

Remembering a Life and Personalizing Genocide

By Eric Benjaminson

It's not immediately clear to me why I was so attracted to the story of my fourth cousin. In fact, I never knew him – his history made that an unfortunate reality. My father was unaware of his specific existence, and he was memorialized in our family only in the aggregate; thought of sympathetically when we mentioned “our relatives in Kurland who must have been killed during the war”. Later, when I began to learn about him and his immediate family, was it the fact that he was, at his death, in his forties and married with a daughter when I, in my mid-40s and married with two daughters, began to discover the traces of his life?

A few years ago, I decided to answer some of the questions about my father's family background that had floated through the odd dinner table conversation and had broken the monotony of long car trips. Using traditional genealogical tools, the emerging wonder of genealogy-on-the-Internet, and standing on the shoulders of many Jewish genealogists who had conclusively proven that the Nazis had in fact NOT destroyed all records of pre-Holocaust European Jewish life, I gradually put together a picture of our basic origins and the dispersion of our relatives during the twentieth century.

My paternal family can be traced back in documents to the year 1777 when the earliest identifiable member, Jankel Benjaminsohn, was born outside of the town of Goldingen in the Duchy of Courland, part of the then-Kingdom of Poland and later a Russian Imperial province. (This town is now known as Kuldiga in the Baltic nation of Latvia.) Jankel began one of two family branches. His descendants (my direct line) were small merchants, tailors, shoemakers, general store owners, and professional musicians who mainly emigrated from Latvia during the 19th and 20th centuries to South Africa and the U.S. Jankel's brother Hirsch and his descendants, for some inexplicable reason, never emigrated, multiplied and flourished in Latvia during the early 20th century until the arrival of Nazi troops in July 1941 put an end to that family line.

Joseph, the subject of this piece, was born in 1900, the youngest child of Wulf Benjaminson (Hirsch's great-grandson) and his wife Gitel Gavronsky. His birthplace was the small Latvian provincial town of Hasenpoth (now Aizpute) located between Goldingen and the seaport of Libau (now Liepaja) in the western Latvian province of Kurland. Joseph and his seven brothers and sisters lived in turbulent times.



My fourth cousin Joseph Benjaminson, born 1900 in Aizpute, Latvia, murdered 1941 in Riga, Latvia.
Photo taken in 1927.

Kurland in 1900 was part of the Czarist Russian Empire, and was beginning to feel the restiveness that led to the abortive 1905 Russian Revolution. The political turmoil thus generated was subsumed into the beginning of the First World War in 1914. In the fall of 1914, the German army had captured Kurland from Russia, and would stay there as occupiers until the Armistice in November 1918. Our relatives were in the western parts of the province, which were occupied quickly by Germany. In an ironic twist, this proved to be good fortune. Not only were the Germans of this war correct and even friendly with the German-speaking Jews, but the Russian authorities east of the frontline in April 1915 forced the deportation of 40,000 Jewish men, women and children deep into Russia. Jews under German control were spared this hardship. The Russians were very suspicious of the Kurland Jews for several reasons: the Jews spoke German or Yiddish and thus were seen as potential spies for the Germans; there was a certain amount of anti-Semitism extant in Russian political thinking of the time; and there was no love lost among the Jewish population for their former Russian political masters.

After the formal end of the war, Kurland was still disputed territory. German troops still held out there after the Armistice while the Soviets moved toward the area from the east. In the midst of this instability, on November 18, 1918, a National Council declared the independence of the new state of Latvia. Due to the continued pressure from the Red Army, the infant nationalist government moved to Libau under the protection of a British expeditionary force.

Immediately thereafter, an interesting but destructive private army became the next challenger to Latvian independence. To quote historian Andrejs Plakans:

“...there now appeared on the scene one Pavel Bermont-Avalov, a brazen military adventurer who imagined himself a Russian count, together with some divisions of the Russian White Army...Bermont-Avalov formed an alliance that included German forces and a handful of Baltic German barons, with Bermont-Avalov commanding this joint army, about thirty thousand soldiers strong. By October 1919, the Nationalist government had raised a fighting force of about 11,500 troops, strongly supported by the population. By early December 1919, the so-called Bermontians had been defeated...”

During this period, Joseph and his parents and siblings had moved from the small town of Aizpute to the then-boomtown port of Libau. His father Wulf was a merchant, a brother was a pharmacist, a sister a pharmacy assistant, and another sister an office worker. Joseph's tranquil life as a young salesman was interrupted when on October 7, 1919 he was mobilized into the 10th Aizpute Infantry Regiment of the Latvian National Army. Immediately after infantry training, he was sent to the front lines and fought in the defense of the city of Libau against the “Bermontians” from November 4-14. This involved a pitched two-day battle to secure a bridge spanning a section of the harbor that separated one side of the city from another. During that battle, a distant relative who served in the same regiment, Herman Levenstein, was killed in action. All told, over 1000 Jews served in the Latvian Army during the fight for independence.

Joseph remained in the army until January 1922, serving with his regiment in eastern Latvia as a bulwark against the Red Army. Upon his discharge he was awarded the Liberation of Latvia medal. Sometime after that, he moved to Riga, but in 1931 he returned at least briefly to Libau to marry Esfir-Lea Stein, born in Libau in 1910. They were married in the Great Synagogue of Libau, which ten years later would be burned to the ground by the Nazis and their Latvian collaborators.

After their marriage, the couple returned to Riga, where Esfir worked as an accountant in an office and Joseph became a salesman and interior designer in an architectural design firm. Their daughter Ruth was born in the summer of 1932. They moved between various apartments in the center of the city, and Joseph became a member of the Society of Jewish Liberators of Latvia. This society united Jewish former soldiers who had participated in the 1918-1920 Latvian liberation struggle.

In 1941, first the Soviets and then the Nazis became the new overlords of Riga. The Soviets had focused their ire on Zionist and “right-wing” Jewish intellectuals, and had deported many of them to the East by the time the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact gave way under the boots of the German advance into Eastern Europe. By July 8, 1941, the entire territory of Latvia was under Nazi rule. Only about 15,000 of the 90,000 Latvian Jews managed to move east with

the retreating Russians. Pogroms aimed at the Jews of Riga started even before the Germans had completed their conquest of the city, under the leadership of the pro-Fascist and anti-Semitic <Pērkonkrusts> organization. This Latvian “fraternity” was headed by one Viktor Arājs, a student and police informant, and on July 2, he formed an armed “commando” to, as he put it, “clear Latvia of Jews and Communists”. The historical research of Andrew Ezergailis provides evidence that Arājs’ Commando was put into action in cooperation with the Nazi Commander of Einsatzgruppe A, Walter Stahlecker. Arrests and beating of Jews by Arājs and his followers began the night of July 3, and on July 4 Riga’s most beautiful synagogue (the Great Choral Synagogue) was burned by the Arājs Commando, along with a number of Lithuanian Jewish refugees who had been locked in its basement. Later in July, Nazi SD units became directly involved and soon took over the leadership of the actions against the Jews in Latvia.

The German goal was to lead Latvians to become involved in the killings of Jews; in practice, this took no particular effort. In addition to the determined anti-Semites like the Pērkonkrusts followers, who engaged in urban roundups and the mass murder of Jews in the forests near Riga, the civilian Latvian police also became involved. It was the municipal police of Riga that arrested and presented Joseph for execution. Beginning in early July 1941, records exist showing that the Latvian police had picked up large groups of Jews at their places of residence and turned them over to the Germans. Major roundups of this nature took place on July 7 and July 19.

It was likely during one of these roundups that Joseph was arrested. In the Archives of the Jewish Museum in Riga is a document, written in Latvian (not in German) entitled "List from Riga's Prefecture of Valuables Confiscated from Arrested Jews and Communists in Riga's Central Prison". The first page of list number 5 (dated August 4, 1941) is shown in the photo below. The second name on this list is Joseph's. It is recorded that from him were confiscated a white metal cigarette case; a black metal pocket watch with a silver band; and a gold engraved ring. An archivist who works at the Jewish Museum told me that the line drawn through the name indicates that the individual was shot.

At the moment of his death, Joseph was 41 years old. He had fought for his country for over two years, had lived a normal, middle class life and raised a daughter. His wife Esfir was 31 when she was widowed, and their daughter Ruth only nine years old, just finishing fourth grade. The exact date of death of Esfir and Ruth is not known, but they would not have lived long with their sorrow. They might have been killed in one of the approximately seven mass shootings that took place in the Bikernieki Forest near Riga between July and September 1941. (These shootings were carried out by Nazi SD teams mixed liberally with Latvian armed participants.) Or the mother and daughter might have survived to be interned in the Riga Ghetto, but even in that case they would almost certainly have been killed during the huge mass executions at Rumbula outside Riga (whose victims were predominantly female) on November 30 and December 8, 1941.

For those who wish to read the tragic details of this massacre, and indeed of the death of the Jews of Latvia, no better source exists than Andrew Ezergailis' "The Holocaust in Latvia 1941-1944".

VĒRTSLIETU SARAKSTS Nr. 5.

Nr.	Uzvārds, vārds un tēva vārds.	Vērtslietu nosaukums.
2		3
1.	Deude, Reisa Noa m. -	•1 balt.met.etvija, 2 dzelt.met.auskari ar balt.stikliem.
2. ✓	Benjaminsons, Jāzeps Vulfa d.	•1 balt.met.etvija, 1 melna met.kab. pulkstenis ar balta met.saiti, •1 dzelt.met.monograma.
3. ✓	Bimants, Levi Lipmana d.	•1 dzelt.met.gredzens.
4. ✓	Borogs, Levs Mendelja d.	•1 balta met.etvija, 1° balta met.rokas pulkstens.
5. ✓	Dvalsičis, Rubins, Šahļa d.	•1 balta met.etvija, 1 balta met.kemmes apkalums.
6. ✓	Dankers, Šloms	•1 melna met.kabatas pulkstenis.
7. ✓	Dankers, Izaks	•1 balta met.kabatas pulkstenis, •1 dzelt.met.gredzens.
8. ✓	Danemanis, Boriss Izraelja d.	•1 balta met. rokas pulkstenis.
9. ✓	Bage, Michails Maksima d.	•1 nikelēts rokas pulkstenis un •1 balta met.zimulis.
10. ✓	Bērs, Dēvids Judeļa d.	•1 Triju zvaigžņu ordenis.
11. ✓	Birnove, Zeliķis Morducha d.	•1 dzelt.met.kabatas pulkstenis, ar tēva vārdu saiti.

The list of Jews and Communists arrested and held in Riga Central Prison, dated August 4, 1941. Joseph's name is the second on the list. The document indicates those personal items that were taken from him (in the right-hand column). An archivist at the Jewish Museum in Riga, where the document is located, told me that the line drawn through the name indicates that the individual was shot.

Joseph's fate was shared by his entire family who had not left Latvia. His father and mother Wulf and Gitel had died in 1928 and 1940 respectively. Three of his siblings had also died before the War. But his eldest brother Itzig, a pharmacist in Daugavpils, was killed in that city in 1941. Itzig's wife Jeva and his daughter Esther were killed in Riga. Joseph's three sisters Lea, Lipe and Roza as well as his cousin Gitele were all shot on the dunes of Libau during the massacres that took place there between December 15-17, 1941. Several other distant cousins were murdered in Kuldiga, Aizpute, Riga and Libau.

And yet, through an accident of birth and of wanderlust, my family remains. My great-grandfather Bernhard Benjaminson was the third cousin of Joseph's father Wulf. For some economic reason or inner motivation, he left

Latvia for South Africa and subsequently the U.S., as did his mother and all of his siblings. I'm not sure that I feel any sense of survivor's guilt, but I do feel keenly how differently things might have been. It could well have been my father (born in 1918) or my mother (born in 1922) who had stood in final bewilderment on the beaches of Libau or the forests of Riga. An unconscious collective societal memory does strike me as a plausible concept, and nurturing it from time to time serves a purpose beyond just rescuing ancestors' names from oblivion. Reminding ourselves of their stories helps us put into context the pluses and minuses of our own lives and those of our families, within boundaries more difficult to discern than the fences built up in our daily successes and defeats.