

# Shoes: Collection of Writings By Zelda Alexander

## Volume 2: Trip to Latvia

### Chapter 1: London Tuesday 20 May 1997: Journal Entry.

It's just three days until we set off. I'm feeling excited and apprehensive. It's hard to settle to anything. I've been on a long and arduous inner journey since our last, failed attempt to visit Latvia about ten years ago. Now I am much more in touch with what this means or could mean. And we know a lot more. We know that our family members who were murdered were not killed by Germans in death camps – they did not experience cattle trucks and gas chambers. They were murdered close to their homes by the Nazi invaders, assisted by Latvian fascists who were keen to collaborate - Latvians who were their neighbours and fellow citizens.

What will we learn, on this trip or subsequently, of the actuality and detail of their deaths?  
What will we learn of their lives leading up to the time of war, and during its initial phases?  
What will we learn of our family's history before then?

We know a little already. My father, his mother – the only grandparent I knew – and his sisters lived in Varaklan (now called 'Varaklani') in Eastern Latvia until they emigrated to South Africa, one or two at a time, in the late 1920's. My grandfather had died in 1925, and one sister had died in 1927. Two of my aunts are still alive and Aunt Ray has provided us with place names and the dates when family members lived in Riga. She has an extraordinary memory for detail and has given us street names, and sometimes apartment numbers as well.<sup>1</sup>

In preparation for our visit we had contacted a certain Mr Feigmanis who is to be our guide. He is an archivist, fluent in a number of languages including Russian, Latvian, Yiddish and English. He has been researching local records on our behalf. We had given him what information we had about names and dates and commissioned him to find out whatever he could. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 records which were previously inaccessible are gradually becoming available to researchers. Mr Feigmanis has examined the archives of Varaklani and found records of the Alexandrovich family in the latter half of the 19th Century. He has also visited the town and seen gravestones bearing the name Alexandrovich in the Jewish cemetery.

We are fortunate in having more than bare facts, at least about my father's family. In Cape Town last year, as well as on a previous visit, my cousin Alec (son of one of my father's sisters) and I spent many illuminating hours talking with Aunt Ray and asking her about her early life. We recorded these discussions on a home video and it is a marvellous piece of oral history which paints a picture of the family's life in Varaklan. One thing which struck me particularly was Ray's reply when I asked her whether they had left because of pogroms.

"Oh, no" she said decisively. "Pogroms were not a serious problem. Sometimes the local lads got a bit worked up, but our boys took them on and sorted them out. We left" she continued "because there was no work, and in my case because the Latvian police were looking for me because I was a Communist". This completely shook up my concept of Jewish life in Latvia. The received wisdom concerning Jewish migration from Eastern Europe during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is always the story of fleeing pogroms and anti-semitic persecution. But this is not what Aunt Ray experienced. Instead she emphasised economic and political motives.

The quality of the tape is rather poor, and Ray tends to repeat herself, but it is nonetheless a resource which I treasure. When I watch it I have a feeling of vertigo. I am in my living room in London seeing the three of us as we sit in Ray's garden in the brilliant light, sunshine and colours of Cape Town. Ray, who was born in 1913, is describing life in their little town so far

north in Eastern Europe in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It is as if London is the point of triangulation, providing a bridge between the Latvian life of my family, forever silenced, and the temporary way-station and refuge which South Africa provided for us.

Ray has also given me a copy of her diary – a diary she kept in Varaklan as a teenager. Unfortunately, it is written in scrawled Yiddish script and so far, despite my attempts to learn Yiddish, I have been unable to decipher it. Reading and translating the diary is a project for the future.

We also have some information about Libau. Libau, my mother's home town on the Baltic coast, is now known by its Latvian name, Liepaja. Sadly, our knowledge of Libau is much more limited than and not as alive and recent as our Varaklan information. My mother, who had died some years ago, had been the youngest child in the family, and although I grew up knowing the aunts and uncle – my mother's three siblings, who had also settled in South Africa - none of them has survived to pass on the kind of oral history which Ray, and to a lesser extent her sister Dora, has provided for Varaklan. One of my mother's sisters is still alive, but sadly suffers from dementia and cannot offer us anything. She didn't even know who I was when I last visited her, and when I tried to explain that I am her niece, the daughter of her sister, she simply couldn't make the connections.

Nonetheless we do have some information. My brother and I grew up listening to our mother's accounts of her childhood and adolescence in Libau. We know that my mother's mother died when she, the youngest of thirteen, was a small child, and that she had been sent to live with her oldest brother, Israel who, by that time, was married with two small children. We know that my grandfather and Uncle Israel died – of natural causes - in Libau after our mother had left but before the war, sometime during the 1930s. They would almost certainly have been buried in the Jewish cemetery in Libau, and we have learned that this cemetery – like so many others in Europe – had been desecrated, with tombstones being removed. We also know that

Israel's wife, Jessie, was the only family member to survive the war, but we don't know how she survived or what happened to all the others.

I remember how I felt standing in the Jewish cemetery at Bendorf on my first and, so far, only visit to Germany. A few gravestones remained but many had been removed. It was such a dreadfully painful feeling to know that even the dead could not be left in peace. How will I feel when it's my own grand-parents, my aunts and uncles and cousins? And that's just those who died natural deaths before the war. For many there is no memorial at all, just the fading memories of those who knew them. As time goes on and the older generation dies out, these memories become fewer and fewer. I recall my parents saying that a person only truly dies when no-one remains alive who remembers them. Until then, something of the dead person's essence endures in the world; a comforting thought, usually, but who is left to remember in the aftermath of such a catastrophe when entire families and communities have been wiped out?

My brother and I regularly visit our parents' graves in the Jewish cemetery at Bushey in North London. We pay a modest annual fee for the gravestones and grave sites to be kept clean and tidy. It is almost unthinkable that in this country our fellow citizens could murder us and remove the gravestones which we had so lovingly erected to remember our parents. Yet that is what happened to our relatives in Libau – and perhaps also in Riga and Varkla. There is a great deal still to learn about the Holocaust in all of these places. So much has been hidden and unknown during the Soviet era. I wonder how much will be available to us on this visit? I have a strong desire, mixed with trepidation, to find out what revelations there will be. I am eager to learn as much as possible so that I can make a contribution, even if only a small one, towards sustaining the memory of the murdered.

Gradually my feelings about the trip had shaken themselves down. First I felt tremendous excitement at its happening at all and at the prospect of sharing the experience with my brother (Simon-A) and his wife Agi, our cousin Simon-G and his wife Ann, and our cousin Taube. Taube, who lives in New York, is the oldest of the group of cousins who grew up together in

Cape Town and the only one of us to have been born in Latvia. The prospect of being able to share Riga with her and her brother Simon-G, who lives in Canada, was wonderful. Then there was added excitement when we learned that there was a possibility, later confirmed, that we would be able also to visit Libau and Varklan and not just Riga. Had we succeeded in getting to Latvia on our first attempt about ten years ago, it would have been to visit only Riga, the rest of Latvia being inaccessible to the visitor, and it is quite likely that we would not then have pursued the vision of gathering a geographically scattered group together to make this journey. It was our total failure last time which had heightened our desire to pursue this quest further.

Another high was the possibility that Alec, who still lives in South Africa, would join us for the visit to Varklan. We had been disappointed when it seemed the timings wouldn't work out. Then we heard that he'd been able to change his flights and would meet us in Riga. More delight when Taube's daughter Karen and my daughter Rina also decided to come. The prospect of the next generation being interested enough to learn about our lost family and lost homeland, and to carry on the memories of the murdered was heart warming and wonderful. There were

e-mails flying around the world, contacts with Karen, with Alec, with Simon G, with Taube. The London group – Simon-A, Agi, Rina and I – were in regular communication as we sorted out flights and accommodation and received updates from Simon-A of communications with Mr Feigmanis. There was a feeling of being closely connected to the network of the present family despite being geographically so far flung - the United States, Canada, South Africa and England.

Unexpectedly, there are the feelings brought up by details. For example, how much local currency would we need? That question starts me thinking about what I might want to buy – drinks, snacks, postcards, maps – all that felt fine. But artefacts, souvenirs? I feel my inner self rebelling. Unlike our visit to the Soviet Union ten years ago when I was eager to take mementoes home, this time I have a very strong negative reaction. I feel clear that I don't want to take anything material away with me. I want to see, feel, experience, be there. I want to stand on the ancestral soil, see with my own eyes what has been unreal for me, and I want only

whatever will help me hold onto that. So - photographs and postcards, maps, yes, but nothing else. Will that alter when I'm there?

Riga, Libau, Varaklan: mythical locations, places to be talked about but never seen, never visited, never real. First the War - growing up hearing hints of a lost family. Then the Iron Curtain: Latvia swallowed up in the maw of Russia, the Soviet Union. Much later, Glasnost in the eighties, and the possibility held out of a visit - but to Riga only with travel to the Soviet Union being permitted only under Intourist's watchful eyes. So we had booked the only available tour which included three days in Riga, the rest of the fortnight being divided between Leningrad, Moscow and Tbilisi. But in the event Intourist blocked even that attempt at setting foot in Latvia. Instead we were sent to Tallinn, capital of neighbouring Estonia, angry and frustrated at not being allowed to go to Riga.

In Tallinn ten years before we had learned much about the anger and frustration of the Baltic States towards their Russian masters. And there also I learned about my mother; understood for the first time how Scandinavian her tastes were, why she loved almost empty rooms with polished floors and a few beautiful objects. I'd always understood her to be culturally German, and so she was in language and literature, but not in her tastes for food and decor. Latvia, swinging between Germany and Russia, with Scandinavia so close across the Baltic, did not fit neatly into any one package. Then in Tallinn it was with a sense of shock and dislocation that I understood this for the first time.

Now, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, with archives opened up and travel outside Riga also permitted, I wonder what new understandings this visit to Latvia will bring me.

