

## In search of Max Goodman's Childhood.

Ken is writing a children's book loosely based on his father's childhood. Max Goodman was born Duvid Mendel Gutman in 1897 in Smorgon, then in Lithuania about 50 miles east of Vilnius (Vilna). Now it is in Belarus. His father was a rabbi & rebbe; his older sisters were radicals. In 1904 sister Kate left for Chicago followed in 1905 by Anna just ahead of the Czar's police. In 1906 they sent for the others: father Yankle Leib, mother Mary, sisters Dora and Sarah (later Selma) and Duvid Mendle. He became Max in school in Chicago.

**First stop Vilnius:** On June 19, 2002 we arrived in Vilnius. Svetlana Satalova was our guide; she engaged Victor to be our driver. We divided our time between Vilnius and Lithuania and Smorgon and Belarus. Around Vilnius we traveled on a divided highway built in Soviet times between Vilnius and Kaunas (Kovna). It goes through a very large, old Jewish cemetery. Almost all of it is lost. Removed tombstones are now steps of Soviet era buildings in Vilnius. We would visit many Jewish cemeteries in various stages of decay on this trip. They are the most tangible evidence of the extensive Jewish population who spent their lives here and of the abrupt end of their communities between 1941-44.



Rebbe and Heder boys: Vilna Jewish museum

We traveled through areas of birch trees and evergreens, with fields of grass and wild flowers. We visited our first shtetl, Vievies, just off the highway. In a number of such shtetlach, the houses survived but the Jews who lived in them perished. Jewish houses in Max's time usually surrounded the market square and had two doors, one for the shop and one for the living quarters. Some houses seem to be virtually unchanged for decades: mostly wooden structures.



Former Jewish house with 2 doors

Trakai was one of the first places to have Jewish settlers in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The grand duke built a castle there on an island in a lake. He brought communities of Tartars and Karaites for protection from the Poles. The Karaites broke off from main stream Judaism in biblical times. They believe in the Torah but not the Talmud. The rabbis told the Germans the Karaites were not Jews so they were largely spared.

*A thought – It's such irony that the Goodman family survived the holocaust because of persecution and unrest that drove them out of Smorgon and to America. But for that there would have been no modern Goodman family*

We visited the killing ground of Ponarai. 100,000 humans were massacred there including 70,000 Jews, many from Smorgon. There were a few survivors of the massacres and a few gentile observers were forced to cook and clean for the Nazis so the story has been well documented. Of all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Lithuania had the highest percentage of Jews who died in the holocaust, 94%. Lucy Topohansoe, a Navajo poet, has a poem about camping as a child with her family at the site of a massacre of her Navajo people. Their ghosts seem to be haunting the site. So it seemed to us as we viewed the huge indentations in the earth that marked the mass graves the Nazis and their local collaborators had their victims dig including some to whom we were surely related in the several centuries our family lived in this area. Surely their spirits are still lingering in this beautiful space testifying as Lucy's spirits did to the capacity for inhumane acts human beings have perpetrated on each other over the centuries.



Pit for those murdered at Ponarai; Lith.



Saadya Gaon, Vilnius

**Vilnius:** In the 14<sup>th</sup> century Grand Duke, Gediminas invited craftsmen from the west of Europe to live in Vilnius. Many Jews came because of persecutions going on in their home communities. A synagogue appeared around the 15th century.

Our hotel is on Glassmakers (Stikliai) Street which intersects with Butcher (Mesinij) Street, Jewish (Zydu) Street and Gaon Street. Nearby is a major blvd. called German street. It was named for early German artisans who lived there. Napoleon is supposed to have first used the phrase the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" to refer to Vilnius. Yiddish flourished in Vilnius because there was no

majority language. At the time of WWI only about 5% of the population was Lithuanian. Forty percent were Poles, 30-35% were Jews and there were Russians, Ukrainians, Belarussians, Karaites, Tartars, Gypsies and Turks. All sustained their own languages. Vilna became a cultural center for Yiddish language, arts, drama, publishing, etc. The Saadya Gaon was the most important Jewish religious authority in Europe.

In 1915, the Germans occupied Vilnius and treated the Jews much better than they were treated by the Tsar. So when the Germans came back in 1941, Jews were not alarmed and saw the Germans as sane, civilized and educated. The Tsar strongly encouraged (often forcibly) Jews to move to Russia in the 1915 period which many did. Half the population of Smorgon died in a forced march in WWI. Poorer Jews from German lands and Poland came to live in Vilnius. At that time you could see Jewish women sitting in front of their houses or at street corners on seats warmed by hot coals selling their wares. Since WWII the majority of Jews in Vilnius are Russian. In the modern cemetery the stones are inscribed in Russian.

