

Stein Family

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Great uncle Philip Stein (1890-1979) was the brother of my grandmother. He was born on the estate of the Polish nobleman called Geminsitz, which was near the village of Shveshna. Shvekshna was virtually a Jewish village. He did not celebrate his Bar Mitzvah, for his mother was ill at that time. His mother took produce to the markets at Memel or Konigsburg, for Shvekshna was near the Prussian border. He migrated to South Africa in 1899. He lived in Montague, Robertson and Cape Town. He worked as a professor of mathematics at Rhodes University, Natal University (South Africa) and then at Cambridge University (United Kingdom).

When he was in his eighties he wrote notes about his origins. Here are the relevant passages, where Shvekshna is mentioned:

"I was born in Lithuania on the estate of a Polish noble. The place was called Germinsalz, and it was near the village of Shvekshna, which also belonged to this noble. My official birthday is the twenty fifth of January 1890. This makes me eighty years old. I do not know my actual birthday within six months. My mother was ill at the time of my Bar Mitzvah, so there was no celebration to fix the day into my memory. This day is anyway within six months of my actual birthday.

"I was my mother's youngest child and the only boy who survived to have a 'bris'. According to my mother the bris that was made was a great occasion, not only the festivities; but in the elaborate precautions to avert the 'evil eye'. Schools of the less affluent Orthodox Jews were hired to recite psalms continuously, and charity was lavishly distributed to the indigent. These precautions were efficacious for I am here at eighty and still alive.....

"I still remember Germineitz in Shvekshna. We lived in Germineitz until I was about seven. My Mother leased the cattle (milk) from the Noble's bailiff. The cattle were tended and herded by the Noble's peasants. We had milk and sold it in Shvekshna. Some years ago she bought the crop of the Noble's orchard. Shvekshna was very near the Prussian border and my mother used to take the fruit into Prussia and retail it in the market at Memel or Konigsburg.....

"In Germineitz we lived at one end of a terrace of cottages. The others were occupied by the Noble's peasants. These peasants must have had young children, for before going to Sheveksha to Cheder, I didn't stir far from the house. In the winter anyway I was rarely allowed out of the home at all. I can nevertheless still picture the place in my mind. It was in a hollow. The orchard was on one side of a cove, and there was also a hill on the other side covered by moss. I would wander into the orchard and pick berries or apples,

depending on whether or not the fruit in that year was ours. I would climb up on the hill and then roll down....

“Shvekshna was practically a Jewish village. There were some Germans who lived on the outskirts. I suppose these were small traders of craftsmen. But essentially it was a purely Jewish village. There was a village square. On one side was a church, a fine brick building. But whether it was Greek Orthodox or Roman Catholic I do not know. I think the latter, as the Lithuanians are Roman Catholic. On the other side there were shops and Inns whose customers were mainly Lithuanian peasants. These peasants brought their wares to the market and then, I am sorry to say, usually went on to the inns and spent the proceeds on cheap vodka. It was the restriction on the sale of drink that led to their emigration. From the square there was a lane leading off to a smaller square in which the places of worship for the Jews were situated. These, in Shvekshna, were three. A Shul, a Beit Hamedrash and a place called a Shtebel. The Shul was a rather forbidding place to us youngsters. It was not heated and was used only on Saturdays and High Holy days. We children had the idea that at night the place was inhabited by ghosts and spirits. It would have been a very bold boy who would have dared to go to the Shul in the dead of night. The Beit HaMedresh. The Shtebel was mainly the place of worship of the artisan class. The places of worship were oriented so that the back was on the east side that is towards Jerusalem and the seats on that side were the most honorable and the most expensive. I do not know whether the seats were brought outright or just rented. I think the former, for one of the assets you left to your heirs was your seat in the synagogue. There were, of course, free seats near the door.

“The young Talmudic students (Yeshiva Bocherim) were a class unto themselves. If you were a particularly bright student you went to one of the renowned Yeshivas. I think the name of one of them was ‘Voloson’ and another was ‘Slabodka’. Otherwise you left your village and went to another one. There was no serious problem of paying for your keep. The villagers looked after you. You ‘ate days’ (‘Gessen Teg’ in Yiddish). The Shul beadle arranged for you to get meals with the local Jewish Yeshiva Bocher for one day a week and fed him with the family. There were jokes about it. One I remember was that one of these young men was wandering around with a lantern. Explanation, he was short a day.”

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We have found that our family from Sveksna are descended from the father of the Vilna Goan, a discovery about which we are proud and honored.