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Exploring Roots in a BYGONE WORLD

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Editor's View BY RABBI PINCHOS LIPSCHUTZ

Exploring Roots in a Bygone World

Last Wednesday afternoon, I sat in Newark Airport, waiting at the gate for a plane. What, you ask, is the big deal?

I was waiting for a Lufthansa flight. I have never flown on the German airline and I am generally averse to all things German. But I'm flying to Lithuania, and that's the way the arrangements were made.

I have never been to Lita. Until now, it has been a mythical place, something from the past, often referred to with reverence and varying degrees of holiness.

I've been hearing about Lita for as long as

I can remember. I am a first-generation American. My mother was born there. Although my father was born in Massachusetts, he has always viewed himself as hailing from Kovno.

My brother was around twelve years old when he met Rav Shlomo Wolbe. "Shalom aleichem," the young American lad said.

"What is your name?" the *mussar* great asked.

"Lipschutz," he responded.

"And where are you from?" Rav Wolbe asked.

My brother answered, "Kovno!"

I was sitting at the gate thinking of that encounter, finally about to connect to my roots and breathe Lithuanian air. I am not foolish enough to ignore the reality of the number of Jews slaughtered by Lithuanians during the war and during the 700 years that Jews lived in that country. Although there were far fewer pogroms and anti-Semitic crimes and atrocities there compared to elsewhere, I have no illusions about the country and its people.

Read about the trip, and the accompanying feelings, sights and sounds as I encountered my roots, beginning on page 30.

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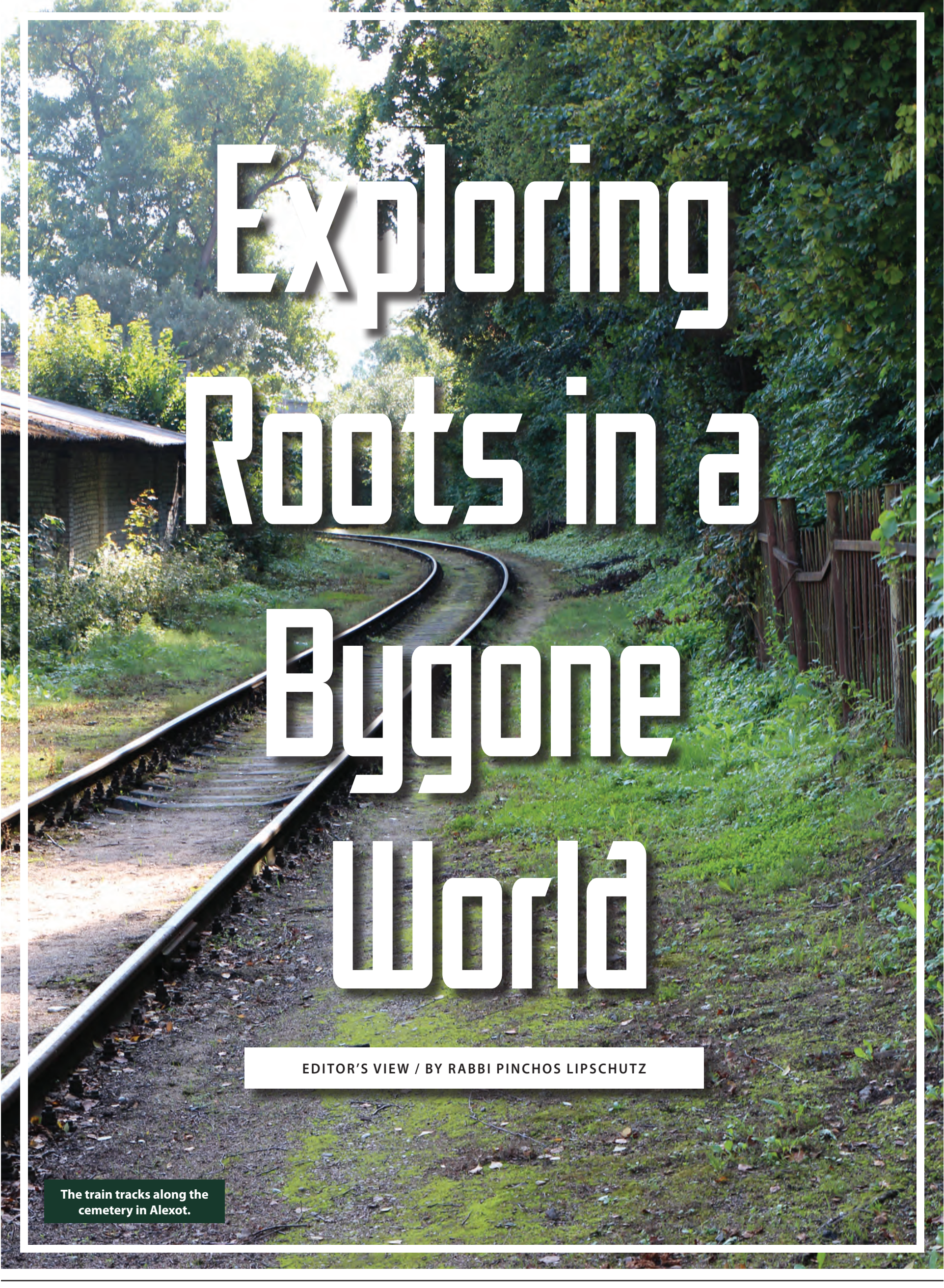
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Exploring Roots in a Bygone World

EDITOR'S VIEW / BY RABBI PINCHOS LIPSCHUTZ

The train tracks along the cemetery in Alexot.

PHOTOS BY AVI YISHAI

Here I am, last Wednesday afternoon, at Newark Airport, waiting at the gate for a plane. What, you ask, is the big deal?

I am waiting for a Lufthansa flight. I have never flown on the German airline and I am generally averse to all things German. But I'm flying to Lithuania, and that's the way the arrangements were made.

I have never been to Lita. Until now, it has been a mythical place, something from the past, often referred to with reverence and varying degrees of holiness.

I've been hearing about Lita for as long as I can remember. I am a first-generation American. My mother was born there. Although my father was born in Massachusetts, he always viewed himself as hailing from Kovno.

And here I am, finally about to connect to my roots and breathe Lithuanian air. I am not foolish enough to ignore the reality of the number of Jews slaughtered by Lithuanians during the war and during the 700 years that Jews lived in that country. Although there were far fewer pogroms and anti-Semitic crimes and atrocities there compared to elsewhere, I have no illusions about the country and its people. Despite that, Lita has a calling for me.

Think about how much the lives of today's *yeshiva* people are influenced by Lita. We are all about tradition and *mesorah*. Much of our *mesorah* