

COMMEMORATION OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ZAGARE

13 July 2012

by Rod Freedman

freedman@changefocusmedia.com.au

Dear Family and Friends,

I recently spent a memorable two days participating in a commemoration and reconciliation event in Zagare (Zhager in Yiddish), where a memorial plaque to the former Jewish population was erected in the town square. Zagare is the shtetl in northern Lithuania in which Uncle Chatzkel's parents, Avraham and Rachel Lemchen, lived. After their town of Papile (Popelan) was destroyed in the First World War, they settled in Zagare and established a small wool dyeing factory behind their house. Uncle Chatzkel lived there for some time as well.

In the *UNCLE CHATZKEL* film, there's a sequence in which I visit the house. Isaak Mendelson, at that time the last Jew in Zagare, recalls the Lemchen family living there. He goes on to describe how, in October 1941, the Jewish community was rounded up in the town square. The German Einsatzgruppen leader ordered the shooting to start. (It's recorded that a spontaneous uprising took place in the square as the Jews were being assembled and seven 'partisan' collaborators were wounded by Jewish resisters.) The witnesses recalled blood flowing into the river. The survivors were taken to the forest in nearby Naryshkin Park and were executed at pre-prepared pits. (See Rose Zwi's book, *'Last Walk in Naryshkin Park'* <http://www.amazon.com/Last-Walk-Naryshkin-Park-Rose/dp/1875559728>) The Einsatzkommando 3 Jager Report lists 633 Jews, 1,107 Jewesses and 496 children killed on October 2. Earlier, leaders of the community had been shot to demoralize the community.

I heard about the intention to have a commemoration event in Zagare through contacts in online communities focused on Zagare – one is [Lithuania Link](#). The other is kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/zagare/memories.html

The idea to have a memorial plaque in the town square comes from a remarkable young man whom Lesley and I met in Vilnius in June. He is Valdas Balciunas, a 35 year old Lithuanian (non-Jewish) agricultural business manager who is from Zagare. Not long ago, he read *'Last Walk in Naryshkin Park'* and was amazed to find out what had happened to the Jews in his home town. He determined to do something to acknowledge that they had lived there and how they had died.

Valdas convinced the local authorities to approve his plan, consulted with descendants over the wording and arranged for it to be made and erected.

I was in two minds about attending until I received Valdas's response to seeing *UNCLE CHATZKEL* :

Dear Mr Rod,

First of all thank you very much for the "Uncle Chatzkel". Amazing story and very nice film you have created. I lived in Vilnius (Zverynas) 5 minutes walk from your uncle not knowing what a great man lives just round the corner... I'm 35 this year. I was born and grew up there (in Zagare).. by the Naryshkin park.. only after Lithuania got it's independence back people started to talk a bit about the Jewish tragedy. First of all there were graves, where one day the plaques changed from "Soviet citizens" into "Jewish victims" .. Then as I grew bigger I started hearing the stories, studied more history, got in touch with Joy Hall (Lithuania Link) and read "The Last Walk in the Naryshkin Park".. From then I started to understand what history holds in our small town. I have the only grandmother who is 84 this summer and she remembers a lot from her childhood. When asked she started to talk about the Jewish tragedy, about the Lithuanian collaborators and the killings.. She was also friends with Isaac and my uncle went to school with his sons. They live in Vilnius now.. I keep on researching.

I cried with you watching the film, my heart bleeds whenever I think of what happened with the Jewish community and of what my grandma told..

My initiative to unveil the plaque is a small step forward to explain the locals the truth. I do not want my children to grow in the world of lies. I do not want the future of the town to be built on curved foundation.

A dozen of locals were collaborators, a few names I know. Many people had work in Jewish craft shops, many Lithuanians lived or still live in Jewish houses. All Lithuanian community in one way or the other benefited overtaking the property. That is probably why people did not want to hear the story and that is why I'm even more willing to tell it. The soviet generation I do not have any hopes. My target is my generation and the younger. The more I talk the more response and understanding I get from others and I slowly achieve small results.

Therefore I need all info about the past. Like your uncle - it's fragile and it's disappearing, you have to catch every word and every story you can grasp. I am ready to listen and record and pass it over to others. The Jewish spirit is alive and I, my family want to make it stronger. If there is a way - to do something to ease the pain...

Therefore from now, even though I know Zagare will remain the sad recollection for Jews, may I once again call it your home. Sad, still bleeding, but the roots - like you said - are such and they are priceless.

You and family are welcome back to visit, stay, remember. We are slowly building new Zagare and you can again be part of it in all possible ways. Like Mrs Rose Zwi said, "may there be more walks in the Naryshkin park"..

With heartiest wishes,
Valdas Balciunas
Valdas@me.com

I arrived on Thursday evening 12 July in Riga (Latvia) where Valdas picked me up to drive the hour and a half south and just over the Lithuanian border to Zagare. A welcome bbq (local venison and boar) was in progress for the overseas visitors at the house of a British/Lithuanian couple. Sarah Mitrike came to Zagare to work for an NGO and married a local.



Avraham & Rachel Lemchen's house



Zagare descendants

I'm so glad I participated. There were descendants from Australia (me and Rose Zwi), Israel (Sara Manobla, a good friend of our cousin Maureen Fain in Jerusalem), UK and USA. One was Roger Cohen, a Brit and correspondent for the New York Times. The morning we met, we discovered our mothers had both been born in Krugersdorp, South Africa and formed an instant bond! After Isaak Mendelson died, Roger wrote an article that received a lot of responses – see <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/.../cohen-the-last-jew-in-zagare.html>

On Friday morning, we went to the Jewish Genocide (translation from Lithuanian sign) site in Naryshkin Park. It's a ten minute walk from the town square. This is where the main massacre took place and where my great grandparents are buried. It remains a chilling and beautiful place. A U shape of dense, flowering shrubs mark the pits and mass graves. The surrounding tall trees filter light onto the memorial plinth, inscribed in Lithuanian and Yiddish.



Execution pits, Naryshkin Park



Memorial, Naryshkin Park

Fifteen years ago when I was filming, I dug up an oak seedling from the adjoining forest and planted it in the clearing with Isaak and his wife Aldona's help. I placed stones around it, hoping it wouldn't be mown down. I dubbed it *'The Lemchen Tree'* in memory of our family and asked Isaak and Aldona to look out for it. They've both since died, so imagine my surprise to find that it has survived. It will be there for a long time.



'The Lemchen Tree' planted in 1997 with Isaak & Aldona Mendelson

Sara Manobla from Jerusalem has been researching the Levinskas family of Zagare with the intention of Yad Vashem recognizing them as 'Righteous Among the Nations' for having saved Jews in the war. Sara visited Yad Vashem recently to find out what else was needed. They required testimony from someone who had been helped or who was a witness. There was an old woman, they said, but had been unable to find her in six years. Sara tracked her down in about three weeks via a family tree she found on the net – she was in Jerusalem, ten minutes from Sara's house. Yad Vashem will now honour the family later in the year. Sara wanted to visit them to tell them the news and give them a gift from Jerusalem. She asked Valdas where they lived. Valdas replied, 'Well, they live next door and she was the head of my old kindergarten!'

So Sara, Rose and I went next door to meet Sofia and Leonas Levinskas. They were nervous but very hospitable and gradually warmed to the foreigners and the attention. It turned out they'd been the children in the house and it was Mr Levinskas's parents who had hidden Jews. His wife's family has also been involved, although in another place. His father was Lithuanian and a 'Tolstoyan' with strong ethics. His mother was German and so the German officers would come sometimes to listen to the radio in the room we were sitting in. During wartime, it had been partitioned into two rooms. At times, children were hidden in one room, including the old woman whom Sara had found in Jerusalem, while in the next room, the unsuspecting German soldiers had sat listening to the radio, hosted by Leonas's parents. This meeting certainly helped to change my feelings about Zagare. Another family has already been recognized by Yad Vashem.



Sofia and Leonas Levinskas...



