

Do You Know the Way to Darbenai?



A local attorney journeys to her ancestral home.

BY HARRIET ROTTER

I have just been on the most incredible journey. On Sept. 5, my husband, Norman Rotter, and I flew to Vilnius, (known in Yiddish as Vilna), Lithuania, where my path was my past. My mother, Dorothy Green, came to this country in the 1920s with her parents and seven siblings. Their family name of Grinker was changed to Green by the customs authorities when they arrived in the United States. She brought a photograph with her that had been taken in front of the family home at her uncle's wedding a few years earlier. Of the more than 60 people in the picture, I can identify my grandparents and their two oldest children. Everyone else in the photo perished in the Holocaust, along with 240,000 of their Lithuanian brethren.

Before the war there were 100,000 Jews in Vilnius — 40 percent of the population. The city was often referred to as the Jerusalem of the North and was a center for Yiddish culture. Nazi and Soviet brutality virtually wiped out this prominent Jewish community and today there are just 5,000 Jews left in Lithuania — 80 percent of whom live in Vilnius.

Never would my mother have gone back to Lithuania: "What's there?" she would ask. "We were happy to leave." Nor did she imagine that I would want to search for her birthplace. I didn't plan to do so myself until January of this year when I was appointed to the Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad by President George W. Bush. Our charge is to pre-

serve and protect historic buildings, monuments and cemeteries in central and eastern Europe. I chose to take the responsibility of visiting Lithuania, with a special personal agenda of discovering my roots.

All I had for reference was the wedding photo and a one-page document unearthed by my brother, Jeffrey Band. In his genealogy search, he found an extract from the 1908 Skoudos town dwellers' community family list. It stated that on April 26, 1914, our maternal grandparents, Khaya and Bentsel Grinker (later called Ida and Ben Green), were residents of Darbenai (known in Yiddish as Darbian). Upon further searching I learned that my grandfather had been born in Skuodas (known in Yiddish as Shkud), that his

family lived in the village of S. Ipiltis (known in Yiddish as Inpility), and finally, that my great-grandfather was from a tiny shtetl called Derkinciai, in the village of Mosedis.

I gave the document to our wonderful and knowledgeable English-speaking guide, Chaim Bargman who lives in Kounas (known in Yiddish as Kovno). He cautioned us Darbenai was near the Baltic coast, at least a four-hour drive from Vilnius. He assured us he could find all of these villages, which were in a 15-mile radius of each other, but the trip would likely take a while, as some of the roads were not paved. We were, however, determined to see it all. Forget the Autobahn — we saw horses and wagons en route.

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Finally, we arrived in Darbenai — the place where my mother was born. Chaim even found the house where the wedding picture was taken, still standing. The sight of my family's home gave me a sense of joy, sadness, regret and pride, as well. Across the way was the mill (now just a pile of rubble) where my grandfather worked and where farmers were working in the same potato fields I had heard about as a child.

I realized that if my mother's family hadn't immigrated to America, I would either be a victim of the Holocaust or I would be digging potatoes too. It was an epiphany. I never felt so proud to be Jewish. In spite of the Final Solution, aided and abetted by the Lithuanians and Soviets, I am alive. The ground in central and Eastern Europe may be soaked in Jewish blood, but we are still here.

Lithuania is trying to come to terms with its role in the Holocaust, to restore the Jewish Quarter in Old Town Vilnius and to memorialize the Jews who perished. It is beyond sad to visit a town square that used to be a flourishing community, a center of Jewish culture and education, where all that remains of that Jewish life is a small sign on the side of a building.

Pre-war, there were 82 synagogues in Vilna; today, there is only one — saved because it was used by the Nazis as a hospital. It was restored in 1995 and services are held daily, led by a Rabbi from Boston, Mass. I realized something that had never occurred to me before: the connection between a Jewish presence and a thriving community that becomes a center of learning and commerce. I feel a tremendous sense of pride at the contributions Jews make to a country, totally out of proportion to their numbers.

Lithuania becomes a member of the European Union this spring. They know they must recognize their past in order to have a future. One way to acknowledge the atrocities of the past is to build appropriate monuments of

ic advantage. Tourists will want to visit a Lithuania that is no longer hostile, and many American Jews will want to see where their parents and grandparents once lived.

The purpose of my trip was to establish a project that the Lithuanian government, with the assistance of the U.S. commission, could undertake. Together with another member of the commission, Steven Some from Princeton, N.J., whose family also came from Lithuania, we decided that our goal would be to restore the Uzupio, the second Jewish cemetery (used from 1830-1941), established in Lithuania. The first Jewish cemetery, where Rabbi Elijah Gaon was originally buried, was desecrated in 1957 and turned into a large sports arena. The headstones in that cemetery were used as stairs.



But the Uzupio cemetery is today an overgrown field. Many of the headstones in that cemetery have been saved and are stored in a warehouse. An architect has been hired to design the restoration of the cemetery, with input from the Jewish community in Vilnius. We are determined to recreate the cemetery, put the headstones back where they belong, and establish a fitting memorial with a plaque honoring donors.

Rebuilding the cemetery is a doable project, something that I can see happening in a relatively short amount of time. Phase I represents a \$50,000 investment — half will come from the Lithuanian government, and half from individual contributors in the United States. Anyone who has roots in Lithuania can contribute. When this project is completed, it will be a sacred memorial from those of us who live in the present to those gentle souls from our past. It will be both a tribute to those who perished and a resurrection of a lost culture. It will be a testimonial that Jews once lived here, and perhaps will again.

To learn more about the cemetery, contact Harriet Rotter at (748) 855-5700