Jakovas Bunka

The Jewish Page of Plungian History

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THE JEWISH PAGE OF PLUNGIAN HISTORY

It would be hard to find someone who could pinpoint exactly when the first Jew appeared in Lithuania, but it is generally accepted that the Crusades and the Inquisition, ravaging 11th-12th century Western Europe, as well as Duke Gediminas' invitation to merchants and tradesmen led the first Jews to settle in Lithuania. From that point in time, they became part of Lithuanian history – they became Lithuanian citizens.

Officially, the first documented instance of Jews residing in Plungė only dates back to the seventeenth century, however, reliable information exists that up to 1941 a certain Mr. Rest was buried in 1600 in the Jewish Cemetery of Plungė, which is now the site of the Old Town Secondary School built in 1975.

There is also a theory that maintains that the first residents of present-day Plungė were Jews who had received permission to settle in Lithuania, but this version of events has not been confirmed by historians. There is, however, some reasoning behind this theory, as from the fourteenth century up to the second half of the sixteenth century, Plungė was a small settlement in the municipality of Gondinga. Later Plungė outrivaled Gondinga. In 1567, it is already referred to as a town, and from 1570 it became known as the centre of Gondinga municipality. According to historian Jolanta Skurdauskienė, the beginnings of Plungė consisted of "12 Jewish and 6 Christian homesteads". Thus, it is possible that the first residents of Plungė were indeed Jews.

The first image of Plungė illustrates a battle between Swedish and Russian armies near the town. Woodblock print. 18th century. 130 x 240 cm. The National Čiurlionis Art Museum. Text: "A battle near Plungė in Samogitia, during which a Swedish regiment under the leadership of Major Danguart beat and scattered the Muscovite and Polish troops. A. The town of Plungė. B. Major Danguart pursuing the Russian cavalry. C. Rittmeister Buddberg inflicting defeat on Russian dragoons."

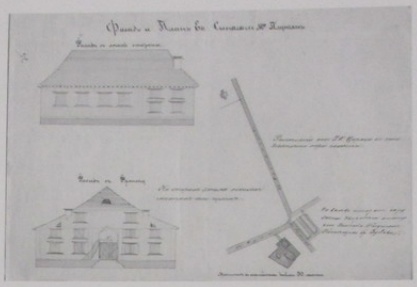
In 1939, there were over 200 thousand Jews living in Lithuania. In 1847, Plungė was home to 2,197 of them, in 1897 it was home to 2,502 (55% of the town's population), in 1921 – to 2,200, and in 1928 – to 1,815 (44%). About 2,500 Jews resided in Plungė in 1939.

Plungė in the 1930s.

Many Jews made their living as merchants, but in 1931-1935 their numbers decreased by half, and their places were gradually taken over by Samogitians. Besides this, the number of tobacco sales licenses was reduced by a quarter. About 200 Jewish families made a living from their trades.

The Jews of Plungė had 6 houses of worship to choose from. In 1814, the Great Synagogue was built, with the Little Synagogue, funded by Yankel Geler, rising up alongside it in 1864. Both synagogues were masonry structures and were active up to 1940. After the war, the buildings were used as a bakery, a flax storage house, the culture centre of the Linų Audiniai (Linen Textile) factory and as a sports hall. After the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990, the remaining Jews of Plungė, coming together as a community, requested that the surviving synagogues be returned to them according to the Law on the Procedure for the Restoration of the Rights of Religious Associations to Existing Real Property, but the buildings were handed over to Linų Audiniai, a public limited company. After a 9-year-long stretch in and out of courts, the community was finally awarded the buildings, however, the latter were in an incredible state of neglect, and a search for those willing to restore the buildings proved fruitless in Plungė,

The design of the Little Synagogue of Plungė and its final day in 2007.



The Great Synagogue of Plungė in 1937.

The Great Synagogue of Plunge, Lithuania, photo 1937/8. Courtesy Yad Vashem Archives, Y. Kamson Collection, Jerusalem.

in the entire country and even abroad. Having found no other recourse, the community decided to sell the buildings, and the new proprietor demolished them.

The last remaining building of the four timber houses of worship, Gmiles, Khesed-Shamashim, Khayey-Adam and Digele – also known as kloyzes – housed the classrooms of Plungė's primary school and later a preparatory school for drivers. When the latter ceased to exist, the building was recognised as structurally unsound and returned to the community, but it also had to be sold. The new owner demolished this newly acquired structure as well.

Plungė was also home to a yeshiva (a school for rabbis), which boasted of 50 students.

In 1908, a teacher by the name of Gutel founded a school in which children studied Yiddish, the native tongue of their fathers.

In 1919, progressive Jewish youths established a Jewish folk school where all lessons were taught in the language Jews spoke the world over. Five teachers taught at this school, with three of their positions subsidised by the state. Later, yet another Hebrew school was set up, but in 1927, both schools were restructured into one by order of the Ministry of Education.

The former Jewish secondary school on S. Neries Street.

The Jewish religious school at the crossing between S. Neries Street and S. Dariaus ir S. Girėno Street. Demolished in 1952, it was later replaced by the Residential Services Block.

There was also a Jewish secondary school where Hebrew was the principal language. The old brick secondary school still stands on S. Neries Street, now a residential building. Legend has it that Duke Mykolas Oginskis awarded the building to the Jewish community for the purpose of establishing a secondary school.

A further 130 pupils studied at a school known as Tarbut.

A primary school was set up alongside the Jewish secondary school, and 100 children were taught here in Yiddish. The school also housed a library named in the honour of the writer Yitskhok Leybush Peretz. Next to this secondary school, located approximately where the Residential Maintenance Block stands by the White Bridge that crosses the Babrungas River, stood a Cheder (religious school), which was later demolished after the war. This was where the children of less fortunate parents were educated. The building was acquired for the school by a wealthy Jew, who invited the best teachers he could find to teach there. The efforts of one of these teachers, Mr. Levinson, brought the school great recognition, however, the wealthy Jews of Plungė still avoided placing their children there. Lessons were taught here in Hebrew, and children studied the Talmud. The children who completed their education at this school were subsequently accepted into the yeshiva.

The municipal government of Plungė did little to lend material support to the Jewish schools. State funding was only enough to support one such institution.

Several athletic organisations such as Makabi and Hapoel existed, bringing together football and chess players as well as representatives of other sports. Young people wholeheartedly participated in the activity of various community organisations. The most popular were Hashomer Hatsair (The Young Guard) and Hehaluts Hatsair (The Young Labourer). All of these associations were united in their quest to recreate a Jewish state in Palestine. The organisations known as Beytar and Brit Hakhyal (Union of Warriors) strove to support the armed fight for the restoration of the State of Israel. About 30 young people (halutsim) lived and studied on the second floor of the former school in Paprūdžio Street, later departing for Palestine and leaving their place to be filled in by others. Individuals emigrating to Palestine had to have a knowledge of some kind of craft. The young men and women in Plungė thus chose to study popular agricultural trades.

As in the rest of Lithuania, the Jews in Plungė had the cultural freedom necessary for their spiritual existence and often came together in economic unions or other types of associations. They received daily newspapers in their native language such as Der Vort (The Word), Folks-Blat (Folk Paper), Jidishe Shtime (The Jewish Voice), Der Emes (The Truth), and Der Moment (The Moment), as well as weeklies such as Der Judishen Leben (Jewish Life) and Haintige Tsaitung (Today's Paper).

A Jewish People's Bank also operated in the town. It was founded by 321 members, but membership later dwindled down to 220. Of these, 15% were Lithuanians. The board was composed of honourable Jewish public figures and intellectuals such as Khatse Gamzu, Avrom Hurvits, Avrom Pozin, Shavel Shur, Shloyme Yankev Mets, Yente Garb, Mikhel Amolski, Tevye Kesel, Odes and Emdin. In 1927, the board of the OZE (Jewish Healthcare Society of Lithuania) department in Plungė was composed of Avrom Dembo, Mikhel Amolski, Itsik Pozin, doctor Leybovich, Khayim Zaks, Gnese Levinson, Khayim Rest, Leyb Garb and Motel Pozin. Plungė was the residence of the famous writer Mordechai Plungianski and the sculptor Rozental. In 1716, the rabbi of Plungė was Ber Dov and in 1929, this position was held by Shmuel Faivenzon. During other periods, the role of the rabbi was taken on by Khayim Blokh, Abraham Vesler, Yehuda Ziv, Isaac Olshvanger, Joseph Gutman, Meyer Mets and Joseph Muravits.

The Makabi football team. Zarasai, 14/09/1935.
Ruvel Tsimbler is the first on the left of the second row.

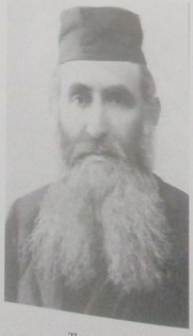
From 1918 to 1932, the mayor of Plungė was Barukh David Goldvasser, who was awarded a Lithuanian Independence Medal (No. 1629) in 1928. In 1937, Goldvasser emigrated with his family to South Africa and died in 1956. His documents and a replica of his medal were presented to a newly founded Jewish Museum of Plungė by his daughter Aneta Goldvasser.

In 1918-1936, only 11 Jews were members of the municipality of Plungė, and only two were left by 1936. One of these remaining Jews was Hirsh Mets, who held the position of deputy mayor up to 1940. Mets and his entire family was exiled to Siberia in 1941. After the war he returned to Lithuania and settled in Vilnius.

Two Jews by the name of Yankel Garb and Leyb Bunka – volunteers in the fight for Lithuanian Independence – also lived in Plungė. They were awarded Lithuanian Independence Medals, 8 hectares of land, building materials and a horse each for their contributions.

In 1936, my uncle Nekhemya Ril, who was a representative of the municipality and the chairman of OZE, wrote about Jewish life in Plungė and the daily activities of the local Jews. According to him, many buildings stood in the centre of the town that belonged to Jewish merchants, businessmen and tradesmen. No Jews were employed in state institutions, three Jews made a living as doctors, two were lawyers and two were pharmacists. On S. Darius ir S. Girėno Street, the Jew Khayim Zaks had set up a power station and sawmill. To this day, old residents of Plunge can be heard referring to electric light bulbs by Zaks' name – zaksinės.

Ril went on to write that the situation of the Jews was miserable. The economic crisis did even more to make life difficult for Jewish tradesmen and merchants. Jewish businessmen stood on the brink of insolvency and some went entirely bankrupt. The Lietūkis company had a great impact on commerce, as it had been awarded tax exemptions that allowed it to sell its wares for lower prices. It was not only the Jews who were affected by Lietūkis – certain Lithuanian merchants also suffered great losses. The Jewish People's Bank of Plungė supported its members, as did the Jewish Support Committee, by providing loans with no interest.



The 1910s.
M. Shpits, the rabbi of Plungė.

The first and longest-serving mayor of Plungė.
Barukh David Goldvasser.

Leyb Bunka,
Volunteer fighter for Lithuanian
Independence.

After a fire in Plungė on 31 March 1930.
Yankel Garb (middle),
Volunteer fighter for Lithuanian Independence.

About 10% of Plungė's Jews had relatives in America, Africa and other foreign countries and thus received support from them. Postal deliveries arriving from abroad on Thursdays and Fridays were awaited with much eagerness. Merchants were very happy to be able to purchase some wares for their half empty shops with the dollars and pounds they had been sent.

In 1894, a fire destroyed 323 Jewish and 60 Samogitian homes, also burning down one of the most beautiful wooden synagogues in Lithuania. Knowing that Plungė was doomed without its Jews, Duke Mykolas Mikalojus Oginskis provided them with timber to build their homes anew and oversaw the construction of a school. In the centre of the town, the duke built a big building (referred to by locals as kroms) that contained many little shops. Merchants were to pay for these shops over the course of 24 years.

Only Jews sold their wares here with products ranging from haberdashery, textiles, bicycles, sewing machines, iron crafts, agricultural tools and everything that was necessary for daily life and farming. Wealthy merchants with money in the Telšiai Department of the National Lithuanian Bank and the Jewish Bank of Plungė kept their shops here too. Among them were Barukh David Goldvasser, Ber Rolnik and Isaac Plungianski. However, most of their colleagues could hardly make ends meet. Their shops did not have any heating or electricity – they could only light these poky and dark spaces with kerosene lamps. Old Hene Shvat kept her corner shop on Rietavo Street wearing fingerless gloves and a cast-iron pot of embers glowing at her feet. With such a heating system in place, she would sit waiting for customers to buy her buttons and yarn.

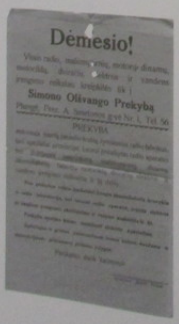
As with other Lithuanian communities of Jews, the Plungė locals also had a khevra kadisha, i.e., a burial society. It was an independent institution and members saw to the adherence of Jewish burial traditions,

digging graves, laying them with boards, washing the deceased, placing a fragment of a clay pot upon their eyes, wrapping them in a white shroud (takhrikhim) laying the corpse to rest in the grave and burying it. The poor were buried free of charge and, during the funeral, members of the society would address the assembled, collecting donations and assuring that sacrifice would keep death at bay. The poor donated cents and the wealthy contributed larger denominations. This was the only payment members of the society received. All year long, through hot weather and through cold, through rain and through snow, members carried the dead to the cemetery upon the hill. The donations they received from both those attending funerals and from the relatives of the deceased were donated to their houses of worship (kloyzes), used to support their members, to purchase a funeral shroud for the poor or to maintain the cemetery wall as well as its surroundings. If any funds were ever left over, the society organised an annual supper for poor Jews, and leftovers from the table were brought to those who had stayed behind at home. The burial society's house of worship was known by the name of the Kloyz of Shamashim.

Plungė, just like every other town, had its own strange characters and vagrants, whom everybody knew and called by their first name, adding the name of their father or mother or a nickname used by the entire community.

Royze's Moyshele (Moyshele, son of Royze) was a small creature. His legs had buckled inwards at the knees and he would careen around the town, occasionally shouting out "ėjau!" ("I went!") and proceeding forward. Though he did not have a watch, he always knew what the time was. In their naughtiness children used to badger him, "Moyshele, vifil ur?" ("Moyshele, what time is it?"), but he would not get angry and answer every Samogitian in Samogitian and every Jew in Yiddish. Some asked him because they truly wanted to know the time and others did it to tease him, but his good spirits remained unmoved in his sunny face, and dozens of times a day he would share his knowledge of the time with passersby without ever making a single mistake.

Another vagrant to roam the streets of the town was Yankel der Bloyer (Blue Yankel), named so because his face and hands were blue in colour. One of his legs was shrivelled and shorter than the other, so he walked with a limp. The evening before Sabbath he would stroll through the town with a rattle and cry out "Yidn, in shul arayn!" ("Jews, to the synagogue!"). When the war began, his relatives retreated to Russia and took him along in their cart. However, Yankel der Bloyer died on the banks of the Pechora River, where he was buried.


Dėmesio!

Simono Olšvango Prekyba


B. GOLDVASERIS

PLUNGĖ Telšių ap.

Įsteigta 1885 m.

B. GOLDWASSER

PLUNGE.

A shopping bill left behind by the mayor of Plungė, Barukh David Goldvasser.

Simon Olshvang's sales advertisement.

