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I WAS only a youth of 15 when I left my shtetl Skud in Lithuania and although those were my most formative and impressionable years, I can only remember my school days, my chaverim, my neighbours, quite a number of the people of our town, and all the activities I was involved in.

To get a general picture of Lithuanian Jewry, I had to do some research but even if I confine myself only to my shtetl Skud, I have an accurate picture of Lithuanian Jewry as a whole. For most of Lithuania was composed of "Shtetlach" with the same type of Jew, occupation, trade, profession and character with perhaps a little more sophistication in the bigger shtetlach.

Lithuania, situated on the coastline of the Baltic Sea, is bound on the North and North East by Latvia and South West by Poland. It is very close to Germany. Lithuania has a long history. It was a warlike nation and fought many battles for its independence. In the 13th century the Lithuanian tribes fought the Germans and even conquered them. The first king by the name of "Mindagas" was crowned and was baptised though most of Lithuania still remained pagan. The King had two sons but both were assassinated. A new monarchy was established. In the year 1385 Poland wanted to form a union with Lithuania with the acceptance of Roman Catholicism. The two countries combined and fought many battles with the Germans.

In 1569 the first Parliament was formed. Amongst other nationalities (like Russians, Lithuanians, Poles and Germans) there were about 400 000 Jews. In 1795, Lithuania was annexed by the Russians who oppressed all nationalities, denying even the Poles and Lithuanians the use of their own languages. It was only in 1905 that the restrictions were removed. During the first world war when the Germans occupied Lithuania, the Lithuanians were given more freedom and even the right to form their own state.

Kovno or Kounas became the capital of Lithuania. I can still remember the Germans commandeering private homes to station their soldiers. In our own house which was quite a big one, 40 soldiers were stationed all on the floor. The Germans were quite different from what they were in the Second World War. They were very well disposed towards the Jews, engaged in business with them and made many friends. In 1918 at the end of the first World War, the Germans withdrew and Lithuania became an independent state. Conscription was organised and in battles fought with Poland, many Lithuanians and many Jews were killed.

Jewish Autonomy

During the 1918 period, the Jews were given national autonomy. There

My Shtetl Skud

by Aaron Malkinson

was a ministry for Jewish affairs, and all the Yiddish and Hebrew schools were subsidised by the Government. It was not long, however, before the anti-semites of the extreme right of the Government arose and abolished all privileges enjoyed by the Jews. They discharged all Jews in top positions. Even in the economic field they created difficulties for the Jews, and formed Government co-operative stores to force them out of their little shops. Left with no alternative but to emigrate, some travelled to the United States of America, South Africa and the southern part of America. By 1939 there were 150 000 Jews left in Lithuania.

The economy of Lithuania was predominantly agricultural. The majority of the people lived in the rural areas and the Jews mostly in the urban areas. The agricultural products were flax, fodder, livestock, cereals, potatoes, etc. Most of the Jews were small shopkeepers selling different products. There were a few bigger merchants who used to buy the produce from the peasants and send it for export, like my late parents who used to export flax to Germany. (Flax was used for bandages).

Every Monday and Thursday was market day. The peasants brought their agricultural products from the farms in their heavily loaded wagons to the middle of the town. After they sold their products, and purchased their requirements from the Jewish shops, they usually got drunk in the beer halls and more often than not assaulted the Jews. My late brother who was a leader of a kind of self-defence movement, was respected by the peasants for his physical strength and courage. When he started together with his colleagues to counter-attack, the peasants were soon back on their wagons, moving towards home.

Skud

Our little town, Skud, was between two rivers and not far from the German borders – a pretty little town with forests and lakes. It was divided in two, the old and the new. We even had two synagogues (not Orthodox or Reform), but because of the distances. One outstanding feature of one of the Shuls was the Ark. It was so beautiful that it became known all over Lithuania and Latvia. People from the other centres came to view it and offered fabulous sums of money for it, but no 'Skuder', in spite of his poverty, would part with it. What happened to it afterwards is needless to say.

During my period, up to 1925, we lived under three governments, Russian, German and Lithuanian. We had three different schools, each under their respective governments. We had the Cheder in the afternoons, which gave us the Hebrew and Biblical grounding.

In 1922, the first youth organisation called "Hanoar" was formed, followed by the "Hashomer Hatzair". Boys and girls were imbued with the ideal of going on Aliyah and many went on "Hachshara" on my late brother's farm to work and prepare to settle in Israel.

The Maccabi Sports Society was founded in 1924. They played mainly soccer and held gym classes. I still remember that whenever there was a football match, we hired a Lithuanian band to march in front of us along the streets playing Hebrew songs and marches, while the public followed us to the football field.

We had a dramatic society which produced many Yiddish plays including King Lear by Shakespeare.

There was also a Bikkur Cholim Society, whose members dedicated themselves to do nursing duties whenever necessary.

Then there was the Talmud Torah study group, which included many of the elders of the town.

Lithuania was famous all over the world for its many "Yeshivot" and was recognised as a main centre of learning in Europe. Lithuania was looked upon as the second Israel, the town Vilno as the Jerusalem of Lithuania.

The debating society of our shtetl was also active. People came from bigger centres to talk to us on topical subjects. The leaders and *balebatim* of the town formed a Kehila, a kind of Board of Deputies, or an Esra (Help) Committee, that attended to the requirements of all the different institutions. A Jewish bank was also in existence. In spite of all that, the Jews of Lithuania depended a great deal on financial aid from relations in America and Africa.

We had an active Jewry involved in many activities, with many fine respected Jews, sportsmen, businessmen and intellectuals. But we also had our crooks, informers, *zulikes*, jokers, etc. I remember there was a Jewish informer who was a hunchback and was called "Yanke der Heiker". He used to make a living by reporting Jewish smugglers to the police. He got many hidings, but somehow managed to survive.

Then there were the *zulikes* (scoundrels) who played tricks, especially on the stingy and unpopular *balebatim*. During Passover Seder night, the "chevra" would hide behind the door and when the door was opened to let the prophet Elijah in, a white goat would be sent in instead. Sometimes, while Kiddush was being made on Succot in a Succah, a bucket of water would descend through the roof and land on the beautiful Yomtov table.

Sabbath in Shtetl

Sabbat in the shtetl was something to be experienced. The feeling of Shabbat started already on the Thursday. The housewives started baking the chalot and rolls. There was an air of warmth and teasing smells.

Then came the preparation of the 'Cholent'. All the necessary ingredients were placed in special pots, tied up

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with string and sent to the big ovens of the nearest bakers. There, I must add, on the next day, when the maid was sent to fetch them, the pots were often mixed up and there was plenty of fun and arguments, claims and counter-claims.

On Friday, practically everybody went to the "Bod" (Communal Bath) and to have a hair cut. The house had to be spotlessly clean and the "Shabes-dige" clothes had to be ready.

The signal for closing the shops and the approach of Shabbat was given by an official of the congregation, a town crier, who used to go to every street and shop and call "*in Shul Arein*". He was more often than not interrupted by the Jokers walking behind him imitating him and adding variations to his tones. After the call "Shul Arein", secular life in the shtetl stopped. The Shabbat with its festive gown enveloped the shtetl and its inhabitants.

The fathers and sons went to Shul. After the service, the *balebatim* looked out for an "Arech" – a guest, a stranger or a soldier who happened to be there on a visit, to take to their home. The Jewish homes were lit up with electric lights and candles, the tables were set for royalty and the songs were carried in the evening air through the whole shtetl.

On Shabbat, after the synagogue service and after the "Cholent" and kugel the older people turned in to *shlof*, while the younger ones arranged cultural activities or took walks in the forests.

Class Discrimination

Although the Jews were united in their religion and in their striving and idealism for Israel, there was a certain amount of class distinction between the *balebatim* and the tradesmen. The more educated and cultured often looked down on those with a poorer background, who had little education. This created a class which leaned more to the left. We called them the socialists. In Poland they were called the "Bunt". They were even anti-Zionist. They were persecuted and prosecuted by their

governments, and were treated as communists. But they were not many. At a later stage their outlook changed and some of them are living in Israel today.