## Chapter 2: London Wednesday 21 May 1997: Journal Entry

A few days ago a friend gave me a cutting out of the Observer of 11th May 1997 with an article on Riga. My immediate response was to look for references to the murder of the Jewish community. I read this:

“Eighteen kilometres south of Riga, the concentration camp at Salaspils where 100,000 people were exterminated, is bleak testimony to Latvia’s final German chapter”

The implication that Germans alone were responsible for the killings made me feel angry. There was no mention of the part played by the Latvian Fascists. I could barely look at the rest of the article, and although I later read it and looked at the photographs of the city, its surroundings and its people, it was only yesterday evening that I was able to begin to connect to the beauty of Riga, lost to me and my family for decades - my entire lifetime so far. The writer describes it as a ‘bright, inviting city’ where it pays to keep your eyes open to its “architectural light-heartedness’. I had no idea of this at all. In my imagination, Riga was a cold, dark, dull city.

How dared they, I thought, keep this grace and beauty hidden and locked away from me for all these years? ‘They’ - my parents, whose pain at their losses of homeland and family, stopped them from sharing this with us, the new, exiled generation thousands of miles away in sunny, brash South Africa. ‘They’ - the Nazis and the Latvian fascists and murderers who destroyed communities and civilisations hundreds of years old. ‘They’ - the newer Soviet masters who imposed their iron rule and swamped grace with the heavy righteousness of a new world order. All six decades of my life.

This was my first pre-journey shock.

Later that evening I watched the first part of the video Alec and I had made of Aunt Ray. I had ‘forgotten’ - how could I have forgotten? - her description of the area around Varaklan as “little Switzerland”. She talked about the rivers which ran through the town, and the nearby lake which froze in the winter, making it possible to reach relatives living on the opposite side much faster by sledge, instead of having to go all the way around. She described her mother, my

grandmother, going out to catch fish in the river which ran through their land. Ray said that Bobbe, as we called her, used a copper pot to catch the fish! She told us about the vegetables they grew, of eating raw onions and carrots straight from the garden, and of the animals they kept - cows, horses, chickens.

As she related her memory of the fresh produce grown in the vegetable garden of their house Ray gestured to the pots on her little terrace in Cape Town where tomatoes, lettuce and courgettes were growing. “I’ve always grown vegetables”, she said, and I recalled visits she made to us in London when she was living in exile in Zambia. In her modest, old-fashioned suitcase, containing otherwise only toiletries and a change of clothing, there were invariably large, choice avocados and paw-paws from her Lusaka garden, wrapped up in cardigans or tee-shirts to protect them from bruising.

Ray also told us about Aunt Gessie, her oldest sister, being bathed in milk when she was a baby - “You remember what a wonderful skin she always had...- that’s why”, she said- And she told us that her grandfather had been a rabbi, but had sent his son (her father, my grandfather), to study in a secular academy rather than in a yeshiva where his education would have been limited to religious and Jewish studies. In the academy he learned languages, history and mathematics. His father taught him Hebrew and Talmud at home.

Ray remarked that their father had also taught all the children arithmetic and encouraged them to learn quick methods to work things out. She and my father were particularly good at mathematics. And I remembered him showing me the methods he had used to do long multiplication and long division – so different from the methods I was being taught in my school in Cape Town. These discussions with my father when I was a child sparked my interest in the underlying structures of mathematics. I wanted to understand why two such different approaches could achieve the same outcome. This led eventually to me becoming a mathematics teacher and then a teacher educator.



Then Ray described her mother, Dobe Liebe, falling in love with her father, Shimon, because “they had such interesting conversations when they went for walks in the countryside”. She added that Shimon was interested in Dobe Liebe because she had lived abroad and so had experienced a different way of life. My grandmother had spent some years as a young woman, working as a seamstress in a clothing factory in Leeds, and had come home in order to meet Shimon, a widower with two young daughters.

Unlike most young women from the small country town near the Russian border at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dobe Liebe, fresh from the experience of living and working in a major city in England, was open to new ideas. Shimon, gymnasium educated, interested in socialism and modern ways of thinking, found Dobe Liebe’s open-mindedness attractive. Her warmth towards his two motherless girls was another favourable indicator. The fact that she was illiterate was of minor importance.

Ray remarked that her mother only learned to read and write as an adult. “I taught her to read” said Aunt Ray, “first Yiddish and later English.” I recall that my grandmother always found writing difficult but was able to read. I also vividly remember that her command of spoken English was limited – as was mine of Yiddish – so we had two-language conversations. She spoke to me in Yiddish, which I understood well enough and I responded in English. This never struck me as odd, it was just the way Bobbe and I communicated, but I now regret that I didn’t attempt to respond in Yiddish and so have a chance of acquiring a general competence in the language. Perhaps it was because at home, my parents – especially my mother – actively discouraged me from speaking it. In common with most people at that time my parents believed that a child would be handicapped by growing up with a different home language from that of the host community.

No doubt my mother’s strong negative feelings about the Yiddish language, which she, a German speaker, regarded as a ‘bastard tongue’, would also have contributed to her attitude. I deeply regret the loss this is for me. Yiddish is so expressive and flexible, and certainly not a ‘bastard

tongue’. Yiddish song, poetry, theatre and storytelling are a storehouse of delights, but one which is largely closed to me. As an adult I have attempted to learn the language and I can understand a bit (if spoken slowly) and read a little with the aid of a dictionary, but speaking and writing are excruciatingly difficult. Now, however, I have an additional incentive as I so much want to be able to read and translate Aunt Ray’s diary, so perhaps I will find ways to improve my skills.

To return to the present - like my image of Riga as dull and dark, my image of Varklan, even after listening to Aunt Ray when we recorded her in Cape Town, was of backwardness, poverty, and privation. Until today, her vivid descriptions of lakes and rivers, vegetables and milk, did not dispel my grim fantasies of what my father and his sisters had escaped. Now I am waiting to see what Varklan (now called Varklani) actually looks like nearly a century after Aunt Gessie, an infant in 1903 was bathed in milk. I have been told that it has become a dormitory town, but even grey Soviet blocks could not totally destroy a river, a lake, and other countryside - or could they? I had walked around the suburbs of Leningrad in 1988 – on the occasion of our failed attempt to visit Riga - and looked at the grey faces of people scurrying between grey buildings. Thank goodness my parents had the nous to leave when they did, I thought. But at that time I still thought of Latvia as just a part of Russia, although one much influenced (in some areas of the country) by German culture. I had had no understanding at all of Latvia as a place, a culture, a civilisation in its own right.

What I am now dimly beginning to comprehend is that what my parents left did not consist of grey blocks and a rat-like existence but beauty - countryside, lakes, beaches, the sea - and graceful, light-hearted architecture in the little Paris which was their capital city, Riga.

My mother suffered with a deep and long lasting depressive illness for most of my life. I remember being told that when she first arrived in South Africa, a young woman in her twenties, she was very unhappy, very homesick, and wanted to return to Latvia. In my mind I translated ‘homesickness’ into depression in keeping with her life-long pattern as I experienced

it. Now I wonder. Perhaps she really was homesick. Perhaps her depression was her response to cultural dislocation, to loss, and to not belonging. My father had all his closest and dearest people - his mother and all his full sisters - with him in South Africa, as well as some old friends and other relatives from home.

My mother did have three of her siblings, a brother and two sisters, in South Africa. But her sisters were culturally very different from her. They were less well educated and had gone to a Yiddish language school. Three older brothers had emigrated to the USA earlier in the century, and her remaining surviving siblings and their families had stayed in Libau and died in the Holocaust.

Unlike my father, my mother had no friends from home. Even Yiddish, the language of the entire Jewish immigrant community, was unfamiliar to her when she arrived. So in Cape Town she had to learn Yiddish as well as English, and despite her feelings about the Yiddish language, she had to speak it if she was not to be completely isolated within the community. Her German could only rarely be used, and once the war started not at all.

I was born just months before the war began, and I have no memory of her speaking German – to me or anyone else. She did not teach me German songs or nursery rhymes, or to count in German. I don't remember German lullabies. We always read, spoke, counted and did sums, in English, which meant that she did none of the things a young mother instinctively does with her babies and children in her own language, sharing with them her own childhood treasury of songs and rhymes. Her dislocation was in every way far more profound than that of my father. She was, as I've already noted, culturally a mix of German and Scandinavian influences. My father and his family on the other hand, were Yiddish speaking traditional East European Jews, who bodily translated their entire culture - including its socialist leanings - into a new geographical context. For my mother there was no such option available.

The only close emotional connection my mother had in Cape Town was with her brother, Joseph

and his wife, Sara. She deeply loved her sister-in-law who had taken her under her wing, and helped her continue her music studies in Cape Town. When Sara died leaving two young children (two years to the day before I was born) this was another huge loss, and it catapulted my mother into another depression. Her pain in the ensuing months and years at learning of the destruction, not only of her family but of access to her society and culture, must have been immense.

When I was in early adolescence, probably five or six years after the end of the War, I went through a very troubled emotional period. As an adult I have wondered whether I had picked up and was expressing my mother's anguish. I was very emotionally bonded to her, was always attuned to her state of mind even when we lived for a while six thousand miles apart on different continents. So it is possible – even likely - that I wept for her, expressing the pain she was unable to articulate. In recent years I've learned more about the inter-generational transmission of trauma, and I believe that that is what I experienced. I did not know it at the time, and would certainly not have been able to name it then.

**Later: 21.5.97** I shall take a notebook and tape-recorder with me to Latvia. This journal, begun sitting at my computer at home in London, will be continued in Latvia.