The kroms. B. D. Goldvasser's shop.

Zaks' mill in Plungė circa 1938.

The Jewish burial society of Plungė, khevra kadisha.
Segal (first on the right), Sher (second from the right).

Every Jew in Plungė had their nickname. Some were called Little Bean, Crow, Sooty, Black, Old Boot, Colt, Cossack Berman Pui, Lion's Bone and Bull according to their looks or the way they lived. The Jews of other towns called the Jews of Plungė "Plungė's crooks". In return, Plungė locals dubbed the Jews of Kelmė "the idiots of Kelmė" and the locals of Rietavas "the long-nosed ones".

The palette of characters among the Jews of Plungė was certainly a colourful and expressive one. I cannot, of course, remember them all, but the memory of certain personalities stuck with me throughout my entire life.

Noy's Khaya Yose (Khaya Yose, the daughter of Noy) was a tall and overbearing woman. On holidays, when the Jews headed for the Great Synagogue to pray, she would stand by the door leading to the women's balcony and watch that no children entered without their mothers. The children, especially the naughty ones, purposefully tried to annoy her in order to hear Noy's Khaya Yose abundant lexicon of swearwords. Jews had a lot of curse words at their disposal as it was, but her collection was especially impressive. "If only cholera snatched you up!", "If only you were buried and devoured by worms!", "If only your guts were to be used to measure the streets!", "Would that you were to explode!", "I hope your parents become possessed by demons!", "I wish you would choke on a bone!" – these were only a few of some of the gentler admonitions she sent in the direction of the little rascals.

Hese Korb was always employed to stay with the deceased because, according to Jewish canons, a dead person cannot be left on their own. Not every man would feel comfortable spending the night next to a corpse, but Hese Korb undertook this task with pleasure. He was a carriage driver, cheerful and inclined to making practical jokes. He had many artistic talents and participated in the folk plays that tradesmen staged in their free time. As he sat guard by the deceased, he would often find ways to turn the situation into a prank. Once he even lay down next to the corpse and covered himself with its shroud. When the morning brought in the first visitors, he started to stir underneath it. The relatives of the deceased shot out of the room like they had seen a ghost, and one even had to be revived from the shock of it all.

My father, Leyb Bunka, was always invited to the celebrations, weddings and birthdays hosted by locals to entertain guests and organise various games. He could improvise a song or poem about a guest according to their appearance or a certain personality trait. He knew many Jewish folk songs and tales, singing and telling the tales beautifully himself. He was quite a literate man and used to write addresses to courts or other institutions on behalf of others. The services of a qualified clerk were quite expensive, but he helped his fellow Jews free of charge.

My grandfather on my mother's side, Mendel Ril, treated patients with erysipelas because doctors were useless when it came to this disease. This is illustrated by the old Samogitian saying that there are three causes of smertis (death): "čiongs, ruožė ė išgostis" (draught, erysipelas and fright). Jews and Samogitians from Plungė, its vicinities and even from towns and villages further afield used to flock to my grandfather's home. He was what we would now call a psychic. He would pour his patient a glass of water or, if the patient brought some of their own, a glass of lemonade. He would then proceed to a separate room (he kept his incantation ritual a secret), begin to mutter something and trace his right index finger in the air, circling it around the glass for several minutes. Once he had completed his ritual, he would bring the glass back to his patient and instruct them to drink a spoonful of the liquid several times a day or return to him once more if necessary. He would never take any payment in advance or request anything in return. If a cured patient returned to him with gifts, he would accept them, if not, a bad word never escaped his lips.

I could not sit still unless I found out the secret of his ritual, so I asked him what it was, but my grandfather only promised to reveal his methods in his old age. Sadly, my grandfather never reached old age because he was murdered along with my grandmother and my little sister on a visit to his married daughter in Skaudvilė when the war began. Thus my grandfather took his secret to the grave.

Not everyone believed in his incantations, but many people really were cured of their illness. Once some villagers brought their swollen and red-faced daughter to be inspected by my grandfather. They claimed they had heard of my grandfather from a neighbour who he had cured and begged for him to help their daughter because doctors could only admit defeat with her condition. My grandfather was, they said, their last hope. So he repeated his ritual with the water, instructed the girl's parents to administer the water as medicine, waved his hands over her face once more and uttered a prayer with his eyes closed. To our great surprise and joy, the villagers returned after two weeks with their daughter.

She was healthy, fresh-faced and beautiful, and our home was filled with many gifts: eggs, butter, sour cream, cheese and a few live chickens.

Hirsh Pelts was known as Hirsh the fisherman because he was a fishmonger. In his old age his hands began to quake and quiver, so the fish jiggled in his hands and seemed to come alive. This was a strong, finely built man with broad shoulders. He had several sons, two lived in Plungė and took after their father and were also healthy as well as handsome men, and the others lived in Argentina and Brazil.

Gita di Telzerke (Gita of Telšiai) was a loner. She made a living by gathering apples in the forest in the fall. She froze them for the winter and sold single apples to children. She also baked all kinds of goodies and thus somehow made ends meet.

Toybe di Blinde (Blind Toybe) had an illegitimate child and sold her own hand-knitted socks for a living. In order to bring her some small joy, people used to tell her that she was wearing a new frock. She would pat herself down and always be surprised about how pretty the dress was. You could never tell whether she was actually blind or whether she was just fooling people.

Locals felt for two not so well-off and weak-minded sisters with speech impairments and a brother that was no more intelligent, but they never missed an opportunity to gently tease them. One of the sisters managed to marry an equally poor Finkelstein and she left home to live with her husband. People spoke of a conversation they once had when they met. One claimed to have seen their dead mother in her sleep. The other laughed at her and replied that she did not even see her mother when she was awake, so how could she possibly see her mother when she was asleep.

Leybe der Leybenbeyn (Leybe the Lion's Bone) was very proud of his nickname because it served as evidence of his strength. He really was very strong, but, as the people said, he had a screw loose. He lived together with his mother, worked as a loader for a Jewish carrier and joked around as he lifted heavy bags of sugar, salt and flour, two at a time, and carried them from the cart to the shops.

My grandparents Golda and Mendel Ril with their granddaughter Dina.

Avrom-Sholem der Toyt was a water carrier with poor eyesight. With a carrying pole on his shoulders and two full buckets either side, he would shout "Make way, death is approaching!" ("toyt" meant "death" in Yiddish). Never having lost his cheerful disposition, he brought water to those who needed it his entire life.

Before the war there were more than 60 Jewish tradesmen in Plungė: 3 watchmakers, 2 photographers (one, Mendel Berkovich, was widely known in Samogitia), 4 tinsmiths, 13 bakers, 6 seamstresses, 3 tailors, 1 boot-leg maker, 8 shoemakers, 1 carpenter, 5 blacksmiths, 2 furriers, 2 metalworkers, 3 mirror makers, 2 hairdressers, 2 window makers, 1 saddler, 4 painters, 1 builder, 1 bookbinder and many others. Bukhbinder and his brother-in-law Takzon had a small sweet factory on Vaižganto Street that employed 30 women and a small ceramic tile factory on Telšių Street. There were several other Jewish workshops, a small restaurant and two guest houses, one in Telšių Street, owned by Mrs. Neyman, and one in Vytauto Street, owned by the Rest businessmen.

The young Jews of Plungė got along well with their Lithuanian counterparts. The children of wealthier Jews attended the Lithuanian secondary school. Rivke Shokhat, Khayke Zaks and Lipkovich had befriended Lithuanian girls. They visited each other and helped each other with their school work. The Lithuanian girls helped the Jewish girls complete the work that was forbidden during Jewish holidays, also keeping their money for them and carrying their school books.

In Kretingos Street, which was renamed Vytauto Avenue in 1930, lived several rich Jewish families such as the Pozins, Rils, Rostovskis, Rests, as well as Gelerenter, Yudelman, Efroim Izraelovich, Kaplan and others. David Rikhman, a businessman who lived on the market square, had a shoe-making and saddle-making workshop that employed around ten workers, five more worked in his small lemonade factory. On Birutės Street, behind the church and not far off from the cemetery, there lived only one Jew by the name of Khatskel Gamzu. The area is still known as Gamzinė. He was a horse trader. He would buy a good lot of horses, line them up in a column, hire people to ride them to Klaipėda and then ship them over to Holland for sale. He was almost the richest Jew in all of Plungė, which is why he was exiled to Siberia. Olimpija Gricienė, who travelled to exile in the same train wagon as the Gamzu family in June of 1941, later recalled that

A Jewish house on Rietavo Street in the 1930s.

the latter were already old and could not do any heavy lifting in the forests, so they received only a very small ration of food, which was not enough to sustain them. Gamzu had a gold tooth implant, but someone stole it.

Gricienė was a young and strong woman, so she did everything to help the old Gamzus. Gamzu promised Gricienė that he would give her a large shop in return for her kindness when they came back, but, as the irony of fate would have it, virtually all the wealthiest Jews of Plungė died in Siberia of starvation. Locals gossiped about some people who had found buried gold when digging around the Gamzu house, but no one knows whether there was any truth to this.

Vytauto Avenue was home to the lawyer Hirsh Rolnik, doctors Ziv, Robinson and Levin, dentist Leybovich and several merchants. Mayor Barukh David Goldvasser lived on Klaipėdos Street, later renamed Vaižganto Street. In 1931, his house burnt down during the greatest fire in Plungė. The merchant brother of Bere Rolnik, the lawyer, also lived on the market square.

In the centre of Plungė, where J. Tumo-Vaižganto Street begins and rises up the hill, next to the western end of the kroms, the Rest family buried a 500 litre cistern and sold gasoline. At the time, only Berzhonski, Sher and Leonard Olshvang owned trucks, but it was at their request that the first petrol station was erected in the town. A manual pump brought the petrol up from the cistern into two glass containers with taps and from these the gasoline was transferred to the tanks of the trucks.

In Rietavo Street lived many poor Jewish shoemakers, tailors, water carriers, goods carriers and labourers as well as the unemployed and the homeless. A support fund was set up in the town: money collected from wealthy Jews was donated to those who did not have enough to buy certain foods for Sabbath. Rietavo Street was the home of those who were in constant need of support.

Nearby there were several small shops without any signboards. One of them was owned by Shaul Kriger. The window displays contained only a few empty packets of Vilkas, Regata, Safo and Turkas cigars. Theirs colours had faded and they were covered in dust. The shop itself was dark and rarely visited by sunlight. The shopkeeper's living quarters were slightly better. Kriger would know when a customer entered the shop when a bell was triggered by the opening door. This way the shopkeeper did not have to stand all day by his countertop, which was nailed together from a few boards.

Right next to the door stood a barrel of herring with salt-rusted barrel hoops. The residents of Rietavo Street were the principal buyers of this product because this type of fish was a staple of the diet of poorer Jews. If you bought a larger quantity of herring, then the shopkeeper poured you some herring juice as well, which could be eaten with potatoes. The herring could be saved for another meal.

Potatoes with herring, potatoes with herring juice and potatoes with sour milk were the main dishes in the diet of poorer Jews. They would make onion soup (cibulynė) with the herring head and roast the herring wrapped in paper on embers. It was a very delicious dish, I can remember the taste of roasted herring to this day.

Just like in the rest of the town, here you could get your shopping on credit (as the Lithuanians would say „ant bargo"). This meant that you could pay for your groceries when you had the money. Having made your payment, you would be crossed off the grocer's list of debtors.

Jews bought firewood for the winter or for cooking by the cartload in the marketplace. If they did not have enough money, they would only buy it in bundles. Firewood did not come cheaply, but there was no going without it in winter. Poorer Jews received support in this respect as well because the canons of the Jewish faith require its followers to do so.

Jews had their own names for the streets of Plungė. They called Rietavo Street "Bod-gas" (Bathhouse Street) because the public bathhouse had been built there. Vaižganto Street, leading down from the marketplace square in the centre, was known as "Pakalnes-gas" (Downhill Street) and Vytauto Street, where a church stood as did the homes of the town's priests, was called "Kunigishki-gas" (Priest Street). The present-day Laisvės Avenue was known as "Liep-gas" or "Doych-gas" because it was planted with lime trees (liepa: Lith. for lime tree) and previously inhabited by Germans. The present-day S. Neries Street was called "Khazer-gas" because an animal market was located there and pigs ran about freely. They referred to all the other streets by the same names as the Lithuanians did, but they would shorten the word, for example, Paprūdžio Street would become "Papruder", and the name of the town itself, Plungė, would become "Plungyan".

The present-day S. Dariaus ir S. Girėno Street was known as "Mil-gas" (Mill Street) because Khayim Zaks' sawmill

Hirsh Mets. The deputy mayor of Plungė, recently returned from exile in Siberia.

stood there. Later, when a railway was built at the end of the street, it began to be called "Ban-gas" (Railway Street). It can be said that the Jews of Plungė not only came up with the name of the street, but were also the initiators and financiers of the railway itself.

During World War I the Germans had planned to build a railway from Šiauliai through Telšiai, Tverai and Rietavas to the Nemunas River. This was how they planned to transport timber from Lithuania. The memoirs of the former forester Aleksandras Tenisonas of Tverai state that the Germans not only had a railway project designed, they had already deforested the path the railway would take and even built several embankments. However, they lost the war and the project was never completed.

The government of independent Lithuania probably wanted to use it in order to establish a link with Klaipėda. Upon hearing news of this, the businessmen of Plungė immediately realised that the railway, which did not include Plungė in its route, would not only kill their businesses but also any possibilities for the further development of Plungė.

Mayor Barukh David Goldvasser, supported by his deputy Hirsh Mets, began their quest. They even contacted President Antanas Smetona himself and argued that the railway from Telšiai to Klaipėda should be redirected through Plungė and Kretinga. The more so because the town of Bajorai, right in the vicinity of Kretinga, was already linked to a railway built by the Germans. From here you could travel all the way to Liepoja in Latvia.

President Smetona, agreed with their reasoning, but had no intention of changing the course of the railway because the state did not have enough funds to design this new Telšiai-Kretinga segment. Only after Hirsh Mets assured him that the costs would be covered by the businessmen of Plungė did the President give his blessing. According to witnesses, the funds for the project and, it seems, for the bribe to alter it, was collected in Plungė without much difficulty because the benefits of the railway later made up for all their expenses.

Of course, the locals of Rietavas might have been angry with the town of Plungė about the bright future that was snatched away right from under their noses, but they should remember that, in thinking about everyone's welfare, the Jews made the town much more appealing to live in and inviting to many more people.

However, change did not come about quickly. Compared to what it is now, Plungė was then a poverty-stricken town. The most miserable looking place was Rietavo Street, which was built up with crooked wooden houses overgrown with weeds. The small courtyards had a few strips of vegetable garden where the locals grew carrots, onions, garlic, dill, cabbages and, if there was enough land left, potatoes. There was no room for flowers.

This street also housed the Jewish community's public bathhouse. These baths also contained a mikva, a pool for married women to bathe themselves in according to Jewish religious tradition. The greatest numbers of Jews assembled here before festive days. By the entrance to the baths stood a large manually-run pump that drew the water out of a nearby spring. The spring exists to this day, but because locals grew tired of fixing the constantly collapsing street surface, they redirected the spring through pipes passing underneath. The used water from the baths flowed under the

wooden street surface across Rietavo Street, into the fields and into the Babrungas River. The space underneath this wood street covering was a breeding ground for cat-sized rats that frightened both children and adults alike. The rats paid no attention to the people, but they fled and disappeared when the public baths were shut down and no longer produced any dirty water.

The entire Buivydas family worked in the communal baths. The man, wife and three children maintained order in the baths, pumped water into the boilers and the mikva pool as well as taking care of various other jobs. The courtyard of the baths was always full of Jewish children who played there and got into all sorts of trouble all day long.

Many of the Jews living on Rietavo Street kept goats. A goat required far less feed than a cow did and it produced enough milk for the entire family, and even a cup or two for treating a neighbour. A goat was easy to feed. On market days, people would free their goats into the street and they would feed themselves by eating horse feed they found around farmer's carts. When the market day was over, the owners of the goats would carefully gather up the remainders of the horse feed. Farmers also often left hay behind for them, so they could store it for winter. In summer the goats were herded into the field, which was so wet in places that the careless goats often sank into the mud all the way up to their stomachs, and people had to help them

Tauba Ril Bunka with her children Khana, Gene, Avraham, Dina and Jacob in Plungė, 1931.

The Jewish communal baths in Rietavo Street.
Today, this is the junction between Minija and Rietavo Street.

struggle out onto dry land. This field lay between Paprūdžio and Rietavo Street. It has now been cleaned up, with built-in water cleaning equipment, deeper pools of water and several lovely docks.

Yankel Yacob, a man who had come to Plungė from elsewhere, lived on the edge of this field. He spoke with a strange accent. He would buy old, run-down horses that could only be used for meat and sold them to animal farms. He sold the horse skins to furriers. He would have to keep his horses alive and in the field until he found a buyer. But the meadow was an even greater trap for horses than it was for goats. All the more so because the run-down horses no longer had the strength to get themselves out. Upon seeing that the horse could not get out of the quagmire on its own, the owner of the horse would rush to call for help to save the animal into which he had invested his remaining savings. Men would come running over and grab the horse by its tail and its head, stick a pole underneath its belly and try to lift it from both sides. Such a rescue would leave the poor horse standing frightened, helpless and shivering on its weak legs. With tears in his eyes the owner would give heartfelt thanks to all his helpers. Such an event easily burns itself into the memory of a small child.

In winter the water in the meadow froze over and became a skating rink for all the local children. They frolicked about without taking any notice of what courtyard or family anyone belonged to. The greatest problem was acquiring a pair of skates because many families could not afford them. So we crafted wooden skates. We would take a thick piece of wire, nail it to a small block of wood and attach it to our shoes with string. We usually only made one such skate, using the other foot to propel ourselves across the ice. But not everyone had even such makeshift skates at their disposal, so they borrowed them from each other.

Rietavo street snakes downhill from the town centre, so on winter evenings children used to take a sledge with a tow bar steering mechanism, pull it up to the top of the hill, fill the sledge with as many kids as possible and launch themselves downhill. You had to know how to steer well in order to avoid the small house on the way down by turning left. As you pushed back up the hill you had to have a lot of strength, so the boys liked to show off in front of the girls by letting them rest and taking on the strenuous task themselves. About ten to twelve children could fit in the sledge.

The fire in Plungė on 31 March 1931.

Sliding down the hill was both fun and safe because the few cars in Plungė did not drive around in winter and no horse-drawn carts were out on the streets in the evenings.

The children yapped about until late, entertaining themselves on those beautiful winter evenings. We rode about until our parents called us in for dinner: milk soup and buttered bread. Then – off to bed.

Winter evenings in a Jewish household were always interesting. Under the light of the kerosene lamp, the women would sit at the table and pluck goose and duck feathers because the Jewish faith dictated that only they could be used to fill pillows and bedding. The children listened to the tales and Jewish folk songs of the grown-ups. I remember that Stese Pil, who used to help my grandfather bake pretzels, told a story of how she once, on her way to our place, got caught up in walking around in the same place next to her house for several hours until dawn as if some magical force was pushing her about. After such stories, the other children and I became scared to sleep alone or go outside.

Jewish games were different for boys and for girls, but sometimes both joined in. Girls baked mud pies, cooked meals and emulated their mothers in playing with their rag dolls. The boys played football with balls they crafted themselves out of rags and string. When the ball fell apart or the strings came undone, the game took on a silly note. All the children would laugh because it was even more fun. They kicked the ball around until it came completely undone and all the rags went their separate ways. Then a new ball had to be made. Boys also pretended to be goods carriers. They would tie a box, which they pretended was a cart, to a stick, which was the horse. They would sit astride the stick, ride around and sell or trade their goods at the fair. Sweet wrappers served as the principal currency. Other games involved soldiers, buttons, dice and chestnuts.

During the great holidays children went to the Great Synagogue, stood by their parents and listened to the prayers uttered by the adults. On such days the synagogue was crowded with people – even those who failed to visit the house of worship all year round would come on more significant occasions.

On regular days, worshippers prayed three times and read David's psalms at a certain hour in the Little Synagogue right beside the Great one.

The Jewish tradition of charity was perpetuated from the very oldest of times. Wealthy Jews made donations to the poor. Locals had appointed a committee that distributed charitable funds to those who could not afford to buy food for Sabbath or other sacred festivities. The very same committee provided support in the event of illness or unfortunate accidents.

The young people, tradesmen and schoolchildren of Plungė were active in community life, staged plays and organised gegužinė celebrations (springtime jamborees in the woods or fields). In Efroim Izraelovich's hall on Laisvės Avenue, they would organise so-called cabaret evenings with a feast but no alcoholic beverages. Lithuanian youths also liked to participate in the festivities organised by their Jewish counterparts.

In the present-day S. Dariaus ir S. Girėno Street, right across the White Bridge, stood the Lyra cinema building. To make the silent films more entertaining, Borukh Gershke and Kalman Kaplan hid behind the screen and played the melodies of Jewish folk songs on the mandolin and violin.

Many Jews were volunteer fire-fighters. A rumour spread in town that someone was setting buildings on fire, so the locals organised a night-watch in the streets and protected the town from frequent fires. It was mostly the owners of wooden houses that insured their buildings. They could at least except some compensation after such an accident. Bitter experience taught them to be cautious. The greatest fires raged in Plungė in 1894, 1917 and 1931. After the last fire, which started in Rest's wooden house on Vytautas Street, many brick houses were built. Five years later, as Nekhemiya Ril wrote, some streets were barely recognisable. Many brick and wooden houses rose up, and the town began to look a little more attractive and fresh, however, many of the residents were burdened by debt because of the construction work they had paid for with credit.

Not far off from Plungė, in the small forest of Kalniškės, a children's summer camp was set up by the Jewish community. This is where the children of less wealthy Jews spent their summers. Those who were better off rented rooms in the countryside and lived there with their families the whole summer long. Others summered in Palanga. Young people travelled to the latter in order to earn some money over the summer. The forest of Kalniškės was the most visited summer resort among the Jews of Plungė. People took walks, went mushroom and berry gathering.

Jews and Lithuanians had many common interests. Jewish merchants bought flax, horses, grain and other agricultural produce. They would rent gardens and orchards and go there to pick fruit in the summer. Merchants delivered various household and farming wares straight to the villages themselves. Villagers were happy with such an arrangement, as they did not have to waste precious time acquiring necessities during work time. Tailors visited these villages as well, bringing all of their tools with them and sewing clothes for entire families. When they had finished their work at one farmstead, they would move on to the next one. In these villages, Jews with ramshackle carts could be seen buying old clothing and rags up as well as selling various small wares such as buttons, needles, yarn, candles, pills for headaches and more. Jewish artists also travelled to the villages and painted Lithuanian ornaments or other pictures onto dowry chests.

On market days or during fairs, visiting farmers would always have a place to stay in Jewish homes or their courtyards. Upon arriving to go to church, visitors would also drop by Jewish shops to buy fresh pretzels, smoked herring and various souvenirs for their children and other members of their households. They would visit the kroms, where every shopkeeper would invite them to examine their wares, advertise their products and even offer strangers to purchase their wares on credit. The merchants of the kroms would risk losing a few litas in order to establish a good name. If misfortune befell them, Samogitians preferred to turn to their Jewish acquaintances, who never refused to help. Thus even now, the older locals remember how they had limitless trust for the Jews.

In 1940, the Jews of Lithuania lost all of their religious and cultural autonomy. Little by little the Soviet government began to take away everything that kept the Jewish nation alive. They closed down schools and synagogues and banished the Jewish language from public life. All the larger Jewish homes were nationalised, and practically the entire centre of Plungė became state-owned. The government also took over ownership of all shops and their stores. The merchants who had invested their savings into these stores lost all of their money.

On 14 June 1941, six Jewish families from Plungė were deported to Siberia: the families of merchant Khatskel (Khatse) Gamzu, Berel Rolnik, Simon Olshvang, deputy mayor Hirsh Mets and the leader of the militarised Beytar organisation, Itsik Tsivye. Aron Traube was deported from Rietavas.

Some still say that the Jews welcomed the arrival of the new government. However, this could hardly have been the case because all the Jewish businessmen quickly lost everything they and their parents had struggled to create their entire lives, and poorer Jews lost both their religion and the support of their wealthier countrymen. The Jews of Plungė did not have any seats in the new government. At first it was only the tradesmen who could find work – the town's businessmen were left in uncertainty and found it difficult to make ends meet.

The spiritual destruction that began with the first days of Soviet rule was also a huge blow to the Jews. Information about such goings on in Soviet Russia had previously reached Jewish ears. They discussed the news, never fully believing it. In 1940, they experienced the "benefits" of the new order personally, but this was hardly cause to welcome it with joy.

The majority did not even believe any of the talk about the war that was about to erupt or the annihilation of Jews. Only those who retreated to the depths of Russia or spent those long years hiding in the homes of kind-hearted people survived. It is difficult to even imagine what brother and sister Pranas and Julija Gadeikis, the Vitkevičius, Serapinas, Gintalas, Badaukis, Straupa families, Emilja and Pranas Kareiva, Father Taškūnas and many others in the Plungė area hiding Jews went through. After all, no one knew how long the Germans were going to remain in Lithuania. Perhaps decades? Perhaps even centuries? And all this time they would have had to hide these condemned men, women and children or even die along with them. The sacrifice and grit demonstrated by those who rescued Jews was not only incredibly honourable but also the greatest lesson in compassion that humanity has ever had. This lesson is commemorated by the Righteous Among the Nations, the trees planted in their honour at Yad Vashem and the humble Rescuers' Way at the site of mass murders of Jews in Kaušėnai village near Plungė.

The village of Kaušėnai witnessed the mass murder of 1800 Jews from Plungė, and the entire district of Plungė – Laumalenka, Plateliai, Alsėdžiai, Jovaišiškės, Milašaičiai, Šateikiai, Purvaičiai, Vieštovėnai – saw 2236 Jews murdered in total. You cannot hide from the facts: Jews were killed by former neighbours, classmates, even those whose relatives stayed in Jewish homes on market days or during celebrations, those who bought from Jewish stores on credit, those who were cured by my grandfather as well as Jewish doctors and pharmacists. Any reasoning that blames Jews for collaborating with the occupants is unfounded because what kind of blame could one place on a newly born infant, a

A Jewish committee existed in Plungė up to 1940. This picture was taken before 1937, when D. B. Goldvasser departed for South Africa. From the left: (seated) Varshavski, Izraelovich, Shur, Nekhemiya Ril, Hilel Riman, Khatse Gamzu and Leybovich (standing), Gelerenter, Minde, Lipkovich, Mikhel Amolski, Khayim Rest and Shloyme Yitsik Rest.

water carrier, an old lady selling buttons, a tailor or shoemaker, a vagrant or an orphan? All of them wound up in the same hole in the ground, what little money they had was snatched up by the murderers.

The names of those who contributed in one way or another to the murder of the Jews of Plungė are known. These individuals died in Lithuania or abroad. Let their names be left to the investigators of those terrible events. It would be risky to publicise them widely because there is always someone who tries to place the blame on the relatives of the murderers.

Of the Plungė natives who retreated into Russia, 72 men and several women were called to serve in the 16th Lithuanian Division of the Soviet Army. 42 of them died and 8 returned as cripples. Their names are not inscribed on the Wall of Remembrance built in 2011 at the site of the mass murder of Jews in Kaušėnai village. There is only an incomplete list of those who were murdered right at the site, near their homes and those natives of Plungė who were murdered elsewhere. One of these men, Mikhel Rolnik, was a participant in the French Resistance and a member of the antifascist committee. He, along with his colleagues Gabriel Peri and Georges Mitard, was shot by the Germans in 1941.

His brother Hirsh was told of his last living hours by the famous French poet and writer Louis Aragon. According to him, the men demanded that they remove the shackles that bound them together, so the executioners were forced

to rush and bring back the keys. The men died with their eyes open and singing the Marseillaise next to their grave.

Lui Aragon promised Rolnik's relatives in Lithuania to send his remaining documents. The writer fulfilled his promise and sent Mikhel's wife his dying words addressed to her in a letter.

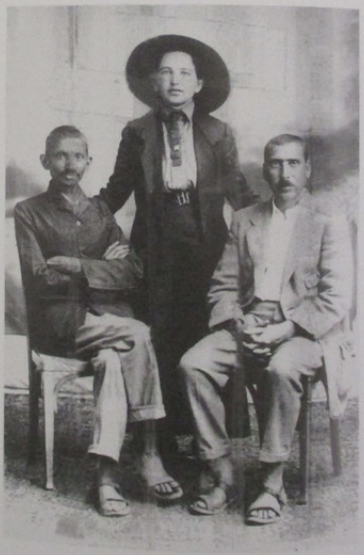
"This evening they came to get us", he wrote several hours before his death, "We will be shot to death at Sante prison tomorrow morning. I believe in dying as I have lived. All the same, it is difficult knowing that you have only a few hours before death and feeling that you are still 33 years old and still have a heart full of joy. Tell my friends that the bullet that pierces my heart will not rip out the ideals I have fought for and been inspired by. I ask for you to remain strong and hold on as a man would. As you experience all of this, find solace in your colleagues, as I have in mine. This I understood a long time ago and I still understand now".

In 1950, as the corpses of the resistance fighters were reburied in the famous Per Lachaise cemetery, Marcel Cachin and Maurice Thorez stood in the front row at the ceremony.

Expatriate Jews from Lithuania are known as litvaks. There are many of them across the world: in America, Africa, England, Canada, Israel, etc. I have counted 28 countries in which the former residents of Plungė and their descendants now live. They visit the homelands of their forefathers and find it difficult to imagine full-blooded Jewish life in a state where there are only a handful of their countrymen left.

In Lithuania, it is not only the memory of those who once inhabited small towns, small homes, lived simple and cosy lives that is fading, but also of those who were well-known throughout the world and even influenced the history

Hermann Kallenbach.



Mahatma Ghandi, Sonia Shlesin, Hermann Kallenbach

of civilization. One such individual was Hermann Kallenbach, born in Žemaičių Naumiestis and raised in Rusnė. Having completed his architectural studies in Germany, he emigrated to South Africa and met the then unknown lawyer of the India Company, Mahatma Gandhi. Kallenbach was inspired by the man's ideas and became one of his most active financial and spiritual supporters. The first popular ashram, a village of love for people from all over the world in search of spiritual peace, harmony with one's own self and one's environment, was built with Kallenbach's money and on land purchased by him. With Kallenbach's financial support, Gandhi was able to delve into his non-violent fight for India's liberation. India's independence from Great Britain lead to the downfall of the colonial system, which shook the entire Western world. Thus Hermann Kallenbach's impact on the history of civilization certainly cannot be called insignificant.

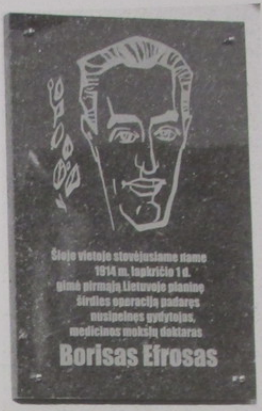
Mahatma Gandhi also worked with his secretary Sonia Shlesin, who was the daughter of Plungė natives. When Gandhi offered her a salary of 25 pounds per week (from the funds donated by Kallenbach), she requested a smaller payment of only 6 pounds and assured him that she wished to work with him because of his ideas and her desire to assist him, and not to earn as much money as possible. Ms. Shlesin lived in South Africa until her death. Having absorbed Gandhi's teachings, she became one of the most well-known educators in the country.

On 1 November 1911, Boris Efros, the first to successfully complete a planned surgical operation of the heart in Lithuania, was born in Plungė. The surgeon had a God-given gift for treating patients and communicating with them. At the beginning of 1960, ruling parties in every capital of the Soviet Union received an order from Moscow that dictated they had to find at least one Jewish doctor to accuse of trouble-making. In Vilnius, they chose Mr. Efros as their scapegoat. Local functionaries actively put together a falsified case, but the chief physician at the Vilnius Red Cross Hospital, Katilius M.D., refused to sign the completely unfounded conclusions of the report. This landed both men in uncertain territory, but they were saved by Stalin's death after which the case was placed in the archives.

The house in which Boris Efros was born has long been gone. In its place on Vytauto Street now stands a multi-storey office building decorated with a plaque in memory of the Doctor. Boris Efros' personal archive was handed over to the Plungė District public library by his wife.

As fate would have it, another medical professional grew up in the house right next to Boris Efro' former home – the world-renowned heart surgeon Rimantas Benetis.

The famous screenwriter, Oscar laureate (awarded for his film "The Pianist") and former president of the England and



Remembrance plaque for Boris Efros.

The first planned heart surgery in Lithuania was performed by Boris Efros of Plungė.

Sir Ronald Harwood with an Oscar, awarded for his screenplay for "The Pianist".

Anthony Sher's roots are in Plungė.

Jonathan Shapiro.

International PEN club, Sir Ronald Harwood (Ronald Horwitz) was born in the Republic of South Africa to Isabelle Peper-Horwitz and Isaac Horwitz from Plungė. Sir Harwood once came to visit his parents' homeland, and now the Tolerance Centre of Saulė Secondary School, under the direction of teacher Danutė Serapinienė, hosts an annual artistic expression competition for the schoolchildren of Samogitia to win the Ronald Harwood Award.

For his contributions to theatre, the Queen of England awarded Ronald Harwood a knighthood. Such a title was also awarded to another Jew with distant roots in the town of Plungė – actor, director, artist and writer Anthony Sher.

Another famous name to have returned to his roots was Jonathan Shapiro. This world-renowned political cartoonist visited his family's homeland with a BBC television crew to film a documentary about his life. His work is so well-recognised that he is often invited to the summit of the leaders of the world's most powerful nations in Davos as a representative of the South African press.

There are many famous litvaks with roots in Plungė and Samogitia. Among them are Nobel prize winners, politicians, actors, artists, philosophers, lawyers and even military leaders. Few know that the Polish national hero, Berek Joselewicz, was born in Kretinga. This cavalryman of the French Legion of Honour was the organiser and leader of the Jewish Cavalry Regiment. Seredžius-born Al Jolson was another bright Hollywood star. The film that told the story of his life was recognised with an Oscar.

The writer and journalist Leon Olshvang was born in Plungė on 3 November 1905 and died in Bonn, Germany on 9 January 1985. "I loved that town and the Babrungas River, where I swam and I fished", he wrote of his home town.

He completed his secondary education at the Saulės Secondary School of Plungė, studied in Kaunas and Germany, went on to work at the Ministry of Finance and later, when Lithuania became a Soviet republic, as an inspector in Kaunas. Just before the war, he was sent off to the Caucasus for a work exchange, however, once the war began he could no longer return home. Like all the other Lithuanian men who were fit for military service and who found themselves beyond the eastern front line, he was drafted into the 16th Lithuanian Division. He returned to Germany as a military officer, injured three times and decorated with two orders and four medals.

Being a useful specialist, Olshvang was not released from the army until the end of the war, but he became a journalist instead of continuing to work in finance. He found employment in Soviet-occupied Germany, however, disappointed with the new order, he retreated to the West. Having worked in the press department of the U.S. diplomatic office up to 1954, he turned to a life of freelance journalism and writing.

As the year 1953 drew to a close, he was caught up in events of the past once again.

For back at the beginning of 1945, in Germany, Olshvang had found two German children curled up by the bed their grandmother lay dead in. Wrapped in rags and riddled with lice, their grandmother's fate was soon to become the children's own. Olshvang carried them to a nearby village and made sure to hand them over to reliable caretakers. The children survived, and eight years later, the German Red Cross located their rescuer. According to Olshvang, his apartment was overrun with journalists who simply could not believe that a Soviet military officer, a Jew – whose mother lay in the mass grave in Kaušėnai village alongside two thousand other Jews of Plungė killed during the first days of the war – could have saved German children.

In February of 1945, Olshvang returned to Plungė for a day, but only found one surviving Jew – Yankel Garb, rescued by prelate Pukis and converted to Catholicism just before the war. Later, in remembering his short visit, he wrote:

"The majority of the Jews in Plungė were simple tradesmen: blacksmiths, masons, window makers, furriers, saddlers, shoemakers, builders, tailors, carriers, water carriers and loaders. The Jews of Plungė were hard-working, honest and God-fearing people. Every morning, I would see the tall brothers Aranovich heading for the synagogue. After that they would spend the rest of the day working by the anvil. I often brought horses to them for shoeing.

In this small Lithuanian town of Plungė, I came into the world..."

In 1938, Leon Olshvang married Juzefa Asauskaitė, a woman he had known since childhood and in whose name a tree of remembrance was planted in Yad Vashem for helping Jews during the war.

In recent years, many descendants of the Jews of Plungė have returned to the motherland of their forefathers. First, they bow down to the innocent victims of war and say Kaddish – the prayer for the dead. Only in their worst nightmares could they imagine what had happened in Plungė in the months of June and July of 1941.

Eliya Broyde and his wife Ivona made the trip to Plungė from England. His parents had emigrated from there to South Africa in 1932. Anetta Goldvasser, from the US, and her brother Harry, from Zimbabwe, visited Plungė – their father, Barukh David Goldvasser, was the first and longest-serving mayor of the town. In 1937, their entire family emigrated to South Africa. A visit to Plungė was also made by the artist, writer and actor of the English Royal Theatre, Anthony Sher, whose grandfather's house still stands on S. Dariaus ir S. Girėno Street.

In Plungė, the home town of their grandparents, they would all visit the old Jewish cemetery, where the Senamiestis Secondary School now stands. Many find the surnames of their forefathers on the old gravestones looming beneath the school windows. They place small stones on the memorials at the site of the mass grave in Kaušėnai and return to those terrible summer days in 1941...

On June 22 of that year, a Sunday, we were awakened in the night. We were sleepy and did not understand what was going on. People were shouting outside. Not knowing what to do, they gathered in the street and conferred with each other, hearing out everyone's opinions. One Jew who had rushed over from Kretinga suddenly appeared. He claimed to know what awaited the Jewish community and advised everyone to leave as fast as possible if the Russian army were to fold under German pressure. A few Jews who had just fled Poland also appeared. They spoke of the way Hitler's people treated the Jews.

Meanwhile, a German plane flew over the people gathered by the Jewish cemetery. Upon seeing the large crowd, the pilot let a few rounds loose from his machine gun. Of course, he could not have known who had gathered here or why, but those bullets helped many of those who were in doubt make the decision to flee. Apart from this, white-bands had appeared in the Jewish quarter and it became clear that they were ready to kill.

On Monday, Jews began to flee from Plungė in droves. Some with children in their arms, some almost running in the direction of Telšiai. Those who had horses could bring more food and their belongings with them as well as sit their children and grandparents into their carts. Others could only take what they could carry.

The road to Telšiai was crowded with refugees pushed ahead by a retreating army. Sensing danger, they travelled as fast as their strength allowed them, pushing away from the soldiers fighting the German onslaught.

Some of these fleeing Jews became victims along the way. A group of young Jews was stopped by Red Army men not far off from Lieplaukė. The soldiers searched them for weapons. The young men tried to explain that they were retreating away from the Germans into the depths of Russia. The Red Army men pointed at a murdered soldier and

insisted that this was the work of civilians. They searched us thoroughly and found a Russian grenade in our friend Rachmilke's pocket He worked at an arms repair shop in Plungė, on Telšių Street, in the building that used to be a vodka store. Our friend explained that he had taken the grenade to protect us from white-bands. The leader of Red Army men would not have any of it. He yelled out that the whole group should be shot. We knew very little Russian and we could not explain that the Germans wanted to destroy us and the Soviet army was actually saving us, giving us no reason to harm their soldiers. After briefly conferring amongst themselves, they took our friend aside into the woods and shot him, commanding the rest of us to disappear.

It was incredibly frightening when German planes appeared above our heads. Though the pilots only saw a crowd of unarmed civilians, they attacked it with long rounds of machine-gun fire. Such air raids left many injured and dead by the roadside.

The moment they heard the sound of an oncoming plane, everyone started to scamper about, jumping into ditches, covering their children with their own bodies, running for the woods and hiding until the raid was over. The noise was horrendous: machine-gun fire sounded as children and adults cried out and screamed. Families got separated during the fray and, when the planes flew off, they would shout out each other's names, hoping someone would reply.

The terrible images of that journey still play out before my eyes. I saw a girl shot down by a bullet, about four years old, her mother standing by with her remaining two children as if struck by lightning, not knowing what to do. Another mother lay with her dead child in her arms. She did not want to let go, but she had to save herself and her remaining children.

The entire road out of Lithuania was full of sights like these. The situation was tragic. Nobody knew whether they or their close ones would be arrested along the way by white-bands, which is what happened to the Glikmans. Fortunately, one of the white-bands knew the family and persuaded his cronies to let them drive on in their cart.

The road was littered with belongings that people had dropped because they could no longer carry them. Only one objective remained – survival.

Of the Jews who had lived in Plungė, only about 10 percent managed to survive by fleeing to the East. Those who remained in Plungė and its surrounding villages were violently murdered. Only their homes and their looted belongings remained.

As I returned after the war, in 1948, I began to search for witnesses of this terrible tragedy because people all over the world had to know what happened to the Jews during World War II. People I knew well told me stories of how the Jews were killed in Plungė.

The Germans entered the town in the early morning of June 24. Up to that moment, local fascists and anti-Semites had already started persecuting Jews. Later they became the first to help the Germans torture and kill them. All of the Jews who had stayed behind in Plungė were rounded up and locked up in the synagogues. There, where the Jews used to pray to the God that betrayed them.

Only one Jew, Yankel Garb, was left behind in Plungė. He had married a Samogitian woman and converted to the Catholic faith. However, he too was shut inside the synagogue to await his death alongside his children. His wife begged Father Povilas Pukis to save her husband, who had been christened as Jonas, and a miracle occurred: Yankel Garb and his children were released.

He told me of those miserable days spent in captivity. Locked in the synagogue, they received neither food nor water. Children screamed, noises and cries sounded from every corner. There was no air to breathe. Later, the space became filled with a great stench because no one was allowed outside. Many died of starvation and thirst. In their agony they knocked upon the doors and begged for water. The guards reacted to this with gunfire, which killed several people. Fearful, the people stopped banging on the doors and windows. Several people lost their minds from being kept with corpses, and Ida Sher gave birth to a child in such conditions. She was later shot in Kaušėnai with this child still in her arms.

Stasė Baraunkienė lived next to the synagogue, so she saw what went on in the courtyard of the house of worship. The Germans had built a fence around it, so that the locals would not be able to get any food or water to the prisoners. Those who tried to throw something edible over the fence were met with threats that they would be thrown in with the Jews themselves.

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The executioners forced the Jews to dig a hole in the ground into which they threw all of their holy books and lit them afire. They made photographer Mendel Berkovich stoke the fire. They pushed him nearer and nearer to the flames and taunted him. Later, they brought blacksmith Ore Gilis and his son Berke out to the courtyard. The Germans needed them, so they were never thrown inside with the rest, but the pair were then accused of trying to start a fire in the town, so that the other Jews could escape from the synagogue. The soldiers burned a house down in Rietavo Street to make their story more convincing. This was an obvious falsehood meant to turn the Samogitians against the Jews and at least partially justify their cruelty as well as to poke fun at the victims. A white-band ordered the Gilis men to walk around the burning fire while he slashed at them with a whip. When the men fell to the ground because they had no more strength left, the executioners kicked them around, then shot them and threw them into the fire.

However, the spectacle did not end there. The white-bands brought two Lithuanian women with them. One had been dating a young Jewish man before the war and the other was the wife of a Soviet military officer. They forced them to kiss and caress the corpses and sigh about how the deceased had been their best friends. They led several old Jews out of the synagogue, intentionally picking men of very different heights and making them carry a heavy log around the fire on their shoulders. The run-down and tortured men crawled on their knees and stumbled, and the white-bands just stood around and laughed. They beat some with sticks for not carrying the entire log on their shoulders and trying to keep it from falling with their hands. Others got beaten for moving too slowly. They brought out a group of women from the synagogue and forced them to watch the old people and their suffering. One woman who had lost her mind ran up to the old folks and tried to help them. She then began to attack the killers, push them around. At first the white-bands laughed, but then, having seen that they would not get rid of her easily, one drew a gun out and shot her.

Soon after this, an order was issued to destroy all the Jews in the synagogue. Aleksandras Pakalniškis, who was in Plungė at the time, wrote in his book, Through the Twentieth Century (Chicago, 1995, p. 119):

"The night from the 12th to the 13th, all of the Jews in Plungė were murdered, including women and children. Before that, they had been locked up in their houses of worship, and every evening they were led out in groups, transported to the woods and shot...

Up to the beginning of this massacre, I had been working for a few days in the office of the commandant of Plungė. The commandant was one Captain Noreika. There were several Lithuanian military officers there... They had announced the mobilisation of young men in the district of Plungė, so they had a substantial troop of armed men at their disposal. Only two miserable-looking German soldiers stood guard in Plungė at the time. One of those soldiers came into the commandant's office and, quaking slightly out of nervousness, asked the commandant:

"What do you intend to do with those Jews locked up in the synagogue?"

"I already gave the order to shoot every one of them", replied the Lithuanian commandant, Captain Noreika. He was standing up out of respect for that miserable little German.

When I saw that first group of Jews being herded to their death through the still-smoking embers, I was so frightened and moved that I grabbed my bicycle and rushed out of Plungė as fast as I could..."

Witnesses recalled how the Jews who could still walk were driven out on foot along Vytauto Street, past the church, behind the factory and up to the Kaušėnai woods. The cripples with no remaining strength, the old people and the children were thrown into a truck and taken straight to the site. Everyone knew the paralysed Brik, who lived in Rietavo Street near the market square, because he had sold all types of flour. The entire street echoed with cries and wails as they saw him thrown into the truck. The killers paid no attention to the wails and screams. It was a sad procession to destruction that wound down the main street. People stood on the sidewalks and watched the half-dead victims proceed: women with small children in their arms and old people who could scarcely drag their legs, supporting each other as they went along. Those who began to falter were thrown into trucks and driven away. The locals watched the column snake on, some with compassion in their eyes and some with fear. Others walked away from the sight, not being able to watch when they could do nothing to help the condemned. Among them walked Ida Sher, who had just given birth, propped up by her husband. The grave pit was waiting for them too...

It had been dug by forty men who had been driven out earlier. That was where the Jews were headed, taken from their sacred synagogue, where they used to pray three times a day to their God. But that God had abandoned them...

The executioners were already waiting for them on the road to the Kaušėnai woods. Alongside the road, next to an old cross, a box of vodka and some morsels of food were prepared for the men, though most of them were already drunk. Vodka was their constant companion throughout the entire massacre.

Juozas Mineikis, a teenager who had accidentally wandered into the site of the mass murders, had to crouch down hiding and witness everything that happened, as he could not walk away unnoticed. After the war, he spoke of what he had seen, still twitching from the horror of it all. The first Jews who were brought over started screaming horrifically when they saw the pits and realised what was waiting for them. Children cried, the executioners swore and shot at those who tried to escape. They threw whoever they shot down into the pit. Most of them had only been injured, but they too landed at the bottom of the mass grave. They herded whole families towards the pit. They fell arm in arm as the bullets hit them. Small children were ripped away from their mothers by their arms and legs. The executioners smashed the toddlers' heads into tree trunks as their mothers watched on – they did not want to waste any bullets on infants. Then they shot the mothers as well. An old Jew stood with his arms raised up towards the sky, making his last request to God. Mothers covered their children with their bodies, as if hoping to protect them.

A prayer by the schoolgirls' graves in Kaušėnai.

Alley commemorating the rescuers of Jews at the Kaušėnai Memorial.

Once the first group had been shot, they brought out a second. New executioners arrived on the scene as well, also drunk. Those who had executed their gruesome duty proceeded to the place where the vodka had been prepared. By the pit, the whole process began anew. It was a rare occasion when the drunk executioners fired a deadly bullet, so many Jews were just injured, but they were thrown into the pit and covered with a thin layer of sand as well. The pile in the pit was bloody and still moving. The second group was thrown straight on top of the first one – nobody bothered to shoot those who were still stirring.

Among the victims was a half-witted Jew by the nickname of Leybenbeyn. The executioners promised to keep him alive if he helped them drag those who had been shot near the edge of the pit into the mass grave. When he had finished

his work, he was the last Jew standing. He sat down on the edge of the pit and stared at the bodies of his compatriots, swinging from side to side. As a bullet hit him in the back of the head, he too slid into the grave along with his fellow Jews. Thus the last Jew in Kaušėnai was murdered.

There is no knowing the exact number of individuals killed in Kaušėnai, but considering how many Jews had lived in Plungė before the war and how many were left, one could estimate that about 1800 bodies are buried underneath the Kaušėnai memorial. Nine oak sculptures stand in their memory in those very same woods. Some of them were created according to eye-witness accounts.

Witnesses recalled that once there was no one left to cover up the last pit, the commanding officer, Pabrėža, knowing that there would not be any volunteers for such a job, arrived at the church after a service, assembled ten men and transported them to Kaušėnai by force. Among these men was Antanas Zabitis, who spoke of the bloodcurdling sight he had witnessed with tears in his eyes. The men saw women holding children with smashed up heads in their arms. Some were naked because the killers had taken all the better clothing. Once they had completed the job, the men were brought back to Plungė. Upon his return home, Zabitis could neither eat nor sleep for several days.

Stasė Zaikauskienė, who lived nearby the Kaušėnai wood, recalled that the hands and clothes of the executioners who had passed through her courtyard had been bloodied. They boasted loudly about how many victims each one had killed.

They washed their hands in a pond and soaked the bloody clothing they had taken from the women in the water. Perhaps they were bringing them home to their wives and daughters. The water in the pond turned red from all the blood.

In the first grave, just at the top of the stairs leading to the memorial, lie 84 schoolgirls. Right when they arrived, the executioners promised to keep them alive if they converted to Catholicism and were christened. In the face of death, many of them agreed, so Father Lygnugaris was rushed to the pit from Plungė. It seems he also believed their promise. The priest performed the christening rites then and there, by the edge of the pit, but just as the ceremony was over, the executioners declared that now there would be more Catholics in heaven and proceeded to drive the girls right to the edge of the pit. Irlecke Tšin, who still had some remaining strength, began to strangle one of the drunk men, but another executioner hit her with the butt of his gun. Several of them pushed her into the grave and shot her.

The chief of operations at the massacre, Pabrėža, was last traced back to Australia in 1988. There he lived under a different name, but the Australian government refused to hand him over to Lithuania.

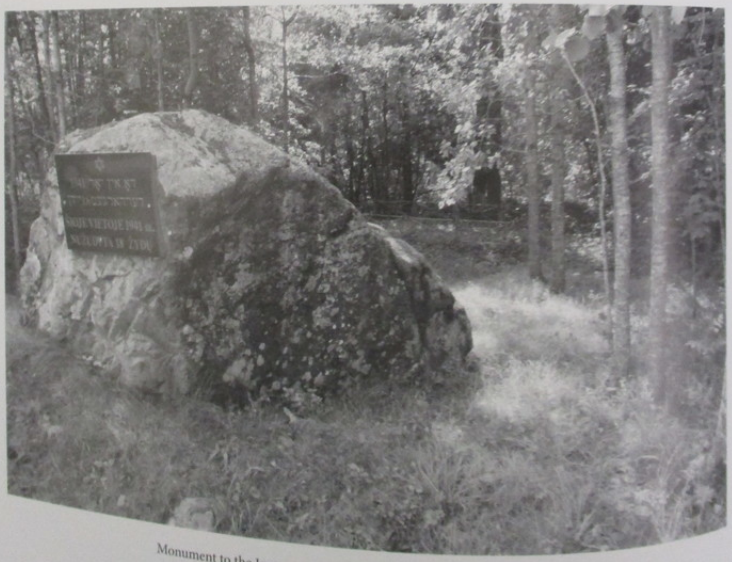
Antanas Grišmanauskas, a villager who lived in the vicinity of the Kalniškės woods, also witnessed Pabrėža's wrongdoings. According to him, on the last days of July, Pabrėža and several white-bands led four Jewish girls across his yard.

Site of the mass grave of the Plungian Jews in Milašaičiai.

Grišmanauskas recognised one of the girls – Tsipora Kesel, who had lived with her parents in Telšių Street. As they passed him, the girls asked for water, their eyes begging for help. But what could the man do? Only the dog tore at its chain and barked madly, as if it could frighten away these bad people, if only it were cut loose. But they shot the dog and marched onwards. After three or four hours, several gunshots were fired. The murderers returned drunk and instructed Grišmanauskas to bury the bodies. The farmer was horrified to see what they had done to the girls before killing them, what they had gone through in the final hours of their lives. Empty vodka bottles and leftovers lay on their naked chests, their bodies were covered in blood and had been slashed open in places. Crying from the horror and sorrow of it all, Grišmanauskas buried them there, in the woods. Later their bodies were exhumed and buried in Kaušėnai.

Right next to the synagogue lived a poor Jew by the name of Shloyme Ber. He and his business partner Kazimieras Pumpius used to buy up livestock intestines, clean them and sell them to sausage manufacturers. During the first days of the war, when the Germans had not yet entered Plungė, several white-bands came to his yard and ordered the Lithuanian to force a live bird down his friend's throat. With shaking hands the Lithuanian forced the bird into his unfortunate friend's mouth in order to save both of their lives, but his friend did not give up easily. For the half-witted torturers, this served as great entertainment.

The executioners came up with many similar and even more horrendous ways to entertain themselves. The white-bands brought around a hundred young women from Salantai and the surrounding villages to the woods beyond Šateikiai for the Germans and their accomplices to have a bit of fun with. They held and raped them there for an entire week. People heard the drunk yells of the men and the wails and cries of the women. When the orgies were over, they took them further off to the woods and shot them.



Monument to the Jews murdered in Klausgalviai (Kretinga district).

The forest near Milašaičiai village is the site of another mass grave in which 60 strong young Jewish men are buried. They were selected as a separate group from the synagogue so they would not cause any trouble when the rest of the Jews were destroyed. Even though the men were brought to Milašaičiai with their hands bound, they still managed to put up some resistance. The people who lived in the surrounding areas spoke of yells, single shots fired and the sound of fighting. Many of the Germans and their cohorts returned from the woods bloody and bandaged. All of them were drunk. One or two even tried to sing a melody.

A total of 2234 Jews were murdered in the present-day district of Plungė (including the towns of Kaušėnai, Šateikiai, Plateliai, Vieštovėnai, Milašaičiai, Jovaišiškės, Purvaičiai, Alsėdžiai). A resident of the town of Ylakiai, Stefa Druskinienė, recalled seeing white-bands bringing Jewish families – men, women, children and the old – to Arlauskas' farmstead in Žerniai village in a two-horse cart two times. She believes that the executioners searched about 30 people at the farmstead, confiscated their belongings and later killed them in a pinewood a few kilometres further off in the direction of Žemaičių Kalvarija. However, this site, located somewhere around the Mažeikiai-Tauragė road constructed in 1972, was never found.

There are so many Jewish mass graves scattered across Samogitia and the whole of Lithuania that it seems the entire country is one large Jewish cemetery. Wherever you go, you can always see the signs indicating the resting places of the victims of genocide.

Teodoras Derkintis, a native of Kretinga who later lived in Plungė, told the story of how executioners humiliated and later dealt with the Jews of Kretinga. The Jews were forced to crawl over rough gravel, driven to a burning fire and accused of arson, herded through a marsh, where their feet were sank in the quagmire. The helpless men and women dragged each other out, just so the fallen would not be whipped and killed. Later they were all led a few kilometres away from Kretinga in the direction of Palanga and shot in the woods of Kveciai. Along with the unfortunate Jews, 23 Samogitians were also killed, but no one knows why. Perhaps they had tried to defend the suffering Jews? Such a theory rests on the fact that among those 23 Samogitians was Stasys Gendvilas, a simple farmer who had no affiliations with either one or the other side. In 2011, his grandson Vidmantas and the Jacob Bunka Charity and Support Fund erected a memorial sculpture by Antanas Vaškys near the site of the massacre in memory of the victims. It is clearly visible to those driving from Kretinga to Palanga.

A former teacher in Rietavas organised a vigilante group that took it upon itself to kill Jews and those who had cooperated with the Soviet government. Their first victims were the rabbi of Rietavas, Samuel Fundiler, and Aba Rabinovich, a butcher. Having murdered the pair, the executioners buried their corpses nearby, next to the chapel of the Oginskis family. In July, the Jewish men of Rietavas were killed in Rainiai, near the town of Telšiai. At first the women and children were kept in Geruliai (beyond Telšiai in the direction of Šiauliai), later they were shot along with Jews from other areas and buried in a mass grave.

In July of 1941, in Salantai, the accomplices of the Germans came together to form a squad. They called themselves partisans. In December of the same year, they declared that not a single Jew was left in Salantai and its environs. This was not true. Born in the village of Šalynas in Kulupėnai township, Base Abelman and the other Jews of Salantai were shut inside their synagogue. Some Jews were brought out to do work. Base found herself under the supervision of farmer Pranas Kasperavičius. Four weeks later, Kasperavičius received the order to bring the labourers to the Šalynas manor house. Upon arrival, Base realised the fate that awaited her and secretly returned to Pranas Kasperavičius' farm, where he protected her for three years.

An eye-witness account of the massacre of the Salantai Jews was provided by a junior officer of the Lithuanian Army from Virškai village in the district of Plungė. He was offered the job of commanding the executioner team and organising the destruction of Jews by the commander of the township police. According to the junior officer, the commander received an order to compile a list of able-bodied Jews. Later, two trucks with SS men from Kretinga and an execution squad arrived. The Germans selected about 40 Jewish men, gave them shovels and brought them to the village of Žvainiai. Not far off from the Jewish cemetery, they were given the instruction to dig a ditch. When they had finished digging, those wearing better clothes were undressed, and all were led to the ditch they had just dug for themselves and shot. After that, several other groups of Jews were brought to the location and shot as well. A total of 405 Jewish men, women and children from Salantai lie in the mass grave at Žvainiai.

Once the war started, the Jews of Mosėdis were rounded up in a small synagogue within a few days. The people did not have any food or water, there was not enough air and not enough room to stand. The children and the old Jews suffered the most. The executioners beat them and bullied them, forcing them to dig shit with their bare hands. Young girls were raped. On Sunday, when most people went to church, the old Jews were forced to run a race. Those who ran easily were beaten with a stick or whipped.

Žabinskienė of Mosėdis and her daughter saw a young girl beg the executioners to kill her and her parents as quickly as possible, so that they could end their unbearable suffering.

Esther Milner, born and raised in Mosėdis, returned from Israel to her native town right after the end of the war. She found two women, a mother and daughter she knew, living in her house. They told her about the atrocities that were committed in the town on those terrible days. With pain in her heart the woman confessed that her son, who she had disowned, participated in the murders of Jews not only in Lithuania but in Warsaw as well.

The Jews of Mosėdis were kept inside the synagogue for almost a week. No one knows why Leyzer Hodes and Yankel Kats were chosen to be tied to a cart and whipped all the way to Skuodas. There, they were killed with all the other locals, and the remaining 125 Jews in Mosėdis were taken to Kretinga and shot with the locals as well. The woman told Milner about the moment she saw her own mother in the condemned procession of Jews heading towards Kretinga to be shot. She looked tortured, weak and hardly recognizable.

In the late fall of 1944, a Jew from Mosėdis demobilised from the 16th Lithuanian Division, returned to his homeland and visited the mass grave of his countrymen in Kretinga. There were many objects lying around the grave. He found his sister's documents among them and handed the papers over to the Alka Museum in Telšiai. He also found some witnesses who told him stories of the tragedy.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Milner was told by two Mosėdis locals, Baltinaitė and Galdikas, that the worst tales were to be heard about murdered children. According to them, witnesses saw how Esther Hodes tried to protect her two children from the bullets with her own body, but fell into the pit along with them.

It took a long time to make the memorial for the Jews of Plungė killed on 15-18 July 1941, not far off from Plungė, in the village of Kaušėnai.

The Jews returning home after the war found the Kaušėnai grave had been dug up in places. Someone had probably decided to look for golden teeth among the corpses. Several years later, the pits were framed with concrete walls, and the Jews collected enough donations to build a memorial in 1952 with inscriptions in Lithuanian, Jewish and Russian. This was probably the first memorial in Lithuania to note the murder of Jews and not just "Soviet citizens".

I had promised myself to immortalize the memory of the murdered victims. This promise and my patriotism were the main reasons I did not emigrate to Israel with my family.

