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A Second Generation Shoah Memory

By Elaine Sneierson Leeder

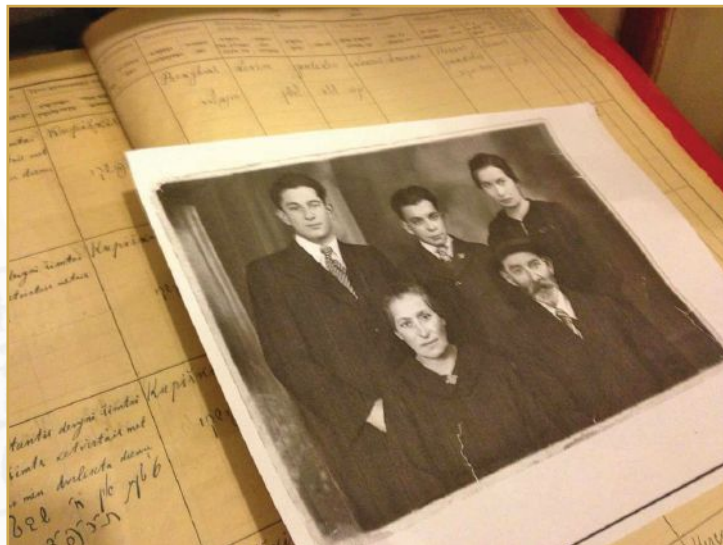


Photo by Elaine Sneierson Leeder

A photo of Samuel Sneierson and his family in Lithuania sits on top of the family's log.

It begins as I turn out the lights and prepare to settle down for the night. The room is dark, the bed is comfortable and I eagerly await restful sleep. But I am still awake. I begin to be anxious. I know what is coming. All of a sudden, the fear takes over.

I am falling into a pit; it is large, an abyss that spirals downward. My fall goes on without end. I begin to think that this life I know will cease, and that everything I know to be reality is, in fact, temporary. Death is inevitable. And the world will go on without me.

As I fall into this dark pit, there is no one to save me. I must deal with it myself, as I have done since the horror began—since I was 11 years old.

My father said I'd outgrow it. My husband held me when I was a young woman, to comfort me. Now I have these horrible dreams alone. They have come for 59 years. Will they ever end?

An Awareness Grows

We sat in a car in the dark. We waited, my brother and I, for our parents to emerge from the apartment in Brooklyn, N.Y. When he went up, my father was eager but anxious.

In what seems like hours later, he emerged, almost carried by my mother, and then helped into the car. He was weeping, quaking. He looked like a broken man. We didn't know what happened, but something terrible had occurred. Silently, we drove back home to Boston. Nothing more was said of that evening, ever. My family guarded the secret well. Over the many years since then, I have tried

to understand what happened that night, but the pieces never fully came together.

My father, Samuel (Zalman) Sneierson, came to the United States from Lithuania in January 1939. Family members here sent money for his eldest sister, Althea, to immigrate, but she wanted to stay behind to care for their ailing father (Eliezer, after whom I am named) and told her brother to go instead; she asked that she be sent for later.

And so the eldest son was the first to go, in keeping with heritage and tradition—and the sacrifice of Althea.

According to family lore, my father was one of only seven Lithuanians allowed into the U.S. that year because of immigration quotas. Actually, he had been number eight on the list, but murky dealings behind the scenes moved him up the queue. A Lithuanian passport kept by the family has a Nazi stamp, indicating he crossed through Germany during the military buildup for World War II. He described being accompanied through Germany by an S.S. guard, moving through Berlin and seeing the mobilization. He ended up in Le Havre, France, and sailed from there to the U.S.

Family members took him in, and he was inducted into the U.S. Army and stationed in South Carolina. He also met my mother, a first-generation American Jew whose family came from Ukraine. Throughout those years, he corresponded with his family back in Lithuania.