### **Chapter 3: London Thursday 22nd May 1997: Journal Extract**

My second pre-journey shock occurred today, the evening before we set off. When I discussed the flight details with my daughter, Rina, we realised that flying time from Gatwick to Riga was only two hours forty minutes. Less than three hours to traverse the gulf which - interspersed for me by my growing up years in South Africa and two years in Israel – lies between Latvia and England. It seems completely extraordinary to me that Latvia, so hidden and so inaccessible for so long could possibly be only two and a bit hours away. Emotionally, it feels as if a journey of at least several weeks or months is needed to bridge the distance between here and there. I need to get into a horse-drawn cart in order to reach a railway station; then travel on the train for a long time before eventually getting to a port and boarding a ship. Many days on the ship to cross to Europe, more trains, and finally another horse and cart are required before, after weeks of travel, we might reach Latvia.

In fact, the journey to Latvia this year is a combined family endeavour involving a group of nine cousins from three continents and four countries. It is a marvel of organisation requiring e-mails and faxes back and forth, which will culminate, we hope, in us all meeting up in the same hotel in Riga, with our guide, Aleksandrs Feigmanis. He has already undertaken research on our behalf, focusing on my mother's family - mainly in Libau but also in Riga. This was initiated by my New York cousin, Taube. Her father – my mother's brother – and his wife lived in Riga for some years and Taube was born there.

When my brother realised from conversations with Taube the extent to which archival research prior to our visit might enhance our experience, he asked Aleksandrs also to find out what he could about our father's family, centred on Varaklan. In addition to doing this preliminary research, Aleksandrs has booked mini-buses for our trips outside of Riga to Libau and Varaklan.

This journey, bringing together family from across the world, and involving prior research and contact with a local historian and archivist, would not be possible without modern communications. But the very things which make it possible - fax, e-mail and air travel – also obscure the reality of distance and remoteness which would otherwise have to be slowly and painfully bridged. I wonder whether the journey will exacerbate or alleviate this sense of dislocation in time and space?

We will be there for only three full days: one each for Riga, Libau, and Varklan. Three days to taste something of - of what? A culture? A history? Perhaps just to gain a sense of place. But remembering always that Latvia has not stood still while the decades of absence rolled on. Ray told us that in 1967 when she was working for the South African CP in exile in Lusaka, she visited Riga probably on one of her party activist trips to the Soviet Union, but was unable to go to Varklan. It had been turned into a military establishment, and no-one, not even a visiting Communist Party dignitary like herself could go there.

Inevitably Riga and Libau, as well as Varklan will be marked by the Nazi years and the long decades - of Soviet rule. Learning whatever we can about family members who did not survive Hitler – if that information is available - is very important to all of us. But I hope, very much I hope, that enough of the pre-Soviet, pre-Nazi time will remain in the places where our parents, aunts and uncles grew up, for us to feel we can make some connection with the lives of our parents and other relatives who left Latvia ten or more years before the Holocaust.

## Chapter 4: RIGA SATURDAY 24 MAY 1997 Journal extract

This is our first full day in Latvia. Riga, founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, is such a beautiful city. The old buildings are gabled, with lovely spires and often conical towers and graceful fenestration. There are also many early 20<sup>th</sup> century Art Nouveau buildings. An architectural commentator has said that in Riga, more than any other city on earth, the light-hearted Art Nouveau style has determined the cityscape. Some vistas however have been spoiled by the ugly, grey, concrete Soviet blocks which were shoe-horned in. But, of course, those grim buildings were not there when my mother, father, aunts, uncles and cousins lived in or visited Riga in and before the 1930's. At that time Riga was referred to as Little Paris, and was the cultural centre of the Baltic States. So much for the dark, forbidding, dull city of my imagination!

In the morning, while we walked slowly through the old streets of the city, our guide, genealogist and interpreter, Aleksandrs Feigmanis, gave us a brief historical overview. We learned that Latvia had been independent from 1920 to 1940. On 17 June 1940 the Red Army entered Riga. And almost exactly one year later, on 22 June 1941 the Germans invaded, occupying Dvinsk (Daugavpils) on 26 June, then Libau and entering Riga on 1 July.

The site of the Big Choral Synagogue (Gogol Shul) has been turned into a memorial. It was here that the mass killings and burnings of 4 July 1941 began. Almost all the synagogues in Riga were burned down, having been bolted and torched, with Jews, often entire families, trapped inside.

On 4<sup>th</sup> July 1988, the 47<sup>th</sup> anniversary of these events, the memorial stone we were looking at had been inaugurated. When we asked passers-by whether they knew what this stone commemorated some did know, and said it was the old synagogue which had been burned to the ground. Others had no idea.

I began to comprehend that the Holocaust in Latvia was unlike the Holocaust in other parts of Europe. Here there was wholesale immediate destruction – burnings and (I later discovered) shootings. With the exception of those few who escaped to the Soviet Union ahead of the Nazi invasion, virtually the entire Jewish community of Latvia was murdered in the space of a few months. These mass murders were committed well before the mass murders in the rest of Europe got under way.

A ghetto was established in Riga in August 1941, but there were by then very few of Riga's Jewish community still alive. By December of that year nearly all of those who had survived were driven to the forests and – after digging their own graves – shot.

In 1939, the Latvian Jewish population numbered approximately one hundred thousand, about half of whom lived in Riga. In 1944, when the Soviets regained control, there remained only 150 Jews in Riga.

In the afternoon we visited the Jewish Museum, where we found confirmation of the early eminence of our father's cousin, Mischa Alexandrovitch, who had escaped to the Soviet Union before the Nazi invasion, and later became an opera singer. There is a photograph of him, aged about 7 or 8 and the caption describes him as a child prodigy who had sung at the Riga Opera House. Many years later, I think in the 1970's, my father was instrumental in helping Mischa and his family get out of the Soviet Union and settle in the West. The museum curator, Leah Germann, told us her own story. She too, as a young girl, had escaped the Nazis by walking from Riga to the East, a distance of at least 200 miles.

Then we saw the photographs. One, dated July 1941, showed a group of women on the beach in Libau stripped naked and surrounded by armed guards. Immediately, I wondered whether my cousin Pupyen (Dolly), Jessie's daughter, was in that photograph.

Later in the afternoon the curator showed us a documentary film,



which had been taken by a Nazi officer amateur photographer. It showed a group of young women on the beach in Libau being forced at gun point to strip naked and dig a shallow grave in the sand. They were then shot. We also saw photographs of the trenches containing remains which were exposed many years later by the action of the sea. We were told that Jewish men too were shot on the beach in Libau. So perhaps both our cousins David and Dolly, neither of whom survived the war, might have met their deaths in this appalling way.

There was something particularly horrifying about looking at the film and photographs of those women, many of them young, who were not starved, emaciated and dehumanised as concentration camp and ghetto inhabitants became, but still plump and healthy. These women had been taken out in the midst of daily life, out of the community, without warning, only days after the invasion of Latvia by the Nazis and had been forced to dig their own grave, humiliated by being made to strip naked in front of their captors, and then shot in cold blood. Perhaps, because of their health and vitality, this was terrible in a very different way from the images of concentration camp victims, with which we are all so dreadfully familiar.

I had intended, in Libau, to visit one of my mother's beaches, perhaps promenade along it, and try to enter imaginatively into her world of the 1920s. After seeing those photographs and the film I felt differently. The beach, and the sea, had been despoiled; they were defiled, desecrated. To promenade would have felt disloyal to the memory of the victims. On the bus the next day travelling to Libau, I realised that I wanted only to visit the sand dunes where the shootings had taken place, and say Kaddish.

## Chapter 5: LIBAU SUNDAY 25 MAY 1997 Journal Extract

Today, is our second full day in Latvia. We are visiting Libau, my mother's birthplace and the home town of her family. Only one of us, Taube, the oldest of this family group, had been born in Latvia; she and her parents, Joseph, my mother's brother, and his wife Sara, lived in Riga when she was a baby. They had made regular visits home to Libau, spending part of each summer in the town but she had no conscious memory of it. She was very young, only about two or three years old, when her parents emigrated with her to South Africa. None of the rest of us had ever set foot in Libau.

We made an early start from Riga, travelling in a hired minibus. Beside me our group consisted of my brother Simon and his wife, Agi, my daughter, Rina, my cousins, Simon with his wife Ann, and his sister, Taube, with her daughter, Karen. There were eight family members in all, plus our guide and interpreter, Aleksandrs.

The journey took about three and a half hours, which gave us time to read the material Aleksandrs had prepared. The archives he had searched included registers of births, deaths and marriages, as well as business and telephone directories spanning the period from about 1913 to 1940. He had highlighted those entries which he thought might be related to our family. With a sense of excitement and disbelief I realised that we might actually have the address of the house where my mother had grown up - her brother Israel and sister-in-law Jessie's home. Although I no longer wanted to go to my mother's beaches, having seen on film and photograph the horrors which had taken place there, I did want very much to see her home, if we could find it and identify it. But surely it could not still be there? And even if we located an address, how could we be sure it was the right house?

We reached Libau, but before going into the town we visited the cemetery and said *Kaddish* (the Jewish mourning and remembrance prayer) at the family grave sites we were able to identify from the cemetery records. The cemetery was reasonably well

kept, there were record books and a map, and the wardens were as helpful as they could be. They were prepared for our visit as Aleksandrs had booked this in advance. Nonetheless, gravestones had been removed making definite identification difficult. Apparently the removal of gravestones - throughout the cemetery, not just in the Jewish section - had occurred in the early years after the war when building materials were very scarce. We were assured (whether or not this is accurate we had no way of ascertaining) that gravestones were generally not deliberately desecrated or smashed.

The burials recorded in the cemetery book were all, of course, those of people who had died of natural causes before the Nazi invasion in the summer of 1941. They included the graves of both my mother's parents and her oldest brother Israel. For those who died during the war years there was no record of date or place.

The minibus then took us into the town where we used the directory entries to identify the buildings relevant to our family's history. We had three addresses. It seemed that my grandfather's business was at No. 6 Zivju Street, and my Uncle Israel's was at No 2. Tirgonu Street. We located No. 6 Zivju Street, which was a large two storey building in a central part of Riga. We knew that grandfather had been a small goods manufacturer as well as a merchant and trader, so we speculated that the ground floor was the shop with the factory being upstairs. Possibly there were also living quarters. Aleksandrs confirmed that this would be in accordance with the typical practice of that period in Libau. He then showed us where No 2 Tirgonu Street had been, but because of a new road layout and road widening the building no longer existed.

The third address was a listing in the 1940 telephone directory for a Gela Gamza who lived at No. 16 Zalu Street. We wondered whether Gela Gamza could have been Jessie, Israel's wife. Aleksandrs thought this likely. By 1940 she was a widow; my Uncle Israel had died in January 1938 (a date confirmed by the cemetery records) and so any listing would have been in her name. But we couldn't be sure. There may

have been other Gamzas, not related to us, living in Libau at that time. But then, in great excitement, Taube exclaimed, “Look at the telephone numbers!” She had spotted that the telephone numbers for 16 Zalu Street (Jessie’s possible address in 1940) and 2 Tirgonu Street (her late husband Israel’s shop, listed in an earlier directory) were both 206. Now we were almost sure that we had the right address. It seemed too big a coincidence that the family shop and someone else’s home could have the same phone number.

With rising excitement we found the house at number 16, Zalu Street, and looked around the vicinity. Zalu Street has broad pavements and is cobbled, lined with trees and grass verges. Many of the houses are timber - possibly just cladding - but No. 16 is a quite impressive single storey stucco finished house with a basement and an attic. It is surrounded by substantial grounds, with another small building at the rear. The house and grounds tallied remarkably well with the descriptions my brother and I remembered from our childhood. Our mother had said that her brother was a wealthy man and that the family lived in a big house with a beautiful big garden. The building at the rear may have been where the piano was housed. My mother always said that she had to practise the piano in the garden! On the front door of the main house there were little holes which were consistent with a *mezuzah* (a small artefact fixed to the doorpost of a Jewish home, containing verses from the *Torah*, the first five books of Moses). having been there.

But we wanted more confirmation. And then something completely unpredictable and unexpected happened. As we stood in the street Rina started a conversation (how, or in what language I do not know as they had no language in common) with an elderly woman who was walking along the road. We asked Aleksandrs to ask this woman if she knew whether this had been the Gamsa’s house. Speaking volubly in Latvian and Russian, she told us that it was indeed the Gamsa’s house, that several houses nearby - she pointed to them - had also belonged to members of the Gamsa family, and that she had known and been a friend of Mrs Gamsa after the war.

As we were listening to the torrent of incomprehensible speech, we heard the word “Afriks”, at which point a look of disbelief went around the group. Up to now, nothing had been said to her about who we were, or where we came from. We could hardly contain ourselves. We nudged Aleksandrs - “what is she saying - please translate!” When he was able to halt the flow of conversation for a moment he told us that after the war - in 1946 - as a young girl, she had come to live in this street and had become friendly with Mrs Gamsa. “Mrs Gamsa was very poor”, she said, “and her family in Africa sent her parcels of shoes so that she would have something to sell. I bought shoes from her, shoes which came from Africa”. My brother and I exchanged astonished glances; there was no need to speak. We both remembered the shoes being parcelled up ready to send to Libau.

We then asked this Latvian lady if she knew what had happened to Jessie during the war. She told us that Jessie had fled to the countryside, to somewhere near the Lithuanian border where she had been hidden by peasants. She returned to Libau after to the war and lived in one room of her former home.

Of course, the ending of the war did not restore normal life to Libau or independence to Latvia. In 1944 Latvia was liberated from the Nazi’s by the Soviets, and became part of the Soviet bloc. During the Soviet years, private property was requisitioned and the previous owners were reduced to living in a tiny part of their former homes.

Our final question to our Latvian friend was “do you know what happened to Mrs Gamsa’s children?”. This elderly Latvian lady said very simply, “Her daughter was shot by the Nazi’s but I don’t know what happened to her son”. So yesterday, when I looked at the film in the Jewish Museum in Riga showing those healthy, very alive young women stripped naked and humiliated on the beach in Libau in July 1941, surrounded by armed guards, and thought one of those young women might be my cousin, Dolly. This thought which I shared with my brother and the others was no fantasy. Perhaps I had seen the cousin I never knew, the cousin who had grown up in the same house as my mother, in the last moments of her life.

Through an extraordinary set of circumstances the shoes I and my brother had seen being parcelled up in Cape Town, and sent by boat to Libau to Jessie our family's sole survivor, provided the proof needed half a century later that this was our mother's home. This was the garden of her girlhood, and that was the building in the garden where she had played the piano. It also confirmed the fate of at least one member of our family, but we still don't know what happened to Dolly's brother David, or to the family of my mother's brother Mendel who, as far as we know, was still living in Libau at the outbreak of war. There are no cemetery records for Mendel, his wife and children, but also no directory entries which might offer clues. It seems likely that he was not well off enough to own a shop or have a telephone, and so his name does not appear in any of those directories. He and his family remain unknown and invisible, like so many of the destroyed Latvian Jewish community.

Having positively identified my mother's home we drove to the beach where the mass shootings had taken place and said *Kaddish* on the sand dunes. I wanted to honour the memory of Dolly and all the other unknown and unnamed victims of those mass shootings on the beach. I felt very sad but also strangely satisfied to have answers to some of the missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of my family's lives and deaths before, during and after the tragic events which totally destroyed the Latvian Jewish community. One or two of the dragons which had peopled the childhood map of my lost homeland had finally been identified.

## Chapter 6: RIGA SUNDAY EVENING 25 MAY 1997

### Journal Entry

When we got back to Riga after our extraordinary day in Libau, a surprise awaited us. As we walked into the hotel, I spotted a familiar figure doing a good impersonation of Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*. Our cousin Alec, a cousin on my father's side, was leaning against the bar, nursing a beer. Alec lives in Johannesburg, South Africa – the rest of our party came from England and North America – and had travelled alone. As we hadn't had confirmation of when he was arriving and the hotel had no reservation for him, we didn't know when – or whether – he would turn up. So finding him in the hotel was a wonderful moment. He had come to share with us the journey to Varaklan [\[1\]](#), the home town of his mother and my father.

Alec said that he had spent the day exploring Riga on his own, including visits to the Jewish Museum and the Gogol Synagogue memorial. After the initial excitement of meeting and greeting had died down he told us that he had brought useful information with him, and produced a rough hand-drawn sketch of a locality in Varaklan. Our Aunt Ray had drawn this map and had marked the family house and indicated the positions of the orchard and outbuildings. The map showed that the synagogue was immediately across the road from the house, and Ray had labelled some other houses nearby as ones where family or friends had lived. She also provided a few street names. For example, the family house and the synagogue were on Skolas Iela (Shul Gas in Yiddish)[\[2\]](#) and a second sketch indicated the relationship of this area to the centre of the town. This was indeed a treasure!

Alec had also made contact with the Diamond family in Johannesburg who had roots in Varaklan and had visited the town some years earlier. According to the Diamonds, there was only one Jewish person, a man called Shalom Segal, who was now living there. Apparently Shalom's father had known our family. However, the Diamonds had

reported that their family home no longer existed, and had warned us not to be disappointed if we did not find much.

In contrast to Libau, which was for us just a name prior to our visit, a town about which we knew little other than that it had an ice free harbour and a music conservatoire and that some schools were German Medium, we knew quite a lot about life in Varaklan when our parents and their siblings were growing up there in the 1910s and 1920's. For some years Alec had been carrying out a project to record oral history about our family and had filmed videos in which he interviewed the two aunts, Ray and Dora, who had returned to South Africa from exile abroad after the end of Apartheid.

On several of my post-apartheid visits to Cape Town I had joined Alec in interviewing Aunt Ray (known when she was growing up as Rochele) about her early life, and had listened in fascination to her descriptions of life in Varaklan. Little vignettes had stuck in my mind, such as the story of why and how my grandmother had started a bakery after the death of my grandfather, and the fact that the family kept a cow. She told us that Aunt Gessie, her mother's first-born, had beautiful skin into old age because as a baby she had been bathed in milk. When more children arrived, Ray explained, the milk had to be kept for the children to drink and to make cheese for the family, so none of the others was bathed in milk!

Additional information available to us arose from the fact that Ray was a well-known figure in South African Liberation politics, had been a Communist all her life, and had written about her early educational experience. In particular, she had talked about the influence of one of her teachers, Leibe Yoffe on her and her comrades' (i.e. school friends') political development.

The oral history contributed by our other activist aunt, Dora (known in



her youth as Dverele) and captured on video, provided further insights into family life in Varaklan as she experienced it. She had spent quite a long period of time with relatives in another village, and as a result had missed starting school at the appropriate time. It was not easy for her to then have her younger sister in the same class helping her to catch up. Rochele did this out of all good will, but Dverele found it humiliating and spent the rest of her life trying to catch up with her cleverer and better looking younger sister.

Despite the fact that for our visit to Varaklan we did not have the benefit of prior archival research such as Aleksandrs had carried out for the Libau family, we hoped that what we knew from personal sources, aided by the map, might make it possible to bring it all physically to life, that is, if we could find Shalom Segal, be directed to the right area of the town and identify what had been there seventy years earlier.

After our astonishing and profound experience in Libau we had some sense of what it could mean to see actual buildings and streets, houses and gardens - to make real the stories we had heard. Aleksandrs told us that he had visited Varaklan several times, had looked at the archives and explored the Jewish cemetery. He thought he remembered seeing tombstones with the family name. So perhaps his general knowledge of the Jewish history of the town as well as the layout and contents of the Jewish cemetery, together with our maps and background knowledge would enable us to be luckier than the Diamond family had been.

Our party for the next day would be a smaller one than the previous two days as our cousins on our mother's side had no personal interest in Varaklan and had made other plans. We would be just six – my brother Simon and his wife Agi, my daughter Rina, cousin Alec, myself and Aleksandrs.

We were all planning on making an early start next morning so we said our ‘goodbyes’ to our ‘Libau’ relatives that evening, knowing that all of us would cherish for the rest of our lives the memory of our two days together in Riga and Libau.

[1] Varaklan is the name I heard my father and his siblings use. It is also referred to as *Varaklian* and in Latvian is *Varaklani*. I generally use the name Varaklan.

[2] On the map Ray has written (in Latin characters) both Skolas Iela (the Latvian name) and Shul Gas (the Yiddish name transliterated). In English this is School or Synagogue Street.

## **Chapter 7: RUMBULA AND SALASPILS MONDAY 26 MAY 1997**

### **Journal Extract**

In the hotel in Riga next morning we gathered for breakfast as usual. Simon and Ann were flying to Stockholm later in the day. Taube and Karen were finalising their travel plans and would probably have left Riga by the time we returned that evening. We had said our farewells the evening before, and there was just time enough for last hugs and final words. I was glad that at least Simon and Ann were planning to be in London later in the week so that was less of a 'goodbye' than the other two. We did not know when we might next have the opportunity to spend time with Taube or Karen.

Karen was a three year old and I was twenty when she and I first met, in 1959, during my visit to New York with my mother. Many years went by until met again. Karen was growing up in New York while I was migrating - first from a troubled South Africa to Israel with a young child, and then to England with two small children. We very rarely see one another. Over the years I had made one more visit to New York and she had visited London once or twice for special family events. But this journey had provided us with an opportunity to really engage with each other and we had become quite close. We shared the experience of growing up with a motherless mother, i.e. a mother who had lost her own mother when very young (my mother when she was about seven or eight, Taube's at the age of ten) and this provided a significant emotional point of contact. In one of our conversations Karen remarked that it was on this trip to Latvia – and in the preparations for the journey - that she first appreciated that she was part of a living, thriving family. I found that very moving, and it was a real loss to have to say goodbye to her. Having a geographically far-flung but emotionally close family can be really hard, especially in the context and aftermath of sharing such intense experiences. These feelings of loss and absence also brought home to me, albeit in a somewhat different way, the pain my parents and their siblings and friends must have experienced as a result of their far more profound losses.

Aleksandrs arrived while we were having breakfast and made his farewells to the departing

members of our group. Although 'only' a guide and archivist, it was clear that he became emotionally involved in the stories of the people, such as ourselves, who were seeking to understand what had been and what had been lost. Taube had also asked Aleksandrs to carry out some further archival research on her behalf and they took a few minutes to discuss that. And of course we needed to introduce Alec who had arrived the previous day.

Once all those preliminaries were over, Aleksandrs gave the five of us who would be with him for the journey to the east an introductory briefing about the places we would be visiting on our way to Varaklan. The first was to be the Rumbula Forest, about 15 km south east of Riga where, he told us, many of Riga's Jews had been killed in 1941. Next we would be taken to the Salaspils Concentration Camp located a few kilometres further on in the same direction and on the railway line linking Riga and Daugavpils. Both these sites were not far out of our way as they were on the main route south east from Riga which would eventually take us to Varaklan.

I was interested to see these places, but hoped the visits would not take too much out of the precious and limited time left for Varaklan. We had already seen many sites of mass murder both in Riga and in Libau, and the main purpose of this, our third and last full day in Latvia, was to see and experience the home town of my father and his sisters. In the event, these visits en route turned out to be a shattering and life changing experience. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw and learned that day.

On the way to the memorial site in the Rumbula Forest Aleksandrs told us that on 30 November and 8 December 1941 two 'aktions' had taken place, and that about twenty five thousand of Riga's Jews had been shot in the forest. There – a simple fact simply stated. But – twenty- five thousand people in two days? Even the gas chambers couldn't accomplish such wholesale slaughter in so short a time. Later I compared these statistics to those from the Somme, wondering how many were killed there in two days. I discovered that on the first day of the battle of the Somme, described as the bloodiest day in British military history, twenty thousand

men died. This makes the Riga massacre in Rumbula forest a close rival to that dreadful day in 1916, yet how often do we hear about the Somme and how very rarely about Rumbula?

So, what is the background to that bald, horrific statement? As early as 23 August 1941, just a couple of months after the Nazi invasion in June of that year<sup>2</sup>, the Riga ghetto was established. By then many of Riga's Jewish community had already been murdered. Most of the surviving Jewish population of the town – those who had not already been shot in the streets or burned alive in synagogues - were forced into this area. About two months later, on 25 October 1941, the ghetto gates were locked with nearly thirty thousand Jews crammed into a space which had previously housed about thirteen thousand people. It was later realised that this was in preparation for the 'aktions' planned by the Nazis. Prior to the 'aktions' of 30 November and 8 December 1941 about four and a half thousand young and able bodied Jewish men had been sorted out and sent to a slave labour camp. About 300 Jewish women who had survived until then as 'specialists' (that is, they had skills useful to the Nazis, such as seamstresses) were also sent to a labour camp. Everyone else - old people, young people, children, mothers with babies in their arms - was force marched to Rumbula where execution pits awaited them.

They were made to put their valuables into collection boxes and to strip, placing their clothes and shoes in piles. Then line after line they were shot: the bodies of the most recently shot falling onto those already in the pits.

These facts and figures, shocking though they are in their own right, need also to be considered in the context of the total Jewish population of Riga which, according to a pre-war (1935) census was 43,672. At that time Jews formed more than 11% of the population of Riga, which according to the same census totalled 385,063. Between the time of the census and the Nazi invasion some people had found ways to leave – or had been forcibly exiled. A few of Riga's Jewish citizens had emigrated to the West; others had gone to the Soviet Union. An example of the latter is our father's cousin, the opera singer Mischa Alexandrovich whose photograph as a

---

‘child prodigy’ we saw in the Jewish Museum. Several thousand Jews (and many Latvians) were exiled to slave labour camps in Siberia by the Soviets following their takeover of Latvia in the summer of 1940. Much later I discovered that my uncle, Joseph Rosen, was amongst those transported to Siberia, probably just a few weeks before the Nazi invasion. A few people understood what was happening and fled east when the German invasion of the Soviet Union, code named ‘Operation Barbarossa’ began on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1941. Leah German, now the curator of the Jewish Museum in Riga, was one of those; as a young girl she walked with her parents from Riga to the Russian border, a distance of some three hundred kilometres. And there were a very few who were hidden in Riga by Latvian friends and neighbours at enormous risk to themselves.

The combination of these migrations and the killings during the early months of the Nazi occupation show that by the time of the ‘aktions’ the Riga Jewish community was already gravely diminished. Simple arithmetic tells us that the killings in the forest effectively terminated that community. In 1944, when the Soviets regained control of Riga, there was a total of one hundred and fifty Jews who had survived those three years in the city.

It is also worth noting that the mass murders in the Rumbula forest – and other massacres across Latvia and in other parts of previously Soviet controlled territory – took place before the gas chambers, which were to become the method of mass murder of the Jews in Europe, had even been built. The Wannsee Conference was held in January 1942, and it was there that the mass extermination of Europe’s Jews was planned in some detail. By that time, Estonia was declared free of Jews, and there were about 3,500 Jews in Latvia – a figure which fits with the number of Jews being used as slave labour.

What, I wondered, was the Jewish Ghetto used for after its inhabitants had been killed? This question was to be answered later that day. But first, Aleksandrs led us to a memorial stone and translated the inscription. It said: “In 1941/1942 here in Rumbula Forest fifty thousand Soviet citizens - political prisoners, military prisoners, the victims of Fascism - were shot.” We

immediately noticed that although at least half of those killed in the forest were Jews, killed just because they were Jews, the memorial stone makes no mention of this fact.<sup>2</sup>

On our way to the site of Salaspils Concentration Camp, at the junction where the road to Salaspils branches off from the main road out of Riga to the east, Aleksandrs pointed out a plaque. This reads (in Yiddish) *di karvanot von Fashism* – the victims of Fascism. Again, there is no specific reference to Jews. I asked Aleksandrs what evidence exists of the massacres in the forest. He said that it is known from Nazi records, and from testimonies – a few people, very few, survived the killings and escaped.

I later discovered that one of these was Frida Michelson who wrote an account of her experience. Initially published in Israel many years after the war, it was later translated into English and published as “I survived Rumbuli”. Her story is chilling. She survived by lying down on the snow covered ground ‘playing dead’. She was wearing a long white garment over her clothes and so blended with the snow. She also happened to choose a spot where victims were made to drop their shoes, thus covering her keeping her warm enough to survive and enabling her to avoid detection. Many hours later, when the murderers had left, she made her way back to Riga.

Further evidence of the massacres is that human remains were found when some of the trenches were uncovered. Aleksandrs reiterated that it was well known that massacres had taken place in this site, and that now archivists are also able to access KGB files where there is further evidence. We saw no physical evidence of mass graves and while standing in the forest I was mainly struck by how peaceful it seemed. The contrast between the forest today and the horrors of those winter days in 1941 was very difficult to absorb.

Already much shaken by what we had seen and been told, we were about to encounter the memorial at the Salaspils Concentration Camp.

<><>

The minibus continued on the last few kilometres to Salaspils and Aleksandrs took the opportunity to explain that very few of the Jews housed in this camp were Latvian. Most of the Jewish prisoners held in Salaspils had been deported East from Germany and other parts of Europe. And the answer to my enquiry about what the Riga Ghetto was used for after its inhabitants had been murdered was the same. Almost immediately after the Riga Jews had been cleared out of the Ghetto, Jews from central Europe were brought there. It was a straightforward explanation, but added another layer of horror. I could not help wondering whether the Jews of Riga were murdered so as to make room for German and other European or Reich Jews.