Jews of Lithuania, Latvia and Belarus, all were called Litvaks. They were also known as the Misnagdim in contrast with the Hasidim. Quite near our hotel is a triangle intersection of Butcher Street, Gaon Street and German Street. A plaque is there showing the area that became the small ghetto and a much larger area a few blocks away that became the big ghetto. The Nazis and their collaborators separated those they regarded as able bodied from those who were old, children or useless. The small ghetto only lasted 1 ½ months until Oct. '41. On Yom Kippur that year, Jews concentrated in prayer houses were seized and transported to Panorai to be murdered.

There were many synagogues, prayer houses and yeshivas in the area near the Old Synagogue called the schulheis which bordered German Street. The old Jewish shops have given way to trendy restaurants, boutiques, coffee houses and other fancy stores. What is now the park-like center of German street has under it the cellars of the bombed out Jewish buildings. There are stories that gold and silver were buried in cellars there during the ghetto times.

The leader of the Vilna Jewish community at the time the Nazis took over was Jacob Gens. His plan was to save the younger generation and the intellectuals by making the ghetto useful to the Germans. He organized many workshops to produce supplies. Those Jews the Germans considered useful were given yellow passes but each family was limited to two adults and two children. Gens saved other members of families by attaching children to families who had less than two. Hirsch Glick who composed Zog Nit Keinmal was among the Jews in the big ghetto. He, with others, was sent to Estonia when the ghetto was closed down in 1943 and he died in the camp there.

**Smorgon and Belarus** During Soviet times the trip from Vilnius to Smorgon took an hour. We got to the Belarus border in ½ hour. We got through the border in 30 minutes. We never had to get out of the car. Victor must have convinced them we were old and feeble. On the way to Smorgon, we saw other shtetls such as Ashmyany (Oshmany) dating from 1384. It's now a town of 30,000. The Jewish cemetery is surrounded by Soviet style apartment buildings. Goats graze nearby. The mayor's office has a statue of Lenin in front of it. We were greeted by women and children, eager to talk. Tiny wild strawberries grew in the woods even among the gravestones in the cemeteries. There were also black currants.

An elaborate sign welcomed us to Smorgon now a town of 40,000. Arrangements had been made for us to stay in the apartment of a local librarian, Valentina. Her apartment has two small bedrooms. It's very neat with carpets on the floor, chairs and a couch. Everything was quite clean. The entrance to the apartment building was dirty with broken tiles, chipped concrete and paint. The whole scene reminded us of a similar building in Kazakhstan. The apartment had a separate small room with a toilet and another small room with a bath and sink. Hot water was available. In Valentina's one tush kitchen we had a discussion about present life and work in Smorgon. Her salary is \$45 a month. Her husband is a government driver and gets \$55 a month. Teachers make about 50 dollars a month and doctors don't get much more. The local factories are closed or closing. People are leaving Belarus



to go to Russia for jobs and better benefits. We had a light supper – Jewish tasting salami and rye, and cucumbers and tomatoes. The first evening she asked us what kinds of things we liked to eat and we mentioned borscht, blintzes, kasha, potato kugel and soup. All of these showed up in the meals we were served. It was the first day of summer and the day was over 20 hours of sunshine.



6.19.99

Jews were in Smorgon at least as early as 1672. Another source indicates that craftsmen came to Smorgon in 1503. All sources agree that the two things Smorgon was known for are the Bear Academy and the bagels (called baronaks in Belarussian) that originated in Smorgon. Also important is the leather industry that developed in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Smor means tarpits in Belarussian and that is one account for the name. Another source said it comes from the Baltic word for apprentice.

Count Radziwill was the major local nobleman, "so rich he could entertain 1,000 people for dinner". He started the bear academy in Smorgo332n. The story is that he hired unemployed Gypsies and Jews to capture the local bears and train them . Gypsies often exhibited bears with collars at fairs around Europe. Our information from the Jewish Smorgon Yiskor book had Jews involved with training bears. Orphan bears from Estonia are still sent to Belarus for retraining to go back to the forests. The bear academy existed until 1914 when the town was totally destroyed



Museum model of Smorgon circa 1900

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A model of Smorgon shows the synagogue, with a dome, in one corner with two story brick houses owned by Jews surrounding it. Some brick houses survive, but they were probably rebuilt after WWI.



Tanner's Street in Smorgon

References report that 20- 75% of the population in all of Vilna gubernia were Jewish. 50% of the industry in the region was Jewish and included crafts, leather work, tailors and also Jewish tenant farmers. In Smorgon there was a street called Gorbarnaya (tanners) with over 30 leather tanneries. The tanneries had hot and cold areas because the working of the leather required that. The workers had to handle acid, salt and hammers and sewing machines. The museum also has a recreation of a bakery where baronaks were made. Baronak means boiled. Bagel in Yiddish means twisted. Four women usually worked in each bakery. The bakery ground its own grain. It had a place to mix and kneed the dough, a place to sift the flour. Some bagels were pretzel shaped or round. Some were boiled with sugar or honey. After boiling they dried and turned yellow as they baked. Then they were strung on a rope and put in a basket for sale in the markets. They were exported to other Baltic countries and as far away as Poland and Sweden. The workers were only women and every bakery had its own secret recipe.

We also got help from Nadezhda Markova who is chief curator of the Smorgon museum. She is interested in the Jewish and labor history of Smorgon and had organized some pictures and documents from the museums archives for us. She had pictures of an 1905 demonstration of workers. The workers were accused of spreading anti-government propoganda. She had pictures of Ulitza Minska, a street where only Jews lived. Bagel bakers and leather workers struck for a 12 hour day. Many workers were women and girls who worked for 50 kopeks a day. Women were also carriers of water, milk and wood for heating . Grandmother Mary carried milk in a yoke across her shoulders. A family story is that she carried milk the day after Max was born

Goodman appears as a common Jewish name in the area in the form Gutman, Guttman, Gutterman, and Gutmanus(Lithuanian ending). But we found no specific reference to any Goodmans in Smorgon. We believe Max's family lived outside smorgon in Karka, where Jews were tenant farmers on Radziwill's lands. It had a flour mill on a small lake. There was a synagogue and rabbi's house next to it at the time of Max's childhood but it's only known from oral history. Karka is now part of the town. In Smorgon some Jews lived above their shops in two story houses but in the typical shtetl the house was one story with two doors. Because few houses in Lithuanian and Belarussian shtetls are well maintained it's hard to tell how old any given house is. Some houses are constructed of notched hand hewn timbers and appear very old. In the Nazi period, Karka was the small ghetto but that



Site of synagogue & Rabbi's House in Karka

only lasted a few months and Smorgon was the big ghetto. Then they were joined in one ghetto including Jews from nearby shtetlach. 3,500 Jews were killed here or transported to Ponorai and killed there.

Another shtetl near Smorgon is Kreva. We caused quite a stir as we walked in Kreva. People in the area remember Jews being undressed and taken somewhere naked but they don't know where. The local seamstress escaped when the Nazis gathered the Jews but her daughter was killed. There are righteous people in this area that get a pension from Israel. Svetlana says such people in Lithuania also get a govt. pension. The Kreva Jewish cemetery is the only surviving Jewish cemetery in the Smorgon district. The Soviets destroyed the Smorgon cemetery and Nazis destroyed the Soli cemetery. Part of the Kreva cemetery is still under care.



Friendly people in Kreva

On our way back from Smorgon to Lithuania we noted that the collective farms are still operating but when we crossed into Lithuania the fields had no crops or livestock. Lithuania ended the collective farms but no system developed to replace it and the farmers have lost their Russian markets.

**Kovno:** David was our driver and guide for our day trip to Kovno. Lithuania's second in size and most Lithuanian city. He was born in 1936 in Kaunas (Kovno). He was one of the 6% of Lithuanian Jews who survived the war. He's more comfortable in Yiddish than English and David and Yetta code switched all day. His Yiddish was very easy for Yetta to understand.

Here's David's story. His mother got word that there would an "action" against the children in the ghetto. He'd been living there for 2 years. His mother had gone to school with a non-Jewish friend who hid them in Kaunas. David's family was taken to a small village in the North where the friend's parents lived. He, his sister and his parents survived there. David speaks the northern dialect of Lithuanian like a native.

A suburb of Kovno is called Slobodka which means a free community. It was the Jewish quarter since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As craftsmen, workers and merchants they were granted freedom from feudal obligations. It became the ghetto under the Nazis for Jews in the town and surrounding shtetlach. There used to be 60-80,000 Jews in Kaunas but they were a minority. There are about 400 now.

Kaunas had its own killing field, the Ninth Fort, which was established in the time of Napoleon. Now it is a memorial to Russians, Jews, Lithuanians and many others who died there. 15,000 Jews from Riga were killed there. One sign said the Nazis and their associates killed 30,000 Jews from Lithuania and other European countries. The city of Munich sent a plaque expressing their shame at doing nothing to prevent the Jews from being deported here to be killed. A stone inscribed in French remembers 878 Jews from France.

**In Summary:** We went seeking Max Goodman's childhood. We found the place and walked where he walked.. We found pictures and historical documents of the strikes and revolutionary activities that sent my aunts to America with the family following but no direct evidence that our family ever existed there. Smorgon was destroyed in World War I, then rebuilt, so that there were 25,000 Jews there in 1940. But the roots of our family growing in that soil for so many generations were cut off abruptly by the Nazis and their local allies. I hope in my book for children to recreate the world of my father which still influences his children and grandchildren

### New Books From Ken and Yetta

A new collection of Ken's selected writing is just out, edited by former students Alan Flurkey and Jingguo Xu. The title is On the Revolution of Reading



which is taken from the title of the book on heavenly bodies by Copernicus. It contains articles written or co-authored by Ken.

Yetta also has a new book co-authored with Gretchen Owocki. Kidwatching is on holistic ways of assessing children. Yetta popularized the term kidwatching to mean the developed ability of professional teachers to evaluate children through careful observation. Both books are published by Heinemann.