The relatives he had left told him in letters and postcards how glad they were that Zalman—who

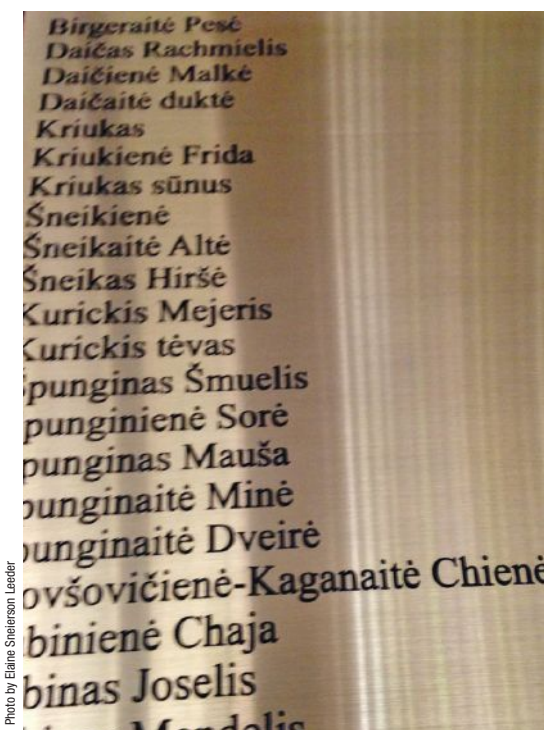


Photo by Elaine Snelerson Leeder

The memorial wall at the Kupiskis library.

had changed his name to Samuel—was not in Lithuania when the Soviet Army had come looking to conscript him. Things were becoming more difficult financially, they said, asking that he send money to help them survive. In 1940, Eliezer died of natural causes, and was buried in the Jewish cemetery not far from the family home at 52 Gedamis St. in the town of Kupiškis.

He told us that on the ship coming over, he had thrown away his tefilin (a small leather box containing parchment scrolls inscribed with Torah verses). But soon after arriving, he bought another set and continued to “lay tefilin” every morning for the rest of his life. He became a key member of his Orthodox synagogue, attending services often.

Over the years, he introduced his children to many of the trappings of the Old World. Its smells and traditions permeated the house. The food made by our mother, an excellent cook, was often Eastern European: borscht, rye bread, herring. My father would sit in his chair all evening, studying religious tracts. Years later, as he lay dying, his physician paid for a private room

overlooking the river. The doctor said it was his “honor” to provide this for such a righteous man.

After the Germans occupied Lithuania in 1941, Samuel never heard from any family members again. As a child, I watched him reading Jewish newspapers, looking for mention of his family, fearing the worst, hoping they had survived. He never saw their names.

I was born in 1944, and my brother in 1949. It was 1955 when we took that painful trip to Brooklyn, when my father learned the fate of his mother, his sister and his brother. Someone he saw upstairs in that apartment who had escaped from near Kupiškis told him the grisly details of their deaths. But my brother and I were told nothing.

The family secret was both constantly present and yet never spoken. It filled the air, sitting over us all like a cloud of sadness.

For a living, my father worked with an uncle in the junk business, first with a cart, then a truck and then opening their own business. He lived a life of vivid contrast, by day salvaging old metals and clothing—later selling used tires—and by night as a biblical scholar and religious man, taking out the prayer books and scholarly commentary and sitting quietly with them, finding solace in the ancient texts. Yet, he interacted with all types, even going to a bar now and then with friends quite different in religion or values.

For years I wanted to visit Lithuania. When I asked my father if he wanted to go, his answer was always the same: “Why would I want to go there? They killed my people, and I was glad to get out of there.” As the years went on, I felt compelled to visit.

Samuel died in 1983. I became a professor of sociology, studying the dynamics of wife battering and sexual assault, working with victims of domestic violence and other trauma. In the mid-1990s, I was a visiting scholar at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. In the afternoons, we worked on our family stories.

Using the JewishGen website, a remarkable tool for information about the families, shtetls and other details of the lost peoples of Europe,

I came upon a handwritten list of all the Jews killed in Kupiškis. It had been compiled by a public health nurse from the nearby larger city of Panevėžys, where my father had attended yeshiva. The list sent chills down my spine. Among the more than 800 people listed were my grandmother, Yenta Leah, age 64, my aunt, Althea (Alte), age 28 and her uncle Herse (Hershel). It said that he was 20, but in fact he was 17, having been born in January of 1924.