In 1976, the chairman of the Šateikiai district Juozas Valauskas suggested that it would be good to create some kind of memorial sign to commemorate the Jewish women of Salantai, who were murdered near Šateikiai. Aside from this, the recently deceased Juozas Būda, a native of Salantai who later lived in Kaunas, asserted that his father Jurgis was shot along with the Jews of Salantai. He was a blacksmith, a cultured man and a book smuggler with a sharp tongue and a mind of his own. Every opportunity he got he would use to declare his views about the church and its servants. Jurgis' grandson Darius had heard it said, that Mr. Būda was ratted out to the Germans and the local white-bands by the local priest, so Jurgis Būda's death was also partially his own sin.

Juozas Valauskas' request cropped up at just the right moment because a creative workshop for the woodworkers of Lithuania, organised by Minija, a company that manufactured folk art pieces, was happening at the same time. I received the approval of the company director Vytautas Šlekonis and created a sculpture of a man with bound hands, measuring 4 metres in height. The district municipality set it up almost in secret, though they insisted that they liked the sculpture.

Encouraged by such feedback, I found an oak log and, in 1986, sculpted a piece depicting a family called "Born to Live". When I completed the sculpture I called the chairman of the district executive committee, Mr. Vindašius, to inform him that I would like to set it up in Kaušėnai. To my great surprise, he immediately got into his car and drove over to see the future memorial with his own eyes. Once he had seen it, he insisted that it should be brought to Kaušėnai.

added that there could be many more such sculptures at the site and promised the support of the local government.

That was the beginning of the Kaušėnai memorial site. Now, sculptures by Edvardas Riauba, Vladas Stumbras, Jonas Kuodis, Leonardas Černiauskas, Augustas Žalgiris, Titas Bikinas and Saulius Ambraška remind us all of the tragedy that unfolded here some time ago. In 2011, the names of the murdered victims were inscribed on the Wall of Remembrance, which was built out of the bricks of the demolished Great Synagogue in Plungė. Unfortunately, many names are still missing, evaporated into oblivion. Despite this, on every third Sunday of July, people assemble here to mourn for all of the lost souls.

Standing in front of the graves covered in flowers, you start thinking about everything that once happened and even shiver when you realise that many of those gathered at Kaušėnai might not have even been born. No one would even have known that a dark-haired and brown-eyed boy or girl would enter the world, holding on to a bundle of red flowers in their hand, much like a few drops of blood. The man with the greying hair and the woman holding a grandchild close might not have been born either if their parents or grandparents had not left their home towns in 1941. Those who remained in their homelands were buried in Kaušėnai, resting in peace forever. This place became the burial ground for around half of Plungė's population at the time. No one will ever know what the schoolgirls felt as they stood at the edge of the gaping hole in the ground, what the mothers cried to their children as they said goodbye in their blood-curdling screams, the curses the old people yelled at the killers, and the eyes with which infants watched the oncoming trunk of a tree, for the killers did not want to waste bullets on them and smashed their heads in as they held them by their legs. The fir trees atop the Kaušėnai hill still sob, remembering the last blow of each baby's head. The Lithuanian oak will sound with an eternal cry, having absorbed the lamentation of the Jewish nation through its roots. As many as 2234 innocent Jews from Plungė and its environs lie murdered in Kaušėnai, Šateikiai, Laumalenka, Vieštovėnai, Milašaičiai, Jovaišiškė, Alsėdžiai, Plateliai, Purvaičiai and Tverai. These are sacred sites... They are sacred remembrance of the fact that memory is more durable than metal. The names of innocent victims can be heard in the lines of poems, during simple conversations and when breaking bread at the table. This page of Jewish history has not yet been turned.

But in 1941, one could only have sensed that such a tragedy was on its way. The mind briskly waved any such thoughts away. The more so because surviving was more important...

It was already quite cold when we arrived in cattle cars to the Novosibirsk station. The journey to Siberia was very difficult, we often had to starve. Families, loners and those who had lost their

Memorial to those killed in 1941 in the Kveciai woods.
To the Jews of Kretinga and 23 Samogitians.

Memorial to Samuel Fundiler and Aba Rabinovich in Rietavas.

close ones on the way over rode in the very same overcrowded cattle cars. The moment the train stopped everyone would jump out of the train like fleas on either side of the embankment, but no one ever dared move too far away, for nobody knew when it would start moving again. If you did not clamber back on in time, then you would be left alone. If no one in the wagon reached their hand out and help you climb up, then you would also be left behind. Living as refugees, we stopped being embarrassed in the face of each other's daily needs. We began to truly see our neighbours and to take care of them. We knew that, if need be, they would also take care of us.

Children and the old and infirm huddled on the haphazardly nailed together boards. Those who were healthy and young sat on the floor, back to back. The lack of space meant that lying down was almost a luxury. In order to take up as little space as possible, people huddled together when they slept.

We boarded the train in Pechora, about 500 kilometres away from Plungė. We travelled that distance on foot. Sometimes those who were tired would be picked up by kind-hearted souls travelling by horse-drawn cart. We clambered into the cattle car without anything on us. What belongings we had taken from home we had eaten or traded for food a long time ago. Those who had left home before the German front had caught up with them were better prepared for the trip. They sometimes shared what they had with their fellow travellers. Russian women gladly traded jewellery, watches and better pieces of clothing for bread and bacon.

The train to the East was a real blessing because sometimes refugees were given some sort of soup at the stations, there were hot and cold water taps. Risking being left behind by the train, children went to beg. Usually, other refugees helped us when they found out that we had only left our home on the second day war broke out and had not had time to prepare for the journey. The stations were full of such refugees.

Their train echelons often had to be stopped for long periods of time in order to let trains that were heading for the front pass. It took us about two months to travel 3500 kilometres to Novosibirsk. And though it was slow to operate,

The Glikman family in Plungė, ~1936.

there actually was some sort of system in place to deal with the fleeing refugees. We were transported from Novosibirsk to the Bolotnoj district, where six families removed from the train. For the others the journey continued. We lived in absolute uncertainty for several weeks. We had been left to our own devices and did what we could. It was a great success if we could find any potato peels. Washed and roasted on hot bricks they were a real treat.

We were tormented by hunger and uncertainty. As we spoke no Russian, we could not find out what kind of fate awaited us. Our clothes were torn, we were overgrown with hair and our shoes were full of holes. We kept getting into sketchy situations. Then one day it seemed somebody remembered us and gave us some money. We would go to the canteen. It was bread that we wanted to purchase the most, but they did not sell it without any soup. And if you bought soup, you only got 100 grams of bread. That piece of bread looked very meagre. I remember feeling that stuffing myself with bread until I was full would have been the greatest dream come true.

From the very beginning of my life as a refugee, my hair had grown past my shoulders. It was a mystery how our clothes still held together because our shoes were so full of holes that we had to line them with newspaper. The militia saw me looking like this, so they brought me in to their department. I could not find a way to explain who I was. I could only repeat the phrase "evacuation, Lithuania" in both Lithuanian and in Jewish The militiamen conferred for a short while, signalled for me to wait and then sat me down on a bench. About an hour later, a civilian came and indicated with his hands that I should take him where we lived.

A few days later, labourers from a collective farm about 30 kilometres away came to get us by sledge. To this day I cannot understand how the adults were able to explain to them that we did not want to separate from our relatives, which is why they took us to different locations as family units. Thus my family and a few other relatives ended up on a collective farm. The people took us in with kindness and compassion. They saw that we had left behind our homeland and all of our belongings just to survive.

There were several exiles from Ukraine and Russia with similar stories. Most of them called themselves chaldons. We were very fortunate to have landed there. The collective farm had only been established in 1936, so the people were quite well off.

Fresh arrivals were accommodated in the school. It was warm and cosy, and the locals started bringing us milk, cheese, bread and even eggs. The smaller children did not know what to grab first, so they began stuffing themselves with everything their hands came across. They had to be restrained, so that they would not overeat and become ill after such a long period of starvation. The local women watched us with tears in their eyes.

An older but still sturdy man from Ukraine accommodated us at his place. Here he had 45 hectares of land. As a kulak (derogatory term for a relatively wealthy farmer – T. N.) he had been deported to Siberia from his homeland. He lived with his daughter-in-law and four grandchildren in a good house and he gave the sauna over to us. The space was very small for six people, but it was a roof over our heads, so we were grateful. My younger brother and sisters slept on the stove. It was warm and cosy for them. A wide bench served as a bed for my parents, and I slept on a small table with a piece of firewood for a pillow.

It was not long before my father and I found employment. We fed horses and took care of them at night. During the day the horses worked, and my father and I rested. I really liked working with horses that I had never seen before in Lithuania. They were long-haired and looked like mammoths. They were not afraid of even the greatest cold. That winter it reached 52 degrees below zero, and the horses stood glistening with frost under their ramshackle roof. My father and I were given fur coats and felt boots, so the cold did not trouble us or the horses too much.

There was a shop on the farm where the exiles could buy food. We began to live relatively normal lives, or at least as much as this is possible in war time. We had enough firewood, but we needed a lot. Sometimes we were lent a horse and sledge, so we collected dry wood and fallen trees in the taiga nearby. However, most times we had to pull the sledge ourselves because the fire had to be kept going 24 hours a day, and our stores of wood disappeared very quickly. At least it was warm. We would sit down to eat around my "bed". We placed one bowl of soup in the middle and each one of us spooned the liquid into our mouths with our own individual spoons, holding a slice of bread underneath them to catch any stray drops. I can still remember that almost sacred ritual and the taste of a bit of bacon or meat found in a spoonful of soup.

In the summer, the children went out to gather Cedar nuts, berries and mushrooms in the taiga. Small red apples also grew in the forest. We called them sibiriniai ("Siberian ones"). They would carry the goodies the 20 kilometres to town and sell them.

My 12-year-old sister Hena had only seen a spinning wheel in Lithuania, but in Siberia she quickly learned to spin yarn out of wool and flax. She then exchanged everything for food.

My uncle Zelik Ril, his father-in-law Froyim Fish, Eliya Glikman and Orke Hirzon and their families lived in collective farms close by. Single Jews Tsipora Blinder, Sheyne-Zune Olshvang and Ruvel Dimont also lived here. Ruvel and I often went to earn some additional money by chopping firewood because what we earned on the farm was only enough to buy food and we had to replace our completely worn-down clothes.

Eliya Glikman and his younger son Leyb were taken to the so-called labour front, but the conditions were so inhumane that they quickly became ill and came back. The youngest Glikman died.

In the summer of 1942, life in Siberia became easier. Our mother worked on the farm and my siblings earned money by selling goods from the forest. The men who had not yet been drafted into the army worked on the collective farm and did quite well compared to those Jews who had retreated to the southern regions of the Soviet Union. During a bomb raid we had been separated from our sister Dina. She and her husband, a refugee from Poland, ended up in Tashkent. Many refugees fled to the south thinking that survival would be easier in warmer climates. However, epidemics, lack of accommodation, food, employment and income made it much harder. When the refugees no longer had what to exchange for food, they died of fatigue and illness.

My sister's husband's health was poor to begin with, and the life of a refugee exacerbated the problem. He died

Ruvel Tsimbler's (in the middle of the first row) send-off to the Lithuanian Army in 1938. From there he was transferred to the 16th Lithuanian Division.

on the street, right there in his wife's arms. While Dina searched for someone who could help bury him, passersby undressed the deceased and left him lying naked in the street.

The 14-year-old son of one of the wealthiest families in Plungė, Yirme Rest, whose father Khayim and older brother David were in the army, only managed to provide food for himself and his mother by stealing. One time he was caught and held prisoner for a longer period of time. When he returned, he found his mother already dead.

Compared to the cities of Asia, Siberia was like paradise for refugees. I only found this out after the war or through letters from my close ones because on 21 February 1942, the good people of Siberia saw my father and I, along with several other Jews who lived in the vicinity, off to the 16th Lithuanian Division. Anyone that had any sort of connection to Lithuania was drafted: refugees, exiles and those who had voluntarily relocated to the heart of Russia before the war. Few believed that we would see each other again. My mother cried the most, and the locals also brushed away a few tears.

The division was converging in the town of Balachna by the Volga in the Gorky region. Here we met some people we knew from Plungė, my uncle and my cousins. There was no end to the joy. We found out who had escaped in time from Plungė and the addresses of our close ones.

I was assigned to a separate gunner battalion and my father was assigned to the 168th Infantry Platoon. He was already 47 then, and I was but 19 years old. We were trained and then, at the beginning of 1943, we began our march to the front. It was cold, our feet stuck in the deep snow and we had to carry gun parts, a rifle and everything else that belonged to a soldier. We would get caught in snow storms that were so bad you could not see your friend marching alongside you. It was especially difficult for the older men, whose load we would share.

The ten days before we reached the front line were the most difficult because we only got hot water and a handful of flour for sustenance. Only later did we find out that the field kitchen and ammunitions supply squads had fallen behind during the snow storm. During the march itself, only one question preoccupied our thoughts: were we fated to die or not? We still had hope to avoid death and see our loved ones after the war once more. We were angry about our broken lives and filled with a limitless thirst for vengeance.

Our first military engagement occurred near Alekseyevka. Just before the battle, they had handed out a frozen loaf of bread for every four soldiers. We tried tucking it underneath our greatcoats to defrost it, but this was difficult because they too were frozen stiff.

Jacob Sheyn, with whom I served in the division, later wrote about the long and constant battle at Alekseyevka: "We forgot the last time we had slept or eaten. Sleep deprivation and incredible fatigue made us indifferent to whether we would live or not. If they killed me, so be it. At least it would end our suffering in this snowbound hell".

Many did not get to defrost their bread and taste it. The famous battle of Aleksyevka seemed more like a massacre, as the only protection we had in a field completely open to enemy fire were the dikes we had built out of snow. We later heard that the division's failure to prepare for battle was blamed on the commanders, who were then punished.

As the historian Gediminas Kulikauskas writes that the commanders of the Red Army and state leaders did not rush to send the Lithuanian army to the front, when national armies were hurriedly being put together, because they knew perfectly well that in 1940, when Lithuania was occupied, the entire "bourgeois army of Lithuania" was restructured into the 29th Soviet Territorial Rifle Corps. However, when the war began, only about 1,500 soldiers out of 18,000 had reached Russia. Some deserted, some defected to the German side, others died resisting the Red Army pushing them to the East. Among those 1,500 soldiers, alongside many other Jews who had had no other choice but to join the army, was the Plungė local Ruvel Tsimbler and Bernardas Vaitkus, who had been accepted at the Vilnius Cadet School back in Lithuania and was the brother of my future wife.

The division was probably only called Lithuanian due to political reasons. When the Germans occupied Lithuania over the course of several days, only about 15 thousand people managed to retreat in time, thus there could not have been enough man-power to form such a unit. As Gediminas Kulikauskas asserts, "Even official data indicated that of the 10,374 soldiers only about 4 thousand were listed as Lithuanian nationals. The rest were Jews and Russians. There was an especially large concentration of Jews in the infantry units – they made up more than 40% of the troops. Thus the 16th Division was the most Jewish military unit in the entire Red Army. Some claim that it was the second largest

unit in the anti-Hitlerite coalition, if measured by numbers of Jewish soldiers. It was only the Jewish Brigade established by the British in 1944 that surpassed it".