Later I found out that transports of Jews from Germany, Austria, Bohemia and Moravia began arriving in Latvia from the end of November 1941. The people in the first of these early transports, from Berlin, were taken straight to Rumbula to be killed. Those in the next few - from several cities in Germany and Austria – departed from central Europe in early December. They were housed in a temporary camp in Jungfernhof. But the destination of the transports which left from 7 December onwards – the first of these being a transport of one thousand Jews from Cologne - was the Riga ghetto; by that time the ghetto had been emptied of its Latvian Jewish population by the aktions of 30 November and 8 December.

The camp at Salaspils held Latvian political prisoners as well as Jews from central Europe. Prisoners were used as slave labourers working in the peat marshes and on the construction of roads and aerodromes. Although Aleksandrs emphasised that Salaspils was not an extermination camp, many thousands died there, he said; possibly as many as fifty thousand from cold, hunger, and disease. Mentally, I compared this death toll over a period of about three years with the two day slaughter in Rumbula Forest. “The history of the camp is well known”, he assured us. “There were mass graves, witnesses who survived, and caches of watches and shoes and other items were found. And there were records.”



As we drove up to the site of Salaspils, we were confronted by an enormous concrete structure, sloping up from left to right at a small angle to the horizontal. The left portion rests on the ground and as it goes up to the right appears to be floating, but is actually resting on a dark, windowless structure. (I have a photo) On the front facade there is a huge inscription in Latvian. It says

“BEHIND THESE GATES THE GROUND SUFFERS”.

I asked Agi, herself a Hungarian holocaust survivor, what her impression was of this solid slab of concrete. She said it felt to her as if something had fallen out of heaven ... something that would stop the world. “Behind it” she continued “there is nothing”.

“Yes”, I thought, “nothing of life, nothing but the horrors of the past.” Looking through below the concrete block the viewer sees a triangular area of ground and sky. If you get close and look through the triangular space you can just about catch a glimpse of gigantic statues placed in the inner area of the camp. I wondered what those memorial carvings were meant to represent.

The huge block of concrete is hollow and we entered at the lower end and walked up the concrete steps inside towards a large plaque on the wall ahead of us. It is a long walk through darkness, and then, suddenly, one emerges into light, openness to the sky, and spaces through which you can see those gigantic carvings. When you stand with your back to the plaque, facing the other way, you look down through sunlight into the darkness of the tunnel through which you had just walked. The interplay of dark and light, perhaps, symbolising that which is hidden and that on which light is shone - had a tremendous emotional impact on me. But I had no time to reflect on it further. Aleksandrs was drawing our attention towards the stairs down to the exhibition centre which is lit only by artificial light. Down there I felt as if this space was deep inside the darkness of the concrete block – but it is actually the structure on which the upper ‘floating’ section of the block rests.

The exhibition centre contains plans and maps of the camp, photographs and other inscriptions. Aleksandrs read and translated one of the inscriptions:

“The Salaspils memorial, a remembrance place of Fascist victims. Here, not far from the little town of Salaspils, a concentration camp was situated from October 1941 until October 1944. Thousands of people from occupied Latvia, the USSR and many European countries were imprisoned there in thirty-nine barracks. The principal function of the Salaspils concentration camp was transportation of the imprisoned to the larger camps of the Third Reich. The prisoners of the camp were employed in peat marshes, aerodromes, in road building and other hard labour jobs. The camp regime was exclusively strict.”

This confirmed that Salaspils had never been intended for Riga’s Jews as the camp had barely been established when Riga’s surviving Jews were marched to Rumbula Forest to be shot. Later I learned that a few Jews from other parts of Latvia, such as survivors of the Libau and Daugavpils ghettos, ended up there. Clearly the site had been chosen for its situation on the main rail link from central Europe via Daugavpils in the south of Latvia to Riga. This made it a convenient location for the reception of prisoners from the West, and indeed, as the inscription says, for the transportation west of prisoners to the larger camps in the Third Reich – presumably the extermination camps in Poland.

On our way back up the stairs we looked at the memorial plaque at the end of the tunnel. It is in Russian. Aleksandrs translated it:

“In the dark days of Fascist occupation, in Salaspils Concentration Camp, there were thousands of Latvians and Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians, Lithuanians and Estonians, Poles and Jews, Czechs and Slovaks, daughters and sons of many peoples. Let us remember them like a fire in our hearts. “

Going out of the exhibition centre and the concrete block, we went into the central courtyard where we looked at the statues hewn out of stone in a style we recognised as Soviet era sculpture. They depicted several men in poses suggesting hard labour and a woman sheltering a

child behind her back. Their faces depict defiance and suffering. As we walked around the camp complex, we began to hear a regular pulse of sound - the sound, it seemed, of a heart beat. It turned out to be coming from a marble block and I understand it to be a metronome. This too, simple though it is, had a profound emotional impact on me and others in our group. The notion of a beating heart that continues to beat despite the worst excesses that we human beings can perpetrate on one another gives a sense of hope and humanity, of life continuing, of survival in the face of all odds.

Although this memorial site was not connected to my family history I felt it had been well worth the time to stop and experience such a moving memorial.

The final piece of information which Aleksandrs gave us is that the memorial was constructed by the Soviets in the late 1960s or early 1970s and then, after Latvia regained its independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union, restored in 1995 with the help of the German Republic.

We continued east towards Varaklan, and on the way I enquired about what had happened to the German commandants who were responsible for the atrocities in the forest and those who were in charge of the camp. Aleksandrs said that they were brought to trial in Riga after the war and those found guilty were sentenced to death and hanged at Riga in 1946.

<sup>1</sup> The invasion was accomplished by *Einsatzgruppe A* under Stahlecker aided by the notorious Rudolf Lange who was in charge of Einsatzkommando2. Latvian fascists under Arajs were immediately recruited to take part in the killings.

<sup>2</sup> I understand that subsequently to our visit a memorial to the Jewish victims has been placed at this site.

## **Chapter 8: VARAKLAN MONDAY 26 MAY 1997**

### **Journal Entry (and later reflections)**

Varaklan is about about 200 km east of Riga, and for the first part of the journey the main road follows the Daugava River. This is an extremely wide, major river which used to be a transport waterway. In later times however, stretches were dammed to provide hydro-electric power for the region, and we could see that this had resulted in sections silting up and narrowing. The railway from Riga to the east runs parallel to the main road and the river, and these three arteries continue more or less side by side until Jekabpils. After that both the road and railway branch, veering away from the river and continuing east toward Varaklan and then on to Moscow, while the other follows the Daugava south towards Dvinsk (now known by its Latvian name, Daugavpils). Dvinsk/Daugavpils is close to the Latvian borders with both Lithuania and Byelorussia and thus strategically very well placed, providing a route from Latvia towards Poland, Ukraine and central Europe – and of course a route from those countries through to the sea at Riga.

We've noticed that many place names are unfamiliar to us. We grew up hearing them in Yiddish or German while now they have Latvian names. Our mother's home town, for example, which we know as Libau is now called by its Latvian name, Liepaja. Street names in Riga and Libau also seemed to be universally Latvian. Varklan is the name by which my father, grandmother and aunts always referred to their home town, but it appears on maps as Varaklan or Varaklani. And as we saw when we arrived there, Varaklani is the name on the signpost at the entrance to the town.

Travelling east from Riga the countryside is somewhat more interesting and varied than that which we saw on the journey to Libau the previous day. It is lush, green and forested. After we left the course of the Daugava and branched off towards Varaklan, the land was quite marshy and we saw a number of water reservoirs. Although largely flat, just like the countryside going west of Riga (as we saw on our visit to Libau yesterday) there is a little more scenic interest. Whilst our road remained alongside the Daugava, the river provided

reflections which broke the monotony. After leaving the river the land seemed to rise a little and there were a few low hills. Nonetheless, my main impression of the Latvian countryside as a whole is one of flatness and emptiness. Although Latvia is relatively large in area it has a population of only about two and half million. Most of the agricultural activity we saw on our journeys out of Riga, both west and east, seemed to be related to dairy farming and forestry.

About 20 km before reaching Varaklan we saw a huge rail junction where large logs were being loaded for transportation. I speculated that prior to the damming of the Daugava logs would have been floated downriver towards the Gulf of Riga and the sea, ready for export. Latvia, with its extensive pine forests and relatively little arable land, has been exporting timber for many centuries. Its other main exports are the produce of dairy farming and Baltic amber found on the coast. When my family lived there flax (which was used to manufacture linen) was grown – and I believe still is today. My grandfather, I had been told, had been a flax merchant, as well as a part-time teacher of Biblical Hebrew and Jewish Studies.

The railway line comes close to Varaklan and then carries on to Rezekne, a larger town which has a station. After Rezekne the line continues to Moscow, a considerable distance further east. But this means that Varaklan is (and has been since the 19<sup>th</sup> century) on the train route from Riga to Moscow. Not only is Latvia as a whole of strategic significance, the small town of Varaklan clearly is as well. It would be a good place for a business to be - on a trade route and with the railway going right into the heart of Russia as well as to Riga. The excellent rail and postal networks in Tsarist Russia and territories under its control were extremely efficient, and this continued to be the case after the Russian revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I had imagined that life in Varaklan – and indeed generally in Latvia - would be backward and out of touch with modern developments in science, technology, politics and the arts. This was part of my mental picture of my homeland as a dark and forbidding place. But this journey and the further research I did made me realise that Latvia as a whole, and even a

small town like Varaklan, had excellent connections to the outside world. The downside of this, of course, is that occupation and control of Latvia were of significant importance for the neighbouring major powers.

The positive side, though, is that from an early period tides of thought and opinion - as well as the influence of political and economic developments both from the West and from Russia - had washed through this small country. It is not so surprising, then, that Ray growing up in Varaklan in the 1920s had access to Russian literature as well as the classics of many languages translated into Yiddish, and that she was deeply influenced by the new socialist and communist ideas which were then infiltrating Latvian consciousness.