I printed out the list and called my brother. A few years later, he phoned to say there was a news story about a Nazi collaborator in Kupiškis. He was about to be deported from the United States for falsifying documents when he immigrated here. On January 14, 2002, the Justice Department initiated proceedings to revoke his citizenship because of his participation in the persecution and murder of Jews and other civilians during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania in 1941.

The complaint filed in U.S. District Court alleged that Peter John Bernes (a/k/a Petras Bernatavicius), 79, worked during the summer of 1941 as deputy to Werner Loew, the Nazi-appointed mayor and police commander assigned to Kupiškis. It stated that Bernes, who after his immigration had settled in Lockport, Ill., participated directly in the process of removing condemned prisoners from jail so they could be taken to nearby killing sites. According to the complaint, more than 1,000 Jewish men, women and children—approximately one-fourth of the town's population—were murdered in Kupiškis by armed men under Loew's command.

Among them were my relatives.

A Trip Delayed

My brother and I agreed it was time to go there. I was 69; he was 65. We booked our trip for the summer of 2014, at once intrigued and fearful. After all, we had lived with the story for our entire lives, although we hadn't known the details. We would hear other people talk about the Holocaust as an abstract historical fact; for us it was a part of our identity.

We were part of a group of eight American

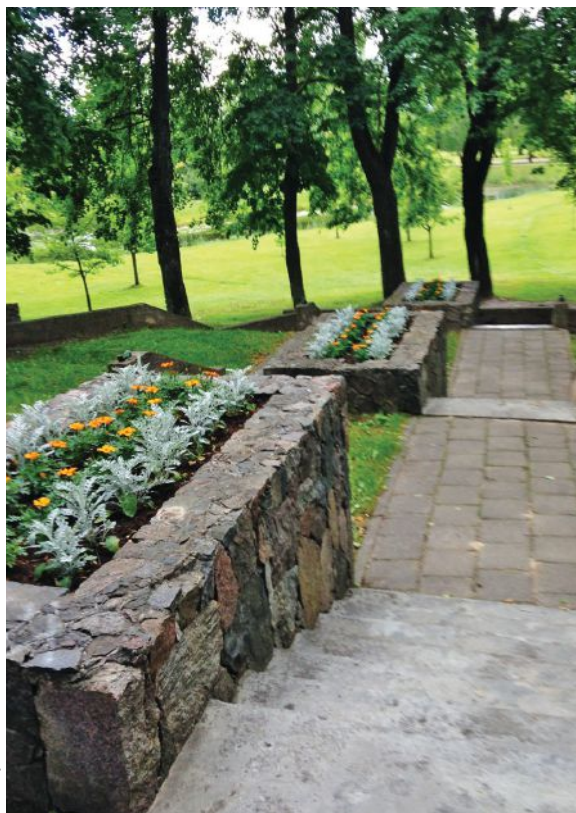


Photo by Elaine Shoherson Leeder

A memorial on a former killing field in Kupiškis, Lithuania, where more than 2,000 Jews were killed on a single day.

Jews on a grim Holocaust roots trip.

At the Holocaust Museum of Lithuania we learned about the numerous killing places. We also saw a letter from an S.S. standartenführer named Karl Jäger, who wrote to his superiors in Germany with great pride about how he had wiped out huge numbers of Jews in the six months from June to December of 1941. The letter attested to the ruthlessness of the *einsatzgruppen*, the roving killing squads of Nazi S.S., police and local collaborators who followed the German soldiers advancing on the Eastern Front.

By 1941, 175,000 of the almost 200,000 Lithuanian Jews had been murdered, most near their homes. The 25,000 survivors were moved to ghettos in Vilnius and Kaunas to contribute to the German war effort as forced labor. In the last phase, from April 1943 to mid-July 1944, the ghettos were liquidated, and the last of the Jews were killed.