... and with Valdas Balciunas in the room where Jewish children were hidden

Afterwards, I walked to the Lemchen house, just down from the square. It looks much the same as in 1997 save for the tv satellite dish. But at the back, in the old wool-dyeing workshop, a local mechanic, woodworker and eccentric sculptor has moved in. Next day, Valdas got us inside. Upstairs in the crumbling attic, some vats that could've been used for dyes and another large cauldron outside that looks very old, were the only possible remnants of Avraham and Rachel's enterprise.



Rod at former Lemchen workshop



Remnants of old workshop

In a book about Zagare published locally, there is a chapter on the Jews and the Lemchen factory is mentioned. Abram Lemchen is listed as standing for and being elected to, the town council. A descendant of another candidate, R. Vulfson, was amongst the British visitors.

The newspaper, Voice of Zagare (Zagares Balsas) wrote in 1931 that seven Jews (Abram Braude, Mendel Malamed, Nochum B. Tankelis, Reuven Vulfson, Abram Lemchen, Dovid Fridman, Hirsh Peretzman) were proposed as candidates for the City Council. A. Braude, N.B. Tankelis, A. Lemchen and D. Fridman were elected.

For lunch, we had beers, borscht and blinis in the pub across from the town square and gathered in the late afternoon for the ceremony. Valdas was supervising the erection of the commemoration plaque which he'd picked up from Siauliai, the nearest big town, just the day before. The square is undergoing a total renovation, so a gang of workers were at it until an hour before, laying down new paving in the area of the plaque. The rest of square is still dirt. The weather was threatening one minute and sublime the next. As it turned out, during the hour and a quarter of the event, we had rotating bouts of sun and showers and a dramatic but brief downpour just before the end.



Site of memorial plaque, town square



Sara Manobla and Valdas Balciunas

The MC's were Sara Manobla from Jerusalem and Valdas, who translated into Lithuanian. We were welcomed by the local council leader. A succession of people then spoke, including the Israeli consul.

Joy Hall from Lithuania Link talked of the ongoing projects and relationships that have developed, including 3 marriages!

Cliff Marks from the Zagare website who has been doing voluntary work as a town planner in the nearby town of Joniskis, spoke on behalf of the Jewish descendants and movingly explained what the event means to us.



Joy Hall, Valdas Balciunas & Alex Gibb



Cliff Marks and Valdas Balciunas

Rose Zwi spoke poetically about her connection and how when she'd first come to Zagare, she could only see it in terms of the Holocaust, but how meeting this new generation of Lithuanians who are prepared to talk openly and honestly about the past had given her a sense of optimism. She ended with the Yiddish phrase, '*Mir záynen do*' meaning, 'We are here'.



Rose Zwi and Valdas Balciunas



Valdas, Isaac Mendelson's son & Sara Manobla

Sara Manobla spoke of her recent research to get the Levinkas family recognized by Yad Vashem as being 'Righteous Among the Nations' and mentioned another heroic family that has already been recognised. She put this in the context of there having also been Lithuanian collaborators at the time, which the memorial plaque openly states. Sara also postulated what the town might have been like if the Jewish community had not been exterminated. What achievements and personalities might have emerged from Zagare – she asked each of us descendants to stand while she briefly outlined our achievements and asked the audience to imagine what had been lost...

A descendant of the family previously recognized by Yad Vashem spoke about his feelings of connection with the disappeared Jewish community.

Isaak Mendelson's son from Vilnius spoke movingly of his father as the last Jew and how he had been a beacon for visitors to the town. He felt the responsibility of this legacy and although he wouldn't normally speak in public, he was pleased and proud to be here today.

Valdas Balciunas talked about his motivation for erecting the plaque in the centre of the town and how he has been affected by learning about the true history of Zagare. He hoped it would be a new beginning. He welcomed us and hoped we could now consider it our home.

