

Combining Latvian Archives and Yad Vashem Database for Research

by Howard Wolinsky

More than 25 years ago, inspired by Alex Haley's *Roots*, I began to research my family's roots. But I could only go so far. Told that records no longer existed in Latvia and Lithuania, I gave up—for a while. With the advent of the Internet and the fall of communism, I took another whack at it, inspired this time by AVOTAYNU. I organized groups of relatives and people who thought they might be related. I found some of the latter online. We ordered records from archives and, for our Latvian connection, we hired Aleksandrs Feigmanis, AVOTAYNU's contributing editor for Latvia. We had traced the family to the early 1800s or late 1700s, but then the trail went cold.

By 2000, a group of descendants of families named Slivkin from Dvinsk, Latvia, had concluded that our research nearly was complete. We had emptied the Latvian archives of records, and Feigmanis had pulled together a 100-page report on this family, filled with information from revision lists and other resources.

Three families named Slivkin (also Slivken and Slifkin in English) appeared in records from the end of the 18th century. We assumed that the three heads of households had been brothers. After all, we had heard over and over that "all the Slivkins are related" and had socialized together before moving on to Riga, the United States, Russia and Israel. Of those who had remained in Latvia, the professionals concluded that, in some cases, when family names disappeared from building registers, they had been killed in the Holocaust. Some members of the group who began their research as early as 30 years ago, felt a new sense of mission in the 1990s when the Communist barriers to information fell and the Internet opened speedy new flows of information. Now the puzzle had been completed, and we were ready to put away our research.

Our smug reverie of 2000 didn't last long. Sometime in 2001, I heard from my Israeli cousin Avi Lishower about some new information he had received from the Latvian archives. In an e-mail, Avi reported receiving photographs of his father's family. Did the archives have any Slivkin photos? Photographs would help bring these people alive. Too often we just had names on a family tree with a birth date and a possible date of death. Sometimes we had an occupation; they were wood merchants and cabinet makers.

I wrote to the Latvian State Archives (Slokas Street 16, Riga, LV-1007). Time flows at different rates in this type of work. I heard from Avi in Israel in virtually real time. I am dealing with people who lived decades ago, even centuries ago. I contacted the archives via air mail and sometimes by e-mail, but it took them months to respond,

FOTOGRAFIJAS:



Paraksts:

PAZIŠANAS ZĪMES:

Visoārejās: Sevišķās:

a) augums *videja*

b) mati *tuuti*

c) acis *melnas*

d)

e)

Kas sniedz ziņas un zem kāda Nē *11/1931g*

lenāk. Nē *Rīgas rajons*

Lietas Nē *15-140/31g*

Reģ. akta Nē

Portion of arrest record of Chaya Slivkin

because they have a backlog—and then when they find something and you say that you would like it, you must mail checks or money orders and wait in the queue again.

In 2002, the archives confirmed that they had some Slivkin photographs. I mailed a check and requested that they send the images via e-mail. Half a dozen images arrived, most of the people were dressed in their Sabbath best, but one picture, that of Chaya (or Haja) Slivkin, looked different. She looked as if she had not slept much and even that she had been roughed up. I asked the archives about the source of the photographs. Jelena Polovcvea wrote in March 2002 that Chaya's photo "was taken from the records of Political Administration as Chaya was arrested for pro-Communist activity. Other photos were taken from the Latvian passports."

This find sparked more discussion than I had seen in years in a group that seemed to be winding down. Why was Chaya arrested? Yevgeny Slivken, whose family came

Family of Chaya Slivkin Cinman:
Frida, Keila (sitting), Zalman,
Rachil, Aron (sitting), Chaya



from Dvinsk and who had grown up in St. Petersburg, especially was intrigued. "In the 1920s and 1930s, Communists were still idealists. Some were heroes," said Yevgeny, a Russian-language professor and former journalist. My brother Gary suggested that we find the police blotter. I wrote to the archives once more, and in September 2003 we received the translated arrest records.

According to the police, starting at age 18, Chaya had been involved in a number of political groups and had been arrested more than once. She was a member of the forbidden Communist society, *Energija*, Daugavpils (formerly Dvinsk) section, and a member of the forbidden sports and cultural society, *Posvieshchenie*. Chaya had been arrested on May Day, 1930, for attempting to participate in a Communist demonstration. Things stepped up in 1931. On January 16, 1931, she was arrested for involvement in a demonstration on behalf of the unemployed. On February 3, 1931, at a meeting of a women's activist group involved in International Woman's Day (directed by the Communist Party), the police found Chaya's address and "Communist documents." "At a search of an apartment, sheaves of papers were thrown out a window," the police reported. Chaya had been jailed for weeks and was released on March 2, 1931. She did not, however, stay out of trouble.

On March 19, 1931, at the National House in Riga, Fedor Dan, a leader in the Socialist Democratic Labor Party, was giving a speech. The party had splintered when Vladimir Lenin contended that there should be a small party of professional revolutionaries with a large group of non-party sympathizers. His opponents favored a large party of activists based on a model in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Lenin disagreed and formed the Bolsheviks, while his opponents, including Fedor Dan, formed the Mensheviks.

Chaya had thrown her lot in with the Bolsheviks and disrupted Dan's speech. According to the police report,

"Bolsheviks in the dock made a noise and fought against [the] guard[s] when they arrested other infringers of the order." The police said that Chaya had "organized the disorder according to the instructions of the Communist Party and was arrested." Chaya was released on a bond of 1,000 Latvian lats on May 7, 1931, but was sent to the Terminal Prison in Riga on July 14, 1931, where she remained until July 9, 1934.

Then what? Then the Chaya trail went cold. Did she move on to join the war against Fascism in Spain? Did she survive the Holocaust? The archives had no further information, and we assumed that we would never find answers to our questions.

In November 2004, I received another letter from the Latvian archives asking if I was interested in some new records they had found. I answered yes and waited a few more months.

The note from the archives arrived on January 20, 2005, nearly three years after our first glimpse of Chaya's photo. A researcher had found records showing that Chaya was living with her parents, Aaron Abram and Keila, in Dvinsk in 1935. She was a saleswoman at a textile shop on Vadona Street. The records also mention her sister Riva, born in 1903, and brother Zalman, born in 1901, who worked as an accountant in a bank. Here again the trail ended.

In passing, the researcher mentioned that Aaron and Keila Slivkin were listed as having been killed in 1941 in Daugavpils, according to a record submitted to Yad Vashem by Frida Peled, a daughter not mentioned in the 1935 census because she was in Palestine. Could this be the same family? I located the record on the Yad Vashem database (www.yadvashem.org) and found that a Page of Testimony had been submitted in 1955. (Until this point, I had not thought to check the database for this family.)

Immediately I sent an e-mail message to Avi asking if he could try to find Frida Peled. Avi checked the Page of

Testimony and found Frida's family in two days. He reported:

I knew I was lucky when I saw the address as Kibbutz Kevozat Kinert because the testimony had been given many years ago. If she were living in a city, it would have been difficult to find her. I called the main number at the kibbutz. The switchboard operator advised me to call the kibbutz museum where a sympathetic woman answered. She had known Frida well and briefly told me the family's history, including the name of the kibbutz where Yuval's family (Frida's son) lived.

From Yuval, Avi reached other family members and was given a summary of the family tree.

Frida had died in 1999. Also a socialist, she had made *aliyah* (immigration) in the late 1920s or early 1930s and helped to found the town of Ramat Gan. She had two sons and a daughter. Her younger son, Aviu, died while taking Jerusalem during the Six Days War. Avi also learned from Frida's son that her sisters, Chaya and Riva, and brother, Zalman, all had survived the Holocaust, although they were spread to the winds and lived on three different continents.

Avi also learned that one of Chaya's sons, Arnold Cinman, a transplant surgeon, lives in Los Angeles. I found Arnold by entering his name in GOOGLE.COM, with a photograph and biography noting that he originally had come from South Africa. I also found an e-mail address and sent him a note. On January 25, 2005, he confirmed that Chaya (also known as Chaia, Haya and Chana, Annie) had survived and had emigrated to South Africa. Arnold wrote:

As far as I know, she became a teacher and moved to Riga. She was active in the Labor movement (a proud Leftist), supporting Soviet principles, and was arrested for these activities—as you know.

In Riga, Chaya had met a shoemaker named Joseph Cinman, also from Dvinsk; they met through their activities in the Workers Movement. Joseph emigrated to Johannesburg in 1930 in search of a better future.

Arnold continued:

Apparently he corresponded with my mother while she was in jail and was able to have her released if she left the country. He brought her to South Africa circa 1935/6 and they married on 5/1/1936 (May Day!!).

Chaya maintained her interest in politics. She named her first son, born in 1941, Stanley after Stalin. In addition to Arnold born in 1948, Chaya had a daughter Ghita, born in 1938. After apartheid was imposed in South Africa in the late 1940s, Chaya remained a leftist and was involved with activities to help the Blacks. Many of her friends were imprisoned, banned, exiled and assassinated. My mother and her friends were active in the 1950s and 1960s. I remember, as a kid of eight or nine, the South African secret police raided our house to look for subversive literature (a strange experience similar to having the Gestapo knock on your front door at 5 a.m.) Fortunately, they didn't find anything. I remember a political fugitive (Dick Harmel) living in our house for a year to avoid arrest. After this, my mother pretty much gave up her political activities. She was invited to attend Man-

dela's inauguration ceremony in Pretoria.

Chaya died in 2001 in Johannesburg. Arnold had brought his family to live in Los Angeles in 1980. Ghita and Stanley still live in South Africa. According to Zalman's granddaughter, Chaya's brother, his wife and daughter, and Chaya's sister Riva (whose own family had been killed) survived the Holocaust because they escaped to Siberia just before the Nazis captured Riga. They returned to Riga after the war, where both Zalman and Riva died. Zalman's family emigrated to Israel in 1973.

Among the many lessons this story revealed to our group is how important it is never to conclude that the research is over, that all the records and people have been found.

Howard Wolinsky began thinking about genealogy while reading the Abegets in Genesis in Hebrew High School on Chicago's South Side. He began his research in earnest in 1978. Wolinsky was especially drawn to uncover Chaya Slivkin's fate, in part because he was arrested twice as a draft resister during the Vietnam War. He works as a technology reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times.

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Alexander Dunai

Oleny Stepanivny Street 17/2

Lviv, Ukraine 290016

Tel: 011-380-322-331-162

email: dunai@dunai.lviv.ua

References Available

WRITING YOUR FAMILY HISTORY?

For professional editing and/or word
processing service, contact:

Irene Saunders Goldstein

2975 S. Columbus St.

Arlington, VA 22206

(703) 933-0011

- Associate Editor, AVOTAYNU
- Copy Editor, *APG Quarterly*, Assn. of Professional Genealogists