Similarly - but with a different, continental, influence - my mother, growing up in Libau during the same period was reading German literature and was steeped in European culture.

These were very different cultural settings; Varaklan in Latgale province was part of Tsarist Russia, hence the influence of Russian language and culture, whereas Libau in Courland had close ties to Germany.

As I later realised, to think of Latvia as a single, more or less cohesive society is to overlook the fact that the provinces of Courland in the west and Latgale in the east, for example, had their own distinctive histories and were only brought together into a single unified democratic state when Latvia gained its hard won independence after the first world war. However, each retained its unique character – and, contrary to my image of them - neither was primitive or backward.

In her diary, written in Varaklan in 1928, which I had not yet read at the time of this visit, Ray records the literature she was reading and the newspapers and journals which were available. Often these were passed around in the community or read out loud to be followed by discussion – something they called a ‘living newspaper’. Ray also records her

excitement when radio came to Varaklan. Telephones were not yet known, neither were motorised vehicles, so people travelled by horse drawn vehicle from Varaklan to Rezekne in order to catch a train to Riga. This was a commonplace journey, supplemented by mail which was very reliable and fast; a letter or parcel posted in Riga (or Varaklan) would reach its destination the next morning; allowing the family in Varaklan to keep in touch with friends and family members in Riga easily.

As I later discovered, during its period of independence from about 1920 until Soviet occupation in 1940, Latvia was an advanced democracy. Women were granted the vote – and full suffrage (the right to become members of the Latvian parliament) - much earlier than was the case in many western democracies. This was set out in the Latvian Declaration of Independence of 1918, although not implemented until independence was actually achieved in 1920. It applied to women from the age of 21, on exactly the same terms as for men. By contrast, in the UK in 1918 only women over the age of 30 were granted the vote, and universal suffrage did not follow until ten years later, in 1928. South Africa was even more backward with regard to both women and all non-white people. Eventually, in 1930, white women got the vote.

No wonder Ray, a communist and a feminist, knowing that women's suffrage was well established in Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine and many other countries, was shocked when she arrived in Cape Town in 1929 and learned that no women – not even white women or older women – had the vote. It required many more decades of struggle – in much of which Ray was an active player – for black people, including black women, to get the vote.

On this journey to Varaklan, however, I was not yet aware of how politically and technologically sophisticated Latvia was in the 1920s when my father and his sisters were growing up there. My image of Varaklan was still of a backward village, cut off from the

outside world, just as my image of Riga had been of a dark and forbidding city – nothing like the beautiful city, with graceful and light-hearted architecture that is the actuality.

Varaklan itself turned out to be quite small, a large village rather than a town, with on the whole very traditional housing and buildings. We had all expected that the typical older style of Russian country housing, consisting mainly of wooden structures with sloping roofs, would no longer exist. We knew that Varaklan had been a Soviet military establishment for a time – further confirmation that it was regarded as occupying an excellent strategic position. It was clearly a significant military base since even Ray, as an official representative of the Communist Party of South Africa in exile, had not been allowed back to visit her home town.

So we expected that the pretty village houses we had seen all the way along the route from Riga, would have been replaced in Varaklan by Soviet style concrete blocks of housing and other utilitarian buildings. It was therefore a delightful surprise to find that much of the old housing remained. We began to feel hopeful that we might be able to locate and identify our family home.

We drove straight to the small central square which has a few shops and a couple of cafes. We were looking for Shalom Segal - the last remaining Jew in Varaklan - who was the contact the Diamond family had told us about. His parents, we believe, were amongst those who escaped across the border into Russia in the summer of 1941, ahead of the German invaders. We learned later that day that those Jews who remained in Varaklan had been murdered on 4<sup>th</sup> October of the same year. Shalom's parents returned after the War and Shalom himself was born in Varaklan in 1946. The Diamonds had told us that even with Shalom's assistance they had been unable to identify their family home, and warned us not to expect to find much of personal interest. But we hoped that Ray's little hand-drawn sketch map would help us to be more successful than they had been.



We found Shalom remarkably quickly. We had been told that he had a shop – a bakery, we discovered – so Aleksandrs asked a passerby if they knew where Shalom Segal's shop was. After a few minutes, someone came and told us that his shop was closed for lunch and a few minutes after that someone else came rushing up to say that he was having lunch in the cafe on the main street. People were very friendly and helpful. We had not expected that local people would take so much trouble to help complete strangers. Shalom soon joined us, and stayed with us for the next few hours as we explored Varaklan. We were dependent on Aleksandrs' interpretation for any Russian or Latvian needed, but Shalom also spoke a little Yiddish, which some of us could understand, which helped.

First we asked Shalom if he could show us the synagogue on Skolas Street. This was a potential landmark relatively easy to identify, we thought, which Ray had marked on her map. We had studied the map in Riga the previous evening and again while in the minibus on the way from Salaspils to Varaklan. Ray had written the street name in Latvian '*Skolas Iela*' and also in Yiddish '*Shul gas*'. In English this is School (or Synagogue) Street. Without any hesitation, Shalom took us straight to Skolas Iela, and pointed out the synagogue, which turned out to be a substantial double storey building. He then pointed to a fairly large house immediately across the road and said (in Yiddish) that this was where Leibe Joffe had lived.

We were puzzled because we knew from Ray's descriptions and map that the family home, the Alexandrovitz house, was across the road from the synagogue. We studied the house closely in relation to Ray's sketch and description. It matched these extraordinarily well, down to details like the double doors at the side of the house and the orchard on its right. Shalom however was certain that this was Leibe Joffe's house! He knew nothing about it having belonged to the Alexandrovitz family.

We were not able to gain access to the house, but as it was clearly unoccupied we were able to look carefully at it from the outside, and explore the garden. Everything we saw fitted

with the sketch map as well as with Ray's description on the home video. For example, Ray had described to Alec and myself how there were two toilets in the back yard, one for adults and one for children. One of these structures was still standing, smaller than the usual size - presumably this was the children's privy - and alongside it a space where there would have been another privy which had fallen into ruins. The house looked as if it had been empty for some while. But apart from that it looked to be sturdy and substantial, in good shape and in an excellent position.

A possible explanation for this being - to the best of Shalom Segal's knowledge - Leibe Joffe's house, occurred to us later, when we were discussing this amongst ourselves. We, especially Alec and I, knew quite a bit about Leibe Joffe, who had been a close friend of the family having been grandfather's friend from years back, a teacher at the school all the children attended, and a major influence on the political development of both Ray and Dora. We knew that our grandmother had sold the property in order to raise money for the remaining members of the family to travel to South Africa in 1930, just before the country closed its doors to Jewish emigration from Europe. Our grandmother and her youngest and oldest daughters, our aunt Gessie and Alec's mother Minnie, had then emigrated to South Africa where they joined my father and the two aunts, Dora and Ray. Putting those facts together and thinking about it all in the context of family history, it seems highly likely that Leibe Joffe bought the house from my grandmother.

As Shalom Segal himself was only born in 1946, many years after it ceased to be the Alexandrovitz house, there was every reason why he should think of it as Leibe Joffe's house.

### **The synagogue on Skolas Street.**

After looking at the house we went across the road to the synagogue, and walked around the outside of the building. Aleksandrs asked Shalom Segal whether it was possible to go

inside. Shalom went off to enquire in the neighbourhood, and returned a few minutes later with a key. He opened a side door and took us upstairs. There were a number of rooms, some unoccupied and others which were being used, mainly by craftsmen for a variety of purposes. One was a cobbler's workshop, another had sewing equipment, and a third looked as if it was a small shop selling second hand clothes. There were also several other rooms which we did not see into. It was not clear whether or not they were occupied. The general feeling amongst our group was that in the days that this was a functioning synagogue these rooms would have been used for study, for the Cheder<sup>3</sup> and for community meetings. We knew that grandfather had taught the children in Cheder, and also prepared boys for Bar Mitzvah. I remembered Ray describing her father suffering a heart attack while teaching, and a little boy running across the road from the Shul to tell her mother that she must come quickly because Teacher was ill.

The layout of this building and the relationship between it and our family home were all consistent with this having been the synagogue. We also noted that the community which supported this synagogue must have been substantial and prosperous enough to be able to afford a communal building of this size and construction.

Much later I learned that Varaklan had three synagogues, and that this one was the largest and also the only one built in stone. The other two were both of wooden construction. This synagogue at 3 Skolas Street was first constructed in 1817 and was known as 'The Great House of Prayer'.

Next we enquired whether we could see the ground floor of the building, and Shalom managed to find the person who had this key, and let us in. Despite the fact that the interior space now looked as if it was being used for storage - there was a fox fur hanging up to dry,

---

<sup>3</sup> The Cheder (literally 'room') is the school where young children, usually only boys, are taught to read Hebrew. It was often held after the normal school day.

and all kinds of stuff lying around in no particular order – we could immediately see that it had been a synagogue. We entered through quite a large lobby and then through a doorway into the main space which had rounded, arched windows and an off-centre pillar with decorative cornices at the top. As we walked in, everyone noticed an area on the wall facing us, and remarked to each other that it was where the Aron Kodesh (the Holy Ark, used to house the scrolls) and the Sifre Torah (the scrolls of the Law) would have been placed. We took a number of photographs inside, and examining them later it was clear that the building and this large room were of a shape and a style of architecture which was wholly consistent with it having been a synagogue. Shalom Segal was absolutely sure that it was the synagogue. As everything we knew about it tallied with what we saw, we were confident that we had located the correct building.