A detailed and formal message was read from the Minister of Foreign Affairs and another Minister. At this point, many retreated into the Cultural Centre as the skies

opened. But it quickly cleared and in glorious sun and purple-black clouds, Dovid Katz, a Yiddish scholar and very close friend of Uncle Chatzkel, told us about the high esteem in which Zagare had been regarded as a place of Jewish learning and culture. Then the reading of the words on the plaque. I read the English, Valdas the Lithuanian and Dovid Katz the 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 entire Jewish community of Zhager began here and continued in the forests nearby. About 3,000 Jewish citizens were killed.

Then the finale, the Mourner’s Kaddish. Sara explained that the language of this Jewish prayer for the dead was originally in Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Dovid dovened and in a version I’ve never heard, intoned the Kaddish in the square where our forebears had been gathered for execution. We recited in our various accents and versions behind him. In a burst of bright sunshine after the storm, with the earth cleansed by the downpour, dark clouds rolled away, revealing bright patches of blue.

Valdas later said this was the moment when it all came together for him and he realized that something had been achieved. He’d never heard the sound of the Yiddish and was profoundly moved. It was very powerful.



Lithuanian, Yiddish and English texts



Rose Zwi and Dovid Katz

Dovid is also a passionate social and political activist. His website, Defending History, counters any anti-Semitism or ongoing revisionism of history in the Baltic. See his account of the event at:

<http://defendinghistory.com/trilingual-memorial-plaque-unveiled-on-zhagers-town-square/37963>

I'd arranged with friends from Vilnius for a crew to record the event. It will be a story for the 'Menorah' program on Lithuanian TV. Some of us were interviewed.

When I went to look for the others after my interview, I found them in the Zagare Cultural Centre which was the backdrop to the plaque ceremony. Inside, a concert was in progress called "From the History of the Shtetl"— a presentation, exhibition, and concert organized by the Joniskis Municipality Museum. A four piece group alternated between top class jazz numbers with drums, soprano sax and keyboards and Yiddish songs sung by a young man with a superb operatic voice. The hall was packed and the mesmerized audience wouldn't stop clapping at the end. A most unlikely scene. We visitors kept looking at each other with 'Am I dreaming?' expressions. Yiddish songs... in Zagare Culture Hall... a full house... I thought of the 'what if' scenario that a Lithuanian Jewish man had mentioned earlier in the day – what if the Holocaust hadn't happened...



The town square & Cultural Centre



Yiddish concert, Zagare

After the concert, we went to a local venue where Valdas had organized a buffet and had a Kabbalat Shabbat ceremony for the overseas visitors and a number of other people involved with cultural activities and institutions. We blessed the wine (Israeli and Italian) and the challah brought from Vilnius, (noone could remember the blessing for the 'kosher' pork).

Some of us who hadn't spoken at the ceremony spoke after the meal about our feelings. I told why I'd first come to Lithuania and Zagare and talked about Uncle Chatzkel and Avraham and Rachel. I recalled how we, our family, had thought of Lithuania as being in the past and impossible to visit until Emile and Ondine Sherman came to see Chatzkel and opened the door. I'd been filled with anxiety

and tension when I first arrived in Zagare to film in 1997. I'd been immersed in the events of 1941 to the point where I couldn't really see or feel the present. Zagare – and Lithuania - in my mind was a dark, repressive, threatening place. I said I now felt very differently, thanks to the actions of Valdas and his supporters in this project. It has made a big difference realising that there had been people who'd helped the Jews. History has been recognized and the truth has been told, even to the extent that the local collaborators are mentioned on the plaque. It's only one of over 250 towns in Lithuania where massacres occurred but it is significant.

(Some of you may recall I did an investigative program back in 2000 called '*One Last Chance*' for Dateline SBS that dealt in part with the issue of the lack of honesty in Lithuanian memorials. Under the Soviets, plaques stated only that 'Soviet citizens' had been killed by the Nazis. Then later, that Jews had been killed by the Germans, but rarely had it been conceded that Lithuanian collaborators had participated. This is part of the significance of this event along with the fact that until now, almost all memorial plaques have been discreetly hidden outside the dozens of towns in the forests where the killings usually took place.)

I ended by saying that I now feel connected to Zagare and welcomed. It's been a great journey of reconciliation. Other visitors expressed similar feelings.

