

ZAGARE 2012

by Sara Manobla

Zagare – the shtetl town in northern Lithuania, on the Latvian border, where Grandmother Berthe/Batya Moeller was born, where she married Grandpa David, and where Uncle Jack (Harry Towb's father) was born. Lithuania was then part of the Russian Empire, and increased repression of the Jews led to mass emigration in this period. The Towbs left Zagare in 1890 and settled in Britain where my father and five more siblings were born. Zagare was forgotten, never mentioned.

A century later the collapse of the Soviet Union opened up new possibilities of tracing ancestral links. Cousin Joy did some research and in 1995 she and Suki made their ground-breaking visit to Zagare. (Suki's account of their adventures is a delight.) As a result Joy became involved with the town and the townsfolk, and set up Lithuania Link, an NGO whose object was to introduce self-help projects and funding to encourage and assist the community's development. Her efforts were much appreciated and in 1998 she was invited to participate in the town's 800th anniversary celebrations as an honoured guest. She invited me to join her and thus began my connection with Zagare. I was somewhat indifferent to Joy's agenda and concentrated on studying the Zagare Jewish community. As it turned out, the visit was a learning experience for us both, and our different perspectives began to coalesce. Joy's projects led to a number of warm and meaningful relationships with the local people, my research took me into Jewish history and family genealogy. The story of Jewish Zagare with its tragic end, began to fall into place. One result was the event which took place on Friday 13th July, 2012, in the Town Square of Zagare, the dedication of a memorial plaque for the town's vanished Jewish community.

Eight of us of Zagarean descent came from abroad: Cliff Marks, a town planner from Seattle, compiler of the Zagare Shtetl website; Rose Zvi from Australia, author of 'Last Walk in Naryshkin Park', an account of her Zagarean family; Rod Freedman, also from Australia, who made the film about his uncle Chatzkel Lemchen, philologist and holocaust survivor; Roger Cohen columnist for the New York Times; Raymond and Hazel Woolfson from the UK; Joy and myself. Our local organiser, translator, and indispensable on-the-spot support was Valdas Balcunius, Lithuania Link activist, who together with Joy had dreamed up this improbable Jewish-Lithuanian joint initiative and translated it into reality.



Before Zagare I had four days in Vilnius, staying with Julius my dear friend and one time lodger from his student days in Jerusalem, and his family. In Vilnius I caught up with Rose, another happy reunion. I met her cousin Freda, daughter of her uncle Leib Yoffe, barber, trumpeter and leader of the Zagare band, the central character of her book, who fell in battle in World War II.

Rose and Freda



Julius

On Thursday Julius drove me and Rose to Zagare, stopping in Joniskis to look at the two synagogues, the Red (brick) and the White (plaster), handsome structures currently undergoing restoration. Here we met Cliff and he came with us to Zagare.



Joniskis - Red and White synagogues



Joy, Sarah Mitrike, Zofia. Valdas – supper at our house

Valdas met us and took Joy, Rose and me to in his mother's house, newly renovated, fully equipped, stocked with food and drink for our stay, which we had to ourselves. Very comfortable. The others were in various private and B&B accommodations, all organised by Valdas. There are no hotels in this little town. Joy and I had a great reunion, endless hugs and kisses, the culmination of months of emailing and phone calls. Valdas' mother brought us lunch – cottage cheese dumplings and a bowl of cherries. It was the cherry season and Zagare's annual Cherry Festival was under way.

Later we all went to Sarah Mitrike's house for an evening barbecue. Sarah was one of Joy's Lithuania Link volunteers who worked in Zagare. She stayed on, married Saulius, and now has a family. She is the unofficial Minister of Tourism for overseas visitors to the town, and founder of the Cherry Festival. A great lass. We met with the rest of the overseas descendants, and some locals, ate venison and pork, barbecued by Saulius, and ran indoors to escape the rain. Back at the house we had a session checking speeches and the programme for tomorrow.

Next day Rose, Valdas, Rod and I went over to see the Levinkas family, who live



Leonas and Zofia Levinkas



next door. Back in 1943-4 Eduardas and Therese Levinkas hid Batya Trusfus and her granddaughter Ruth for nearly a year, saving their lives. They are now candidates, posthumously, for Yad va Shem's Righteous of the Nations award, and

hopefully my research will complete the file. Their son Leonas, now over 80, remembers everything, and the family of his wife Zofia was also involved in rescuing Jews. With Valdas translating we had a most interesting encounter, viewing photos, cuttings and documents relating to the past.



Rose at mass grave

After this we went to the Town Square where the ceremony will be held. The paving was not finished but the plaque was in place, 3 metal plates with the 3 languages, on a plinth prominently placed in front of the municipality. From here we drove to the mass grave in Naryshkin Park, unchanged. A sombre place.

After lunch in a café in the town square we went back to change, returning to the site at 3 o'clock to greet arrivals for the 4 o'clock start. Weather throughout was unsteady, with showers and bright sunshine alternating. Umbrellas much in evidence.

Dignitaries and guests arrived, and the plaza filled up. There were some chairs, but it was mostly standing, about 100 persons. Two mikes, one for speakers, one for translator (Valdas). I acted as MC for the event, welcoming the guests and introducing the speakers; the head of the regional council; Liat Wexelman of the Israel Embassy who came through from Riga; Vidmantas Mendelssohn son of Isaac Mendelssohn, Zagare's last Jew who died last year; Eduard Tiesnesis, son of Miriam Schneider of Zagare, who was saved in 1941 by local people; Valdas who spoke on behalf of the townsfolk; and speeches from the descendants – Joy, Cliff and Rose.