But the students of the Talmud or Yeshiva Bochurim were looked up to by the *balebatim* and anyone who had a daughter of marriageable age was anxious to acquire a son-in-law of that calibre, regardless if he was rich or poor.

Every shtetl had a nickname. Our shtetl was called "Farfel-Zimesh", others "Drobianer Pipkes", "Vilner Zulikes", "Zedikers", "Haikers", "Yanoven Ganovim" and so on.

But the Lithuanian Jews' nickname was "Zeiliem Kop" for a very good reason. He always put himself out to the utmost to help his fellow men and devoted all his love and energy to Israel.

In 1939 when Germany and Russia signed a non-aggression Pact, Lithuania fell under the sphere of Soviet influence. The Russians occupied Lithuania in 1940 and dissolved the Lithuanian Government. Members of the Lithuanian Government were arrested, and sent to Siberia. Others fled for refuge to Nazi Germany.

Nazi Rule

In 1941, the Germans (in spite of their non-aggression Pact) attacked Lithuania and within a few days overran it.

Many Jews joined the Russians to fight the Germans, many were killed in the battles and many withdrew with the Russians back to Russia. Others joined the Partisans, fighting in the forests or wherever they could find the Germans.

Of 150 000 Jews in Lithuania, 135 000 were murdered. Only 10 per cent managed to survive and escape.

Most of them are living in Israel today. The Israelis cannot understand how the Jews went down without putting up any resistance, but this is not correct. Many individuals resisted even with their bare hands, but could not stand up to the German armoured and mechanised armies. Very little publicity is given to these individuals, with the

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exception of the rising of the Warsaw Ghetto.

I now know of a case when the Lithuanians approached a certain home, by the name of Fogelman (one of the *balebatim*) and started knocking at the door. The son of the family who knew that there was no way out fired shots at them, killing four, then shot his own father, mother and himself.

On the following day, 50 males, all leaders of the town, were rounded up, marched to my brother's farm, beaten up with truncheons and whips, insulted and humiliated and ordered to dig graves. My brother Itzchok broke the ranks, attacked a Nazi officer with his bare hands and choked him to death. My brother only lived a few minutes before he was murdered with the others and buried in the massed grave. With his heroic deed, he not only took revenge for his own blood, but for the whole Jewish Skuder community.

Although the Lithuanians were the first to start pogroms when the Germans entered the country, there were some who actually saved a few Jews. My late brother's daughter, Esther, was saved by a gentile school friend and with the consent of the girl's father was hidden in an attic where she lived for two years. Very often her hosts forgot about her and some days she was left without food or water.

When the Russians re-entered Skud, they started arresting all the Lithuanian Facists, confiscating their belongings and possessions. The gentile girl's father begged Esther to tell the Russians that he was not a Nazi and that he had saved her life. When Esther walked through the streets, the "Goyim" could not believe that she was still alive.

They crossed themselves believing that it was her spirit that was moving. When she went to see the Russian officer, she burst into tears as she told him her story. But as he listened, he too began to cry, for he also was a Jew.

In 1951, I met another survivor of our Shtetl in Paris, and he told me that with the re-entry of the Red Army in Lithuania, they asked the handful of Jews left in the Shtetl to point out to them the Lithuanian Facists. When they did, they handed them back, and said they could deal with them themselves. My "Landsman" recognised one who had murdered his parents. When he started questioning him, he denied it. Later he admitted it making excuses, and begging him for forgiveness, kneeling and kissing his feet. Nothing was sweeter than revenge my Landsman said, but one thing he did not do. He did not order him to dig his own grave before he shot him.

Three hundred families were shot in Skud.

A few Jews returned to our Shtetl after the Holocaust, walking in the streets like shadows, tramping on the graves of their brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers, friends and relations. There was not an inch of ground in our Shtetl Skud where no Jewish blood was shed.

Aaron Malkinson, the writer of this story who left Lithuania before the Holocaust and whose brother remained to share the fate of the six million who died.