still young (Julius 8, Herman 4 and Frida 1). Unable to continue running the business, they had to leave Gros-Dahmen, and Ernestina went back to Goldingen with her children. It was during this same time frame that Isidor had either already left or did leave for South Africa. Like so many of his compatriots, economic opportunity as well as the avoidance of conscription would have been the motivating factors.

I have been unable to trace the burial place of Michel. His body would have been transported to an approved Jewish cemetery, probably some distance away. I believe that the birth certificate issued by the Rabbi at Skude was only done after Michel died and probably given to Ernestina.

The children would have observed a great deal about life on the noble estates. Their father as a merchant may well have had close contacts with the Baron. Many of the Barons had good relations with the Jews. They possibly had contact with their great aunt Rosa Herzberg who had married the Baron Lowenstein of Kokenhusen. These childhood memories, retold many times, could have been the basis for the stories of the grand life they had remembered. In any event, it all ended when Michel died. As the lives of Ernestina and Herman are well documented after that time, there was certainly no evidence of further grandeur or titles.

### **Isidor Bernitz**

Isidor, son of Michel Behr and Lea, was a half-brother to my grandfather Herman, and was my grand uncle. He was the first in the family to immigrate to South Africa.

The dates are uncertain. But according to his daughter Joanna, “Isidore was definitely one of the first Jews in Smithfield prior to the Boer War, definitely fought in De Wet’s Commando, owned the farm Caledondraai, which he had to mortgage to Lewis Suzman in the 20’s, was President of the Smithfield Zionist Movement and was also a Freemason. Smithfield had a small congregation of 40 Jews and a Rabbi. Isidore owned a store and the first garage in Smithfield”. She is researching the subject for a book which she is writing.

The photograph below was taken on an occasion when rifles were being handed in to the British. The army encampment can be seen in the background. Isidor is right of centre with his hat raised. The sign on the corrugated iron building reads Smithfield Supply Store.



*Photo Joanna Bernitz*

Herman travelled to South Africa to join Isidore and worked in Isidor’s store. Isidor married Polly (Pescha Lipka) Suzman who was born in 1889 in Salant, Lithuania (the same shtetl that my maternal grandmother Sara Tsipe Chasan came from). He presumably met her in SA. My mother Pearl observes that, “because Isidore married a Suzman, and because Sara Tsipe’s half sister was also a Suzman, Isidor’s sons Alfred and Mischa were first cousins to my dad and second cousins to my mom”.

### Ernestina Herzenberg

Ernestina was the sixth child of Naphtali (Naftali) Herzenberg and Agnes (Nese) Brenner. Naftali and Nese had four sons and six daughters: Leonhard, Joseph, Ignatz, Leopold, Sarah, Ernestine, Sophie, Fanny, Dora, and Lina.

The Herzenberg's were a large family in Kurland. Their history has been well documented by the Herzenberg descendents ([www.hertzenberg.net](http://www.hertzenberg.net)). Robert Herzenberg, of the same generation as Herman Bernitz and his brothers and step-brothers wrote his reminiscences in the 1940's. These were translated into English by his son Leonardo in the 1990's. They provide much information about Ernestina and the Bernitz family. They further provide a fascinating view of the lifestyle of our ancestors' generations in Kurland

Ernestina's birth date is unknown. Her eldest brother Leonhard was born in 1856. As she gave birth to Julius in November 1881, she must have been fairly young when she was married (say 21). Therefore she probably married Michel around 1880/81, and was born in approx 1859/60. She was certainly much younger than Michael, possibly by 20-30 years.



Left. Ernestina, holding a grandchild. Louis, Elias, Johana and Sofia Salmonsohn were her stepchildren. Right: Joe's nephew Zalman, with his mother. *Photos from Bertha Aberman.*

Ernestina gave birth to 3 children with Michel - Julius, Herman and Frieda. She was also stepmother to Michel's 4 children by his first marriage to Lea Friedman – sons Isidore and Nochum and daughters Rahle and Pere. She was mother to a further child (Josef Salmonsohn) as well as 3 step-children in her second marriage. After Michel Behr Bernitz had died, Ernestina remarried. Her second husband was Shlomo Salmonsohn (Salmonsohn), a widower.