So that was Friday 13 July. On Saturday, we relaxed, visited the crowded Zagare Cherry Festival (I've got the cherry T-shirt, the cherry tea towels, the cherry chocolates, the cherry badge and the cherry knitted brooch). A Makkabi team from Vilnius unfortunately lost to a local team. (Ever heard of a great Jewish football team? Neither have I!).

We visited one of Zagare's Jewish cemeteries – it was totally overgrown in 1997 but is now mown and visible with the gravestones a ghostly granite representation of the lost community. Few of the stones are still legible.



Jewish cemetery, Zagare

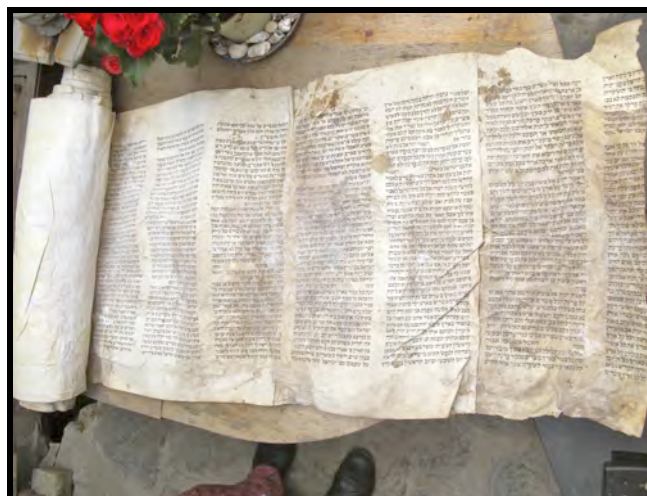
One last thing – we visited the house of the eccentric sculptor who’s taken over the old Lemchen workshop. You can’t miss his house because it’s covered in pots and pans – literally. His twenty-something daughter is happy to show visitors the obsessive collection of objects. We told her why we were there – she speaks some English – and she said, ‘Oh, wait a minute, we found some Jewish treasure buried.’ Jewish treasure? She emerged with a saucepan and bowl, in which were about fifteen large coins dating from the 1790s. We thought they were either Polish or Russian. Then she said, ‘Oh and we found a Torah too’, and ducked into the shed to get it. Apparently two boys found it hidden in a wall cavity somewhere. We were shocked when she started to lay it on the floor, but of course, she has no knowledge of it’s significance. It’s been terribly damaged but still exists, somehow a metaphor for the Jewish presence in Lithuania. We’ve told people from various organizations about it, so I’m not sure if it will be ‘rescued’ or remain as a curiosity to visitors. She said it had been very interesting to meet Jewish visitors to the town for the first time.



The pots & pans house



Nazi souvenir & Torah scroll



Torah found hidden in wall

The dark presence of Zagare and the dozens of other towns like it with their massacre sites have stayed with me in the fifteen years since I went to Lithuania to make the '*Uncle Chatzkel*' documentary. The contrast between the present beauty and the past horror is too much to integrate.

This journey has helped me at least feel that there is acknowledgement of those past horrors and not to feel a stranger in the home of my ancestors. I thank all those involved in organizing the event, especially Valdas Balciunas, for reaching out to the Jewish descendants of Zagare in a spirit of warmth, openness and honesty.

ROD FREEDMAN
Sydney, July 2012

Contacts

LITHUANIA	Valdas Balciunas	valdas@me.com
AUSTRALIA	Rod Freedman	freedman@changefocusmedia.com.au
UK	Joy Hall	joy@joymaynard.myzen.co.uk
U.S.	Cliff Marks	c.v.marks@att.net
ISRAEL	Sara Manobla	manobla@netvision.net.il
LITHUANIA/UK	Dovid Katz	www.DefendingHistory.com

UNCLE CHATZKEL DVD is available from the National Film & Sound Archive:
mandy.mullen@nfsa.gov.au

<http://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/film-australia-collection/program-sales/search-programs/program/?sn=8159>

There is also a Lithuanian language version.