Our audience



Rose and Joy



Valdas and me

In the event we overran our allotted time, mainly because of the time needed for translation. I cut my speech drastically and so did the others. The speeches were by and large appropriate and all were very sincere. But the importance of the event lay in its context, a context of co-operation between Jews and Lithuanians, of coming to terms with the past, of an open acceptance and acknowledgement by Lithuanians (some) of the terrible history of collaboration with the Nazis, a context of

reconciliation and of looking ahead to a better future. So much of this was due to Valdas, the prime initiator, and the link between the locals and the descendants. The event was sponsored by local funding which covered the costs of the plaque dedication ceremony and would not allow us, the Jews from outside, to contribute. But we were permitted a free hand in the programme, choice of speakers and so on. And we attempted to find a golden path between the harsh notes of history and the sweet sounds of reconciliation.

Of our little band, Rose Zvi was the closest to the legacy of the past. The remains of her grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins lie in the mass grave, and in her book "Last Walk in Naryshkin Park" she tells most movingly the story of her family and of the Zagare community. She spoke with much emotion, ending her speech with the words: "we are here". The showers renewed as she unveiled the plaque and the texts were read aloud by Rod (English), Valdas (Lithuanian) and Dovid Katz (Yiddish):



For hundreds of years Žagarė (in Yiddish — Zhager) had been home to a vibrant Jewish community. Zhager's marketplace had many Jewish shops and was a center of commerce for merchants from here and a range of other towns. Many of their shops surrounded this square. Zhager was also famous for its many Hebrew scholars, the "Learned of Zhager". German military occupiers and their Lithuanian collaborators brought the region's Jewish men, women, and children to this square on October 2, 1941. Shooting and killing of the whole Jewish community of Zhager began here and continued in the forests nearby. About 3,000 Jewish citizens were killed.

Dovid Katz, a Yiddish scholar, American, now living in Lithuania and active in local politics, is a large and colourful character. And it was Dovid who led the assembly in reciting together the Kaddish prayer for the dead, bringing the ceremony to an end.

Valdas, Joy, Cliff, Rose, Rod, and I found it hard to believe that the months of planning and preparation had brought us to this moment of completion. But there was more to come! In the town's Cultural Centre, right opposite our plaque, another Jewish-related event was in progress. A talk (in Lithuanian) about Jewish history came to an end and was followed by a concert of Jewish music – a singer of Yiddish songs, and three klezmer performers. The audience loved it and roared with applause.

Then came our Kabbalat Shabbat, for the overseas visitors, and friends and supporters from Zagare, Siauliai, and Vilnius, some 30 persons. Julius and Valdas had organised a charming chalet outside the town, and provisioned a buffet supper. I had brought from Vilnius Israeli kosher wine, challot and candles for our Friday evening gathering and Cliff hosted the evening.



Rose, Hazel and I recited the blessings, there was much talk and laughter, and some people – Rod, Roger and myself – spoke, and a good time was had by all.

Zagarean descendants

The sunset over the fields was beautiful. I said goodbye to Julius who left for Vilnius early the next day. He was a great support and help to us all.

The next day, our last in Zagare, I popped into the Levinskas house next door, to deliver a present to Leonas and Zofia, an illustrated book about Jerusalem, in Russian. Later that day, Zofia popped into our house, with a bowl of fruit and plate of open sandwiches – a contribution to our supper. And she stayed on and socialized with us.

We spent time at the Cherry Festival in the Naryshkin park. It was reminiscent of the 800th anniversary events 15 years ago, sports competitions, horse racing, a fair with stalls, food, drink, and a football match with Maccabi Vilnius (seniors). We met a Jewish man from Sauliau whose son was on the team, and Rose chatted to him in Yiddish. But more important was the Jewish cemetery – a little tidier perhaps but unchanged since my last visit, tombstones illegible and fallen down, but no vandalism, and the area was mown. Then our visit to the house of Pots and Pans.



The house of Pots and Pans



Jewish cemetery

We went because Rod's family had had a cloth dying workshop there, which we duly inspected. The current owner now has a run-down garage operating on the premises. He is also an avid collector of junk, and has covered the walls and roof of the building with pots and pans and lids. The collection can be viewed in the courtyard and his daughter showed us round. Then she brought some objects which she said would be interesting to Jews. There were coins that had been found in the house, Russian or Polish, and a torah scroll, torn, dirty, roughly rolled up like a bundle of newspapers. She tried to open it and to my horror, laid it on the muddy ground. We cleared a space on a table and examined it. The girl told us that it had been found hidden inside one of the walls of the house. I read a few lines - it appeared to be not very old, with fine calligraphy, but in poor condition.

Leib's band



Torah scroll



And then in the courtyard I came across the musical instruments, half a dozen brass instruments – three trumpets, euphonium, saxophone - decayed, rusty, broken. They must have belonged to the band of Uncle Leib. It had to be. I beckoned to Rose and we embraced. For Rose to hold her uncle's trumpet in her hand was the closest any of us came to our ancestors. It was a poignant finale to our three days in Zagare.

References, further reading:

"Last Walk in Naryshkin Park", Rose Zvi

"Uncle Chatzkel", Rod Freedman

"The Last Jew in Zagare", Roger Cohen, New York Times

Zhager shtetl links, Jewishgen, Cliff Marks

"The Promised Land", Jewish history chapter in the 800th Anniversary Green Book,



ISAAC MENDELSSOHN the last Jew of Zagare, born 1922 - died 2011.