*(And, of course, as noted below, it was later positively identified from photographs and video footage by Dora and Ray.)*

### **The Jewish cemetery in Varaklan**

Our next stop was a visit, accompanied by Aleksandrs and Shalom, to the Jewish cemetery. There is a brick arch at the entrance with a Star of David in the centre and lions on either side. We discovered that Shalom Segal acted as caretaker of the cemetery. It seemed that an American Jew who had visited a few years previously - no doubt an émigré or the descendant of émigrés – had set Shalom up in business as a baker and in return Shalom took on this responsibility. He certainly kept his side of the bargain. The cemetery was meticulously maintained, and the gravestones, memorial plaques and paths had been kept clean and tidy.

Aleksandrs had visited the Varaklan cemetery previously and had located some family headstones. One of these was of our grandfather. We were able to decipher the names and dates on this, and the information tallied completely with what we knew - his name, his father's name and the date of his death, which was 1924. We took a photograph of Simon,

Alec, Rina and myself standing by this headstone, and can place this side by side with old family photographs of our grandmother and her children standing by this grave. We also saw the headstone of another member of the Alexandrovitz family, a woman named Brina who died in 1912. On the family tree which we have little by little been constructing, there is a Brina Alexandrovitz, an aunt by marriage of our grandfather Shimon. We were sure this was her stone. Another headstone we identified was that of Leibe Joffe, the friend and teacher who we had just learned had lived in our family house.

The cemetery had a very peaceful air, and a feeling of being cared for, unlike our experience the previous day in Libau where the missing headstones bore testimony to times of upheaval. However, we had yet to see the saddest part of this cemetery. It was surrounded by woodland and Aleksandrs told us that the Jews of Varaklan had been murdered in the forest. He took us to see two memorial plaques sited at the edge of the cemetery, where it backs onto the forest, as close as possible to the area in the forest where the massacre took place. One of the plaques looked very official and was inscribed in Russian and Hebrew. The second was more personal, and inscribed in Yiddish and Russian. I was able to read and translate the Yiddish inscription. It read:

*We will forever remember our parents, brothers, sisters and children who were murdered at the hands of the fascists on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1941.*

It was not clear who had arranged for this memorial to be constructed, or when it was placed there, although it seemed likely that some of those who had fled across the border into Russia ahead of the Nazi invaders and later returned (as Shalom's parents had) might have initiated it. Although not certain of its provenance we found it very moving and were glad that it was there. The personal message provided at least some sense of closure. We noted that the date of the massacre in Varaklan was in the same time period, i.e. between early July and December 1941, when all over the country, in the major cities and in small town, Latvia's Jews were being systematically murdered.

Before leaving the cemetery we said Kaddish at the Yiddish memorial and also at our grandfather's grave. We couldn't quite believe that we were standing on the same spot as our grandmother, my father and all his full sisters had stood in 1925 or 1926 more than seven decades earlier. This photograph was probably the last record of them all together as major changes were on the way over the next few years. A year or so later Keila Mary died of an appendix operation which went wrong. Soon after that my father began the migratory moves which resulted in all the other people in the photograph settling in South Africa. By 1930 they had all gone. I imagine that all of the people on that photograph treasured this record of the last time that they were all together. For me it felt like a warp in time. I had a sense of unreality, of the mythical being transmuted into the solidity and reality of stone and inscription.

After experiencing the cemetery and the memorials we asked Aleksandrs whether we had time to return to Skolas Street, to have a wander around and get the feel of the place. He readily agreed, so we boarded the minibus again and made our last Varaklan stop back at the house where my father and his sisters had grown up. There was a pleasant, peaceful atmosphere. The surrounding village and countryside are very pretty and unspoiled by much in the way of modern developments. I felt that I got a sense of what life in Varaklan might have been like then and that it had not been very different from what it is now, but for the advent of cars, telephones etc. Apart from that, and given that both motorised vehicles and telephones seemed sparse in modern Varaklan, daily life appeared not to have been unduly affected by Soviet rule or by the advent of modernity. It seemed to me – to be much as it probably always had been in the villages and small towns around the countryside. However, I wondered in what ways it had been different when more than half the population was Jewish, many with connections with the outside world.

This account is based on a tape recording I made of comments and observations at the time of our visit and which I transcribed on our return to London, as well as research and information gathered later. I ended the recording with these words:

“I feel a shiver when I think that yesterday afternoon, just a day ago, I was in the orchard where my aunts would have gathered fruit in their childhood and young adulthood. I don’t know who planted those fruit trees - again, we can check that with Ray.”

Subsequently, we obtained definite confirmation that we had correctly identified the family home. When I phoned Ray in Cape Town after our return to London, I described what we had seen, including the double doors. She said that ours was the only house in Varaklan with double doors. She was absolutely thrilled and delighted when I told her that the fruit trees were in blossom, and in an excited voice exclaimed “Oh, our cherry trees are still there!” Hearing her delight became for me one of the highlights of this trip. Later we had further confirmation when we heard from Alec that he had shown Dora and Ray his video footage of Varaklan without telling them what he was showing them and that Dora immediately identified both the synagogue and the house.

In another conversation with Ray I expressed my surprise at the good condition of the house given that it was of timber construction. She explained that the timber was only cladding, and that the actual construction was stone or brick, I’m not sure which, but in any case a more durable material than wood. However, when I explained that we’d found the house because Shalom Segal had taken us immediately to the correct location, and added that he was the only Jew living in Varaklan, she was taken aback. Her voice expressed absolute shock as she said “but it was a Jewish town!” It was very difficult for her to absorb this fact, not surprisingly as until the Nazi invasion Jews comprised the majority of the inhabitants of Varaklan.

According to census records, the population of Varaklan at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was about 1,810, of these about 75% (1,365) were Jewish. The movement of some younger people to the larger towns and Jewish emigration resulted in a reduction of the total population in 1935 to 1661, of whom 57% (952) were Jewish. It is clear that Varaklan remained a Jewish town until the destruction of 1941. No wonder Ray found the information that only one Jew remained deeply shocking.”

Some months after our journey I discovered that an acquaintance also had a Varaklan heritage. More than that, she had a collection of photographs taken in Varaklan in the 1920s and 1930s. These convey another dimension to the sense of place. I wrote this: “The young people in Ayalah’s photos are well dressed, even elegant, and the photos record picnics and other activities in the open air. One gets a feeling of a village or small town in which, although it is very much part of countryside living - growing vegetables and fruit, keeping a cow or two - there was also leisure and opportunity for study and for fun. It was not at all the backward, cut-off fusty place I had imagined.”

We drove away from Varaklan towards Riga, where we had a last evening together. On the way we talked about what we had seen and experienced that day, and all of us felt that this had been a rich and informative day. It had made us feel very connected to our family’s life before they emigrated to South Africa, and before the Holocaust destroyed Jewish life in Latvia. I experienced that sense of place which I had hoped for. In the ensuing years, during which I and a colleague translated Ray’s diary and I made visits to and corresponded with Ray in Cape Town, that sense of place remained with me. It was a great gift.



## Chapter 9: LONDON FRIDAY 30 MAY 1997 Journal Entry

We arrived back on Tuesday morning 27<sup>th</sup> May, after a horribly early start from Riga, all of us feeling as if we'd been away at least three months rather than three days. The mass of information, experience and impressions we packed into those three days was extraordinary. The sense of time and space being out of kilter is enormous. Two and a half hours in a BA plane to traverse impossible distances of time and space. It feels a bit like Alice. Her experience was of herself shrinking or growing. Ours is of vast distances being shrunk into tiny ones; distances which we had previously felt were either untraversable - or would at least require a huge investment of time and energy to encompass and unimaginable aeons of time - nearly 70 years - suddenly being telescoped into three days.

What was even harder to absorb was the solid, physical reality of our family history as manifested in graves, houses, streets and synagogues – and even photographs in the Jewish Museum in Riga. What had been unreachable behind the Iron Curtain, had acquired tangible and visible substance. I had heard about my mother's childhood home but until I had seen it and stood in the street looking at it, it was no more real than the gingerbread house of fairy tales. Yet there were the marks left on the front door where clearly a Mezuzah had been placed, and there was the small building in the garden where the piano had been kept.

I had heard about the small town where my father and his sisters grew up, about the synagogue across the road and the cherry tree in their garden. And I had seen the photograph of my father, his mother and his sisters standing by my grandfather's tombstone. But all this was unreal, the stuff of myth and fairy tale, until I actually saw the cherry tree in blossom and I myself stood by the tombstone. All these things seen, touched - and captured on our cameras – contributed towards the making real of the mythical past.

What I also understood, helped by the long bus journeys across country is that these realities are at opposite ends of Latvia. Some years ago it occurred to me that my parents could have met in Riga where family members were acquainted because of their shared political interests. This gave me a sense of myself as a Holocaust survivor. I imagined my parents meeting there when they visited their respective siblings, marrying there and my brother and myself being born there. By the time of the Nazi invasion in June 1941 my brother would have been six, and I would have been two years old. No young Jewish children survived the massacres in Latvia – indeed, very few Jews of any age survived.

But now, having travelled there and seen the places of my parents' childhood and youth, I know that it was highly unlikely that they would have met, and that even if they had met, it is even more unlikely that they would have got together. The language and cultural differences between them were too profound. Although they both 'came from Latvia', I do not believe this would have been sufficient for them to transcend their different

backgrounds. They needed to meet in a new country for a relationship to be possible – and even then, as I now recognise, they both found it difficult to bridge their different outlooks and cultures. So rather than being a Holocaust survivor I now know myself to be the child of a ‘mixed marriage’, an accident of the patterns of migration of Latvian Jews in the 1920s and 30s. I also know myself to be doubly fortunate: fortunate to have been born at all, and fortunate to have spent my childhood in a peaceful and beautiful part of the world while other children around the globe experienced hunger, terror, injury and catastrophic losses.

My major loss, as I understood only very much later, was the loss of a homeland – perhaps of two homelands, Courland and Latgale, and the loss of relatives – aunts, uncles, cousins – whom I never had the opportunity to meet.