Even though they had suffered great losses at Aleksyevka, the soldiers fought heroically. The first engagements demonstrated all the cruelties of war and thereby hardened the others. The Jews fought with exceptional ferocity, for winning the fight was their only way out. Everyone knew that defeat would be a more terrible outcome than death on the battlefield because it would mean not only their own death, but the death of their close ones. Of the 12 soldiers in the division to be awarded the status of Hero of the Soviet Union, almost half were Jews.

David Rest, a machine gunner from Plungė, who not only led his own troops, but also took the place of the deceased chief of artillery, was awarded with the order of Alexander Nevski. Even when he was heavily wounded, Bentsel Olshvang from Plungė did not leave his cannon until the German attack had been defused. After the battle his arm had to be amputated. He returned to his home with the order of the Red Star.

I was badly injured at the Orel front and taken to the Zlatoust hospital in the depths of Russia. My condition was already improving slightly when another wave of injured soldiers was brought to the hospital. The veterans at the hospital made greeting the newcomers a ritual during which they looked to see if they recognised anyone they knew among the new faces. I was probably inspected by them during the first days as well, but I slept through those first four days and did not see a thing.

I found a familiar face in the newcomers' ward, but I could not recognised it. Only after having read the last name written on his cast did I realise that it was my good friend Ruvel Tsimbler lying in the bed. I sat down on the stool by his bed. Ruvel opened his eyes slightly as if he had sensed something. He looked at me and then closed his eyes again. A moment later he woke up again and called me by my name. The world truly is a small place if, in the chaos of war, far far away from home, you could not only bump into a fellow countryman, but also into a close friend. After he had recovered somewhat, Ruvel told me of how my father, who served in the same battalion as him, died before his very eyes.

Tsimbler and I stayed at that hospital for several months. He already knew that he would be a cripple for life. I met Ruvel again only in 1947, in Plungė. The medical commission recognised me as fit to serve and sent me off to the distribution point in Chelyabinsk.

After all of these adventures I became a scout in the 10th Cavalry Guard Regiment in the 3rd Division of the Don Cossack Corps. I rode across the Belarusian towns of Gomel and Kalinkovich, across Poland and Germany, and on 2 May 1945, in the streets of Berlin.

I was almost left behind in Frankfurt (Oder). On a reconnaissance mission on 1 February 1945, we noticed a group

The war ended for me (left) in Germany. With a friend after the Battle for Berlin.

Motel Pelts in the 16th Lithuanian Division, 1944.

of riders wearing white camouflage robes. They saw us too. I saw one of the riders raise his rifle, and suddenly it felt as if lightning had struck my face. The man was a good marksman – a few centimetres more and the shot would have been deadly. We had been instructed not to engage in combat, so two of my comrades in arms sidled up to my horse and kept me from sliding out of my saddle while the horses brought us back to our camp.

I was treated in Lodz, Poland, and later transferred to Bydgoszcz Hospital. I could walk, so I often went out into the town. Here, I met a group of Jewish women who had been liberated from a concentration camp where Germans manufactured railway tracks and grenades. They still wore their prisoner's uniforms. Not knowing what to do, they had found shelter in an abandoned house. One told me that she had once lived in Klaipėda, but I do not remember her name or the names of any of the others. I helped the women who were weak and ill as much as I could, but this did not last long, for I was sent out to Lodz again. From there I returned to my unit with three horses which had also been treated for injury.

Here, in the Don Cossack corps, the long-awaited end of the war finally came. The 9 May 1945 became my second birth date. That day, the trumpet signal of the regiment sounded, so we saddled our horses, lined up and waited for our commander, trying to guess what he would tell us. Some said that we were being transferred to another location, others believed that we would be sent to fight the remaining German troops.

Our commander appeared in the distance, galloping as if he was afraid to be late. He stood still before our line-up and looked at us strangely. He was silent for several seconds and then he yelled out with a voice that was not his own: "Brothers, the war is over!".

As we recovered from the shock of the news, we began firing all the weapons we had. We embraced each other and rejoiced at having avoided death. We were alive and could soon return to our loved ones, who had been waiting all this time in anxiety. All of us began writing letters to our families. I wrote to my mother in Siberia. Of the three men she had seen off to war, I was the only survivor.

The war was over, but I only came back home in 1947 because I had to spend a further two years in the army of occupation in Germany. Back in Plungė I found my mother and three sisters, all returned from Siberia.

The first Jew to come back to Plungė, before the war was even over, was Berel Glikman. In the fall of 1944, he visited Domicelė Vaitkienė to tell her that her son Bernardas was alive and being treated in a hospital. Berel returned to the front to continue fighting, but several surviving Jewish families came back to Plungė, as well as those Jews who had been protected by ordinary Samogitians. Most of the former residents of Plungė moved to Kaunas and Vilnius because

it was painful living in an empty town and knowing that the loved ones and neighbours buried in Kaušėnai would never come back.

Those who returned earlier put their lives in order and helped later arrivals settle in as well. Some Jews went to their former neighbours to ask about remaining household items of theirs. Lithuanian families now lived in their homes, but there were no problems when it came to returning the homes to their former owners.

The first Jews to return to Plungė with their families were Mule and Motel Pelts. Motel was a farmer who owned land and all the necessary equipment as well as livestock. Later, when the Soviet government began setting up collective farms, Motel became the chairman of one, though he really had not wanted to. Pelts was one of the few officials who was chosen by the people and not local authorities. The labourers of the collective farm respected him for his ability to manage the farm and for his selfless support. Motel lived in a house on Rietavo Street with his wife, who worked as a shopkeeper, and three children. He fell ill and had to undergo surgery, but he died suddenly thereafter.

Mule Pelts was older and also a farmer. He lived in the town, kept a cow and was employed as a buyer-up at the consumers' cooperative. He later relocated to Israel, where he died in his old age.

His daughter Eta Slavin died young. She was an educator and an active community member. Everyone in Plungė

The Minster family. 1948, Plungė.

knew her well, and her funeral was attended by many teachers and pupils from all the schools in town. Her mother Khana soon fell ill with grief and died as well. Eta's husband Kalman worked as a department head at the Industrial Production Block in Plungė, later emigrating from Lithuania with both of his sons.

Ruvel Tsimbler returned from the war a cripple and made his living as the director of the marketplace up until his retirement. He was a cheerful and extroverted individual who had become a living legend. It seemed he knew everyone and everyone knew him. At home he had a small farmyard where he kept a cow. While their three sons were still little, his wife Hina took care of them and the household, later she worked at a dry cleaner's.

Eliya Glikman was a widower for many years. After the death of his wife in 1927, he and his mother-in-law raised his five children. With the onset of the war, the entire family fled to Siberia, where one of their sons died. The rest returned to Plungė.

Eliya was not a literate man, but he could speak in five or six languages, he even managed to communicate with gypsies in their language. He knew all of the prayers that Jews had to say three times a day by heart. I remember him singing Russian folk songs to his children at home, for he had served in the tsar's army during the First World War and had been held as a captive by the Germans. The children sang along with him, even though they did not understand any of the words.

Shortly after the war, his mother-in-law died, and his children grew up and created their own families. Eliya Glikman died in his old age in Plungė and was subsequently buried in Vilnius.

Back in Plungė, Eliya's daughter Dobka married Petia Segalovich, a Jew from Belarus. He was a builder and worked in the Renovation Office. They raised a daughter and a son, moved to Vilnius and later relocated with their son's family to Israel. There, Dobka died from a sudden heart attack.

Eliya's son Motel married and lived in Plungė. He worked as a stableman in the Communal Service Office. Having divorced his first wife, he moved to Vilnius. There, he met a widow from Minsk, married her and moved into her home. His first wife Sara and his sons Leyb and Monel relocated to Israel with their families.

His son Berel returned to Plungė after the war and settled there for good. He was an active athlete, the goalkeeper of the Linų Audiniai ice hockey team. With his Lithuanian wife Zita he raised a daughter, Lidija, and a son, Genadijus, who took after his father in athleticism and grew up to be a high-achieving basketball coach in Lithuania. His wife Zita took care of the children while they were still little and later worked as a shopkeeper in a confectionery shop. Berel died at the age of 68.

Upon his return from Siberia, Eliya Glikman's youngest son Avraham first worked as a translator and later found employment

Motel Tsivye. 1916.

Ben Karabelnik, a soldier of the 16th Lithuanian Division and editor of the district newspaper.

in the Gas Services Office in Plungė. He and his Samogitian wife Rūta raised a daughter and moved to Israel with their daughter's family after retirement.

Itsik-Mendel Sher had perhaps the most difficult and dangerous job in the Linų Audiniai factory. He pressed flax waste into bundles weighing 90 kg each and stacked them one atop the other in a cold and dusty facility. He worked here until his death. After he was gone, his wife, son and daughter left for Israel.

Gut Abromson also returned to Plungė after the war. She worked with Itsik-Mendel Sher, but managed to live to an old age. After having buried her husband Henekh, who was a hairdresser, in Plungė, Abromson settled in with her daughter Fania in Kaunas. Her daughter Gita lives with her family in Israel.

Bentsel Olshvang was one of the first to return to Plungė. He had lost an arm in battle, which was considered to be a group I disability. The local government provided him with a cow and disability benefits. He lived in his own house, where Jews used to converge to pray in secret. His wife Sheyne took care of their son Itsik while he was still young and later found employment at the Linų Audiniai company. Meanwhile, Bentsel worked as a guard at the sawmill of the Plungė Industrial Production Block. However, he had to leave because he did not get along with the director of the institution. When Bentsel died, his son took great care to nurse his mother for two years until her death, after which he moved with his wife and two children to Israel.

Beyle-Libe Rostovski's husband Mones died during the war. She returned from Russia with her seven children. Her pension was not enough to feed such a large family, so Rostovski was forced to figure out a way to make ends meet. As they used to say in those days, she began speculating, though it was life itself that had forced her to start buying things on the cheap and selling them for more. The children gradually grew up, started building their own lives, and life started becoming easier and easier for Beyle-Libe. She died in Plungė. Her children created families of their own, one son moved to Germany, one to Vilnius and the rest to Israel.

Mordechai-Leyzer Bukh returned from Russia to Plungė after the war and was overjoyed to find his daughter Sorke, who had been hidden away and protected throughout the years of German occupation by Ignas Gintalas, a resident of Rietavas. She was one of the few Jews who could speak Samogitian without any accent. Shoemaker Bukh returned to

Me in 1945 and 2012.

his trade and began working in the shoe repair workshop at the Industrial Production Block. Later he and his daughter moved to Israel, where he died.

The childless married couple Shiya and Menukha Mikhelzon agreed to raise a girl by the name of Dobka from a poor and large family they were related to. Dobka called Shiya and Menukha her parents. After the war, she married military officer Gurevičius and left to live in Vilnius. However, she died young, and her husband relocated to Israel with their children.

Alter Khaves was a very good tailor, but he was not in very good health. His wife Beyle took very good care of him, protected him from overwork and was famed as a brilliant cook. The Khaveses raised a daughter and son. Alter earned a good living and was thus able to save some money and buy a co-op apartment in Vilnius and move there. His daughter married and his son remained a bachelor. Both the old Khaveses died in Vilnius.

Mikhel Minster was also a very good tailor. He was an entertaining musician, singer and chess player and lived a very healthy lifestyle. Minster fought in the 16th Lithuanian Division, where he was injured. The tailor returned to Plungė just as the war ended and immediately took up his trade again. For many years he managed the sewing workshop in the Residential Services Block of Plungė. His three sons took after their father and enjoyed music. His wife Riva took care of the household and was known as a great housewife. She liked to treat everyone and always had something delicious for any guest that came to visit unexpectedly. One of their sons departed for Israel with his family, where he died in a car accident. Later, Mikhel and his wife and their remaining sons emigrated to the US and settled in New York.

Meyer Rostovski was also a tailor, but he was unmarried. His relatives lived in Vilnius, so he lived as a single man in Plungė. During the war, he was drafted into the 16th Lithuanian Division, where he was caught criticising the Soviet order. The tribunal sentenced him to ten years in a labour camp. He served his sentence and returned to Plungė. When his mother and brothers departed for Israel, he moved to the US and settled in Los Angeles. There he worked as a painter until his death.

On 14 June 1941, Itsik Tsivye was exiled to Siberia along with four other Jewish families from Plungė because he had been the leader of a local Jewish militarised organisation called Beytar. He returned from Norilsk to Plungė and worked at a sales kiosk, which the locals called the Tsivye kiosk. He also had an illegal source of income from slaughtering animals and selling meat. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the Soviet government openly in conversations with friends and acquaintances and even in the presence of state authorities. His wife stayed at home and raised their two children. Given the chance to leave the Soviet Union, he immediately packed up his bags and left for Israel. He accidentally invited the director of the local KGB department to his farewell party, but of course, the latter did not come.

Ben Karabelnik was the leader of the Plungė branch of the Hashomer Hatsair (Young Guard) organisation. In the 16th Lithuanian Division he was promoted to the position of lieutenant. After the war he became the deputy editor and later the editor of the district newspaper (The Socialist Way, later Kibirkštis). He also worked for a short stretch in the communist party's district committee. In Plungė he was a well-known and respected figure. His wife Liuba worked as the manager of a store and raised two sons. The younger son, Ilya, participated in the protests in Kaunas after Romas Kalanta burned himself alive, and shortly moved to Israel. There was no longer any work for Ben Karabelnik at the newspaper, so he began working as the director of the preparations office of the Plungė District Cooperative. Later he moved to Vilnius and from there he departed for Israel, where his second son Jacob had already relocated as well.

My mother Taube Bunka and my three sisters came back from Siberia after the war. Because they did not have their own house anymore, they were given a communal apartment. My oldest sister Dina worked as a shopkeeper at the general store and my younger sister Hena worked as an accountant at the Housing Board of the Communal Services Office. She later moved to work in Vilnius and was married there. My sister Gene married Aron Gornshteyn, who was crippled in the war, and lived in Vilnius. My mother did not work anywhere, as she received social benefits for her dead husband, and helped her daughter Dina raise her children. In 1972, she emigrated to Israel with her granddaughter Golda. Later, my sister Hena, along with her two daughters, Liuba and Aviva, and her husband Feliks, joined them in Israel. In 1975, Dina and her husband also departed for Israel. My mother and my sisters Dina and Gene died there.

I left the army from Germany in 1947 and returned to Plungė to my mother and sisters. I began to work in the Communal Services Office and later in the Industrial Production Block as a metalworker. When the beginnings of the

future Minija folk product manufacturing company emerged, I organised the production of wood souvenirs. I oversaw workshops across all of Samogitia and the work of craftsmen who worked from home. Before the war, I had trained as a woodworker, so the craft was familiar to me. I returned to my childhood passions – drawing and carving. My dream to become an artist or sculptor did not come true, but I did become what folk artists call a folk craftsman. I created wood sculptures, participated in exhibitions and even organised a few of my own. I built my first memorial to the murdered Jews in Šateikiai. With the help of my friends and other folk artists, I created the Kaušėnai Memorial. Around the year 1990, I made an old dream of mine come true and began creating sculptures with Jewish motifs. I do not even know how many of them I have scattered across the entire world.

Yankel Piker had a very subtle sense of humour. He knew many anecdotes and entertaining stories and, most importantly, was very good at portraying them. He worked as the manager of a store the locals of Plungė called Piker's shop. His wife stayed at home and raised their three children. Yankel wanted to emigrate to Israel very much, so in order to make this move more smooth he relocated to Vilnius and then departed for Israel. There he wrote a book about his life as a soldier and refugee.