The most important part of my trip was going to where my father's family was shot by the Nazi killing squads and their Lithuanian collaborators in Kupiškis, in northeastern Lithuania.

The Killing Place and a Visit to Kupiškis

The sky was beginning to cloud over as we stepped off the bus. In the distance, we saw a water tower the Soviets built after the war. They had bulldozed much of the centuries-old Jewish cemetery, leaving only a few graves next to the tower. I was finally coming to the place of my terrifying dreams.

To the right of the water tower was a slope with a memorial. The translator said it honored the Jews killed in this shtetl in June 1941. At the foot of the hill was a garden with flowers and steps leading to a small spot with a view of the field toward the Kupa River. My father had said that he often took his horse across the river from their small farm into town. It was quiet, peaceful, nothing as I imagined.

As we descended the steps, buried beneath our feet were the remains of the 2,000 Jews killed there on a single day (more than 800 from Kupiškis, the rest from the surrounding region). My brother took out the prayer books he'd brought and distributed them so we all could say Kaddish. I wept as we recited the old, familiar words. And then the skies opened up; we were drenched. Were the souls of our family weeping with us? As we hastily climbed back up the steps, my brother ran to the cemetery near the water tower and said another Kaddish for our grandfather, who had been buried there. And then it was over.

We sat inside the bus in silence, deep in our own thoughts.

Wary of the locals—after all, some of them, or their ancestors, may have been collaborators—the group next went to the address where our father's family had lived: 52 Gedamis St. It was easy to find, but the house was not there. Instead, there was a police station, a house at number 50 and an empty field. An officer explained that the house had been torn down four years ago. Before that, it was a home for the poor, this public use actually



Photo by Elaine Snelson Leader

An empty field where the Sneierson family home once sat.

more consoling than if it had been taken over by a private family. The house was a half-mile from the killing place. As I stood there, I wondered what my aunt, uncle and grandmother had experienced. Did they die together? Were they separated? Were they praying? Crying? Helping each other? Being there answered some questions but raised more. It was so real, yet surreal.

Behind the town library was the old synagogue building, which had become a community multi-purpose facility. The women's section upstairs had been boarded up, but otherwise it still looked like a shul.

There was lunch at a local restaurant. In honor of our father, my brother and I ordered his favorite meal of borscht with potatoes and rye bread. It was as if he were with us. In three hours, we had seen it all and done what we had come to do. It was poignant but not as depressing as I'd expected. A few days later, I went home, still trying to discover what this whole trip had meant to me. But that insight would not come until a few weeks later.

The Aftermath

Soon after my return from Lithuania, I turned 70. As was my ritual, I attended a meditation with a guide who helps me see where I am and where I might be heading.

I told her about my persistent dream and my trip to Lithuania.

She asked me to imagine the pit of my dreams and the usual falling into infinity. I fell and fell, as I had in the past. I kept falling for quite a while.

But finally I stopped. I saw a small light ahead; the infinity I'd always imagined was not so infinite after all. The narrow downward spiral began to open up and I came into the light. The place I entered was lovely, with a bright blue sky and puffy white clouds. My guide told me that for Buddhists, the image represents Nirvana. As I exited my "spiral of infinity," I was met in my mind's eye by my old childhood friend Michael. I used to see him sitting in the synagogue with my father and the other men. Michael died many

years ago. But here he was welcoming me to this place. In the background, I could see my parents, but they did not approach. Instead, Michael told me there were some people he wanted me to meet.

They were my murdered ancestors. As my grandmother, my aunt and uncle Hershel came toward me, they wordlessly told me that they were all right and in a good place. They said I no longer had to carry the burden of their memory, even as I continued to memorialize them. They indicated that I had done my job, and now it was finished. Their lives had ended, their spirits were free, and mine should be, too. I realized that Althea's name meant healing. I was about to begin my own.

I felt at peace. I was released from the tragedy that had plagued me my entire life.

I have been back for a while now. I have not had the horrifying dream, nor have I been depressed by its loss. I still feel compelled to tell my family's story, but it is now a story with an ending. 🕊



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