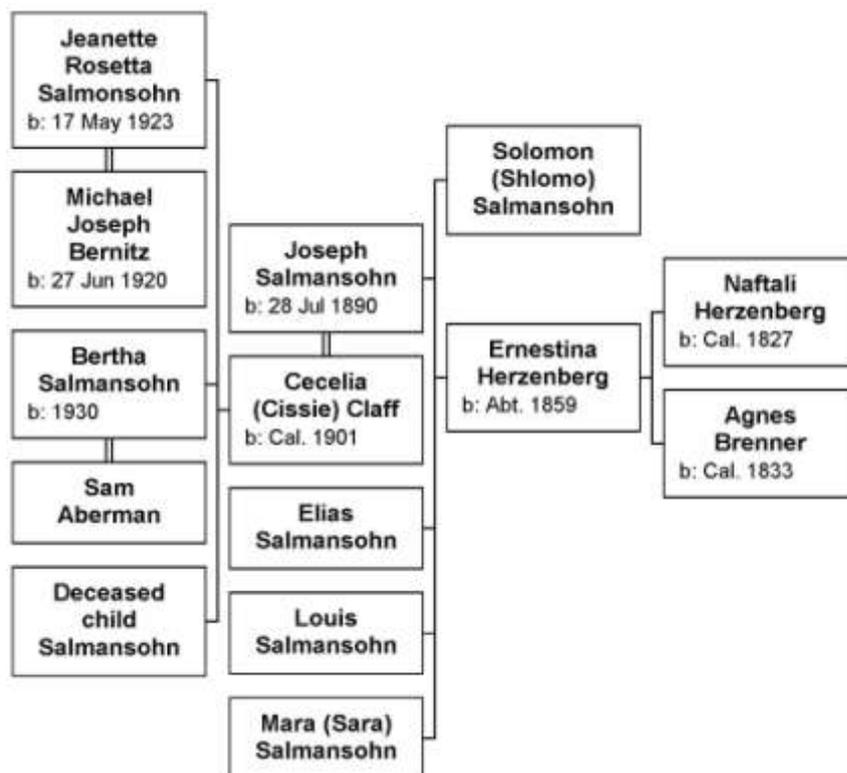
The following account is from the Reminiscences of Robert Herzenberg  
 “Aunt Ernestine's first husband was Michael Bernitz, who was a widower with many children. From this marriage came my cousins Julius, Herman (Hemske), and Frieda. Uncle Bernitz, also a brewer, died young. Aunt Ernestine stayed with the younger children at Grandmother's in Goldingen, cousin Julius came to my father and was raised with me. He was a little older than I, attended Blumenau's cheder, and then in 1895, when my father and uncle Joseph founded the firm Gebruder Herzenberg, he became an apprentice in the business. He stayed there a few more years after the death of my father with my brother George. He lived in our home, sharing my room until I left home in 1902. Soon after that my brother George drove him out of the business. He had a small factory making coconut mats in Libau. He had two children in his marriage, Mischa and Nancy. Mischa supposedly plays cello, of Nancy I know nothing. When cousin Herman became older, he also came to Libau as an apprentice at Gebr. Herzenberg and uncle Joseph took him into his house. Times there were not good for him. But he was so cheerful and imperturbable that he tolerated it very well. He immigrated to South Africa still before the first world war, where he became fat and wealthy. His sister Frieda also followed him there, where, as far as I know, she is married and happy. Aunt Ernestine, in a second marriage, married a widower, Salmonsohn, with whom she had a son, whom I hardly knew. He worked in my father's business, and he was also driven out by my brother George after father died. I don't know what became of him.”



The grave of my great-great-grandmother, Nese Herzenberg, born Brenner. She is buried in a plot in Libau Jewish cemetery next to her father Naftali Brenner.

## Ernestina's second marriage to Shlomo Salmonsohn

When Ernestina married Shlomo (his first wife had died), she also became stepmother to his children from his first marriage, a son and a daughter.



In all, Shlomo had 6 children, sons Louis and Elias, daughter Johanna, Sofia and Mara by his first marriage, and Joe with Ernestina in his second marriage.

We know that Elias and Louis both immigrated to South Africa, whilst Mara remained in Goldingen in Latvia. There is no evidence that she ever married, and she did not have children. Her handwriting and letters indicate that she was not well educated; perhaps she has some learning difficulties. She probably died during the Holocaust.



Photograph of Mara, with handwritten inscription on back:

Dear brother.  
I am sending you my picture. Hope you will appreciate it. Write how you find it - does it do me justice? I am well and hope you are the same.  
many regards  
from your sister Mara





This picture dates from 1919. It appears to be taken at the Seder table. The lady standing at the back is servant (most likely non-Jewish). Who are the others in the photo?

The lady in the centre bears a resemblance to the photograph of a younger Ernestina (strong chin). She was 60 in 1919. The lady first left is strongly like the one who appears with Zalman on page 31. Therefore possibly his mother, and the wife of either Louis or Elias Salmonsohn (sitting far right). The man next to Ernestina is possibly Zalman – compare also to picture page 32.