Froyim Fish and his wife Liba were already very old. They did not work anywhere and received pensions as well as social benefits for the sons they had lost in the war. One of their sons lived in Russia and the other, who was missing a leg and had a group I disability, lived in Vilnius with his family. One daughter lived in Klaipėda, the other married and lived with her parents in Plungė. Later Froyim and Liba Fish moved to Vilnius, where they both died.

During the war, Zelik Ril was drafted into the 16th Lithuanian Division. Upon his return to Plungė, he worked as the manager of a shop selling household products and later, a butcher's shop. He lived well because almost all salesmen had both an official income and an illegal one, which depended on their craftiness. His wife Lėja took care of the household. They bought a co-op apartment in Vilnius with their savings and relocated there. When they had already moved to Vilnius, their oldest son died in the service of the Soviet army. Ril died shortly in Vilnius, and his wife, daughter and younger son emigrated to Israel.

Khatskel Sher and his wife and twins came back from Vilnius, where they had lived after returning from refugee living in the East. Before the war he was a member of komsomol and thus received all sorts of privileges in the Soviet times. The trouble was that he was not very literate, with only two years of schooling under his belt. However, as a former member of komsomol, and later a member of the Communist Party as well, he was appointed as the manager of the Economic Department of the Party's District Committee, later – as the director of the Industrial Production Block. His daughter married a Samogitian from Plateliai by the name of Vaitkus. Khatskel was later transferred to Šilutė, but rejected his new position and worked in Klaipėda as a guard. He then moved with his wife and his children's families to Israel, and from there to Germany, where the brother of his wife lived. He stayed there until his death. His wife and children remained in Germany.

Leyb Orlianski worked as the manager of the district communal services department. He was adept at organising work, knew how to select and motivate employees, sending them on work exchanges to locations as far as Vilnius because he knew that these men and women from Plungė were reliable and fast workers. The first apartment building built after the war still stands in Plungė by the church. The communal workers of Plungė responsible for its construction were constantly praised and awarded for their work. Later Leyb was appointed the director of the Industrial Production Block and he built new workshops and increased the range of products manufactured. The emergence of Minija, the only manufacturer to produce ethnographic furniture and wooden souvenirs in Lithuania, was one of Leyb Orlianski's greatest achievements. The company's workshops were set up across the entire country, from Zarasai to Skuodas, and almost all of the folk artists and woodcarvers of Lithuania were provided with the opportunity to make a living and foster folk art. However, Orlianski himself was not satisfied. The childless Orlianski family moved from their house in Plungė to live in Vilnius. From there Leyb tried to reach Israel illegally, but he was caught and sentenced to 15 years in prison. After completing his sentence he still managed to enter Israel, where his brother Berel lived with his family.

Judel Fisher and his wife worked at the Industrial Production Block. She was the chief accountant and he was the specialist at the wool carding facility. He was a capable mechanic and organiser of work who could dissemble and assemble carding and spinning machines with his eyes closed. He took great pleasure in improving the machinery and

was always eager to share his ideas with others. However, his greatest desire was to take his wife, two sons and daughter and move to Israel. Thinking that he could ensure a smoother transition from Vilnius, he moved there with his family, but had to wait quite a long time before he could leave Lithuania.

In Plungė, Yosel Odes married a Jewish woman who had been saved during the war by ordinary Samogitians. At first he sold household wares at a store known by Plungė locals as žibalinė, and later found employment in a furniture shop. His wife Nekhe learned how to craft hats on her own and became a very good specialist. She worked in the Residential Services Block, but the ladies of Plungė constantly plied her with orders for hats. In order to be allowed to travel to the Promised Land, the Odes family moved to Vilnius. From there they moved with their youngest daughter to Israel and later to the US. Several years later, they were joined by their eldest daughter Eta and her family.

Itsik Pozin was employed at the sales base and his wife worked in a furniture shop. Having believed Soviet propaganda, they fled from Lithuania to Russia before the war, to the Jewish Autonomous Oblast of Birobidzhan, thinking that all nationalities lived there peacefully and happily. However, they were painfully mistaken because there they were suspected and persecuted as spies from the Baltics. It was only the war that saved the Pozin family from repression and destruction. After the war they returned to their native Plungė. They died here. For a long time their son worked as the senior engineer at a large factory in Vilnius. He was one of the founding members of the Lithuanian Jewish Community. However, in the end he moved to Israel with his father.

Tevye Grolman returned from the war a cripple. Upon his return he received disability benefits and did not have to work anywhere. His wife was employed in sales and raised a daughter and son. They lived in their private house on Rietavo Street. One day there was a great commotion. The Samogitians claimed that the Grolman family had kidnapped a Lithuanian child. Many people had gathered in the street, so the militia intervened. They arrested a drunk man who confessed to having been paid to cause a stir up in exchange for a bottle of vodka. However, the people would not rest until the girl, who had been playing in another yard with the neighbour's children, appeared. The Grolman family moved to Šiauliai after this incident and later emigrated to Israel.

Moyshe Zalkinovich and his wife Esther returned to Plungė after the war with two sons and a daughter. Moyshe began to work at the military vojentorg (household goods shop). His sons were also salesmen. His daughter married Ben Karabelnik and, when their children grew up, she started to work as a shopkeeper at the general store.

Upon their return from Siberia, Rachel Mets and Zalkinovich's son Leyb wanted to get married, but it turned out that Rachel had escaped from exile without her documents. When no formal requests solved the problem, Rachel and Leyb went back to her parents in Siberia, got married and lived there for a while. They returned to Lithuania and settled in Vilnius, from where they emigrated to Israel.

Their youngest son Vulf married a Samogitian woman by the name of Genė. They raised two daughters and lived in Plungė until their death. His mother died before his father did, and Moyshe Zalkinovich worked in sales until his death.

Samuel Hirzon was old and his health was weak. He and his wife received pensions, did not work anywhere and lived with their adult children. Their son Leyb worked in the preparations department of the co-op and bought agricultural products up from farmers along with Mule Pelts, delivering them to co-op stores. When Polish citizens were given the opportunity to leave Lithuania, Leyb set up a fictitious marriage with a Polish woman, emigrated to Poland, from there to Israel and from Israel to Canada. His sister and her family joined him from Vilnius. The old Hirzon and his wife died in Lithuania, and Leyb ended his days in Canada, though his body was buried in Israel.

Upon his return from life as a refugee in Russia, Motel Reznik worked at a bootleg maker's workshop. He was a good specialist and was loved by all the workshop employees because he was friendly with everyone. His wife was left paralysed after a severe illness. She tried to kill herself, so that she would not be a burden to her husband and son. She was saved, but she soon died anyway. Reznik and his son emigrated to Israel, but there he died at work.

On the first days of the war, Taube-Zelda Hirzon and her two sons fled to Russia. One died at the front and she returned with the other to Plungė. Her sons were both 2 metres tall, broad-shouldered, but weak-minded, though calm and obedient. They earned a living by delivering small products to nearby villages. However, one of them once entered a farmstead several miškiniai (forest bandits) were visiting at the time. The owners of the farm knew him well and tried to convince the miškiniai that he would not rat them out, however, the men took him into the forest and tortured him

so that the locals living in the vicinity heard his screams and killed him. The next morning they found his body tied to a tree, riddled with lacerations and shot. Having lost her son, Taube-Zelda Hirzon became ill with grief and soon died.

Tsipora Bank's brother Jacob remained in Vilnius after the war, but even though she was single, she did not stay with him and returned to Plungė. Her greatest concern was to help the poor in her home town. However, she soon joined her brother when he departed for Israel. Her interest in the goings-on of Plungė made her write frequently to those back at home, asking after people she knew, about the preservation of Jewish remembrance and expressing her regret at not being able to visit her home town due to her health.

Shaya Odes was disabled from childhood, it was difficult for him to move one hand and leg. The locals of Plungė nicknamed him Kašaja. His father, who worked as a carrier, and his entire family were murdered in Kaušėnai, and Kašaja was the only one to have retreated to the depths of Russia. How he endured the journey and how he survived without being able to work remained a mystery to everyone. After the war he made a living from speculation. He would receive products such as cigarettes, yeast and spices from somewhere and sell them to shops, where there was a constant shortage of wares. He was not afraid of the militia because they did not come after the disabled. He liked to have a shot of vodka occasionally, which he bought with his earnings. He did not spend a lot of money on food because he was fed by Jews who would come to his home on certain days of the week. Others treated him to some home-made vodka because they knew he liked it. He fell ill and died young in Plungė.

Ruvel Dimont was the only one to survive from his large family. He returned with his mother from Siberia, where they both lived on a collective farm. He was young, so he was never drafted into the army. My mother took care of him. Back in Plungė, he worked as a loader for the co-op and delivered products to stores. He married a girl from Šiauliai and had two sons. Suddenly he fell ill and unexpectedly died. Everyone in Plungė could not believe that such a strong man could have died so suddenly. His wife and children returned to live with her parents in Šiauliai.

Judishke Fish spent the entire war living in Russia. She returned to Plungė with her mother and daughter as she had divorced her husband, who stayed behind in Vilnius. Just like Kašaja, she made a living out of speculation, but she was afraid of the militia, local authorities and her neighbours. She decided who to pay off herself because this most probably saved her from any trouble. When her daughter married Plungė local Mordechai Rostovski, she and her young family moved to Vilnius, where she died.

Sore-Yevzele Levinson's son died in battle, so she received social benefits. After the war she was already old, but she secured an additional source of income by selling the goodies she made out of poppy seeds, carrots and other vegetables. Locals called her Šorke. In the summer, she spent her days sitting next to her house in what is now Sinagogų Street, and both children and adults flocked from the entire town to buy her sweets.

When the opportunity to leave the country came about, Levinson departed for Israel with the first wave of emigrants to join her daughter, who was already living there and ho had lost her hand in the war with the Arabs. However, they were together only a short while. Having lived in Israel for only a few months, Levinson died.

Baseve Akum made a living selling berries, fruit and spices. Her husband had died, so she raised her son as a single mother. During the war she lived with him in the Caucasus. There, life was such that she returned to Plungė as soon as she could. In her native town, she had a small house. Her son Leyzer worked on the Housing Board, studied in an evening school and helped his mother. Having completed seven years of school, Leyzer departed for Kaunas to study construction in a school for advanced vocational training. He married a medical student and settled in Kaunas. He invited his mother to live with them, but she soon died. Leyzer and his wife and children emigrated to Israel.

Velvel Belkind was born in Alsėdžiai and lived there up to the war. During the first days of the war, he retreated to the East, was drafted into the 16th Lithuanian Division, where he served until the end of the war. When the division was in Lithuania, he made a short visit to Plungė, where he found the time to marry his beloved Khaya Gite, who was served along with several other Jews by Pranas and Emilija Kareiva, brother and sister Julija and Pranas Gadeikis as well as other good people. Velvel and his family settled in Plungė. He worked in the district co-op union and studied. Later, he was appointed the chairman of the district co-op union of Plungė and then as the manager of the Plungė branch of the Lithuanian Cooperative Union. His former employees only had kind words to say about him, there were some who even called him their second father.

The Belkinds raised a son and a daughter, Misha and Rita. A well-known Lithuanian economist and professor at Vilnius University, Misha and his wife Eleonora emigrated to the US. Misha worked at the World Bank until retirement and is now a consultant. Several years after Misha's emigration, Velvel buried his wife and her mother in Vilnius and also emigrated along with Rita's family to the US. Velvel lived close to his son and daughter and took care of his grandchildren. He died in 2005.

After the war, Ruvel Maler became the director of the machine-tractor station of Plungė. He raised two daughters with his wife, a teacher. In 1974, they emigrated to Israel. His daughter Jolanta studied classical languages at Tel Aviv University. Her teachers encouraged her to complete her PhD, but she relocated to live with her parents in Canada. Up to this day, she writes Lithuanian poems, which are then translated into Hebrew and published in Israel. Her work has been published in journals such as Aidai, Ateitis and the Draugas cultural supplement. In 1976-1979, she won poetry awards in the competitions organised for young people by Ateitis. Jolanta Maler's work was included in a collection of poems written by young poets and published in Chicago in 1986 (Four).

Jaschin was born and raised in Belarus, but he found himself in Plungė after the war, where he married Tema Rostovski and settled down. He worked on the collective farm and was one of the best mechanics in the district. Seeing him off to Israel, his colleagues were sorry to see him leave, for he was not only a great specialist, but also a kind-hearted, quiet and calm man, a loving husband and father. However, he did not live long in the Promised Land and died young.

It was not only the residents of Plungė, but the majority of the Jews in the Soviet Union who made various attempts to leave the country. Some tried to get into Israel through Poland, some set up fictitious marriages for money and others tried to achieve this illegally. I have heard a story about a mother and daughter who paid a large sum of money to a pilot who had promised to fly them to the US only to be handed over by the man to the KGB. Another Jew who had tried to escape was also caught with them and all of them ended up in prison. The woman's husband took all of the guilt upon himself, and then killed himself as he awaited trial. The women left prison and managed to emigrate to Israel.

Several gaps in the borders of the Soviet Union gradually opened up for the Jews, and the first wave of emigrants left the country. Many Jews knew that their place was in Israel, that only there would they be protected from assimilation and anti-Semitism, that they had to build and strengthen their historical fatherland, protect its independence and, at the same time, not forget their home towns in Lithuania.

A total of 138 Jews lived in Plungė in 1950. Twenty years later there were only 45. Today, I am the only remaining Jew. The last one. There is no one else left to continue the story of the Jews of Plungė. The only thing others and I can do is protect the memory of the Jews murdered in Kaušėnai, Milašaičiai, Vieštovėnai, Alsėdžiai, Purvaičiai, Plateliai, Laumalenka, Šateikiai, and Jovaišiškės, and preserve at least a piece of the hundred-year-old cemetery that is now half-occupied by a school built in 1975. When they were getting ready to build the school, the local government announced that relatives could take the remains of their family members and bury them elsewhere. However, only a few Plungė locals were thus transferred to another resting place. The remaining gravestones were brought to Kaušėnai, where they were kept for over 15 years. Seeing them, the poet Mykolas Karčiauskas wrote: "What do these quests inscribed in stone mean, these old graves of the Jews banished from the Promised Land".

When Lithuania regained its independence, I collected all of the gravestones I had recovered, and we stood them in rows reminiscent of the Western Wall. There are no longer any remains underneath them, but the old cemetery is not only a record of the history of the Jews of Plungė, but of Plungė itself, without which the town would be a poorer place, its people strangers and the past riddled with blank spots. I am the last person for whom the history of the Jews of Plungė is my own personal story as well. This story will not die along with its people. But the people can banish it to oblivion if they want the most terrible events in history to repeat themselves once more.

I do not want this...

Celebration of Jakovas Bunka's 90th Anniversary. With wife Dalija, 65 years together. July 2013.

Jakovas and Dalija Bunka

Jakovas Bunka. 2014.

Jakovas Bunka with members of the Tolerance Centre of Plunge's "Saules" gymnasium. September 2013.

Columbia University professor Simon Shama recorded a conversation with Jakovas Bunka for his documentary "The Story of the Jews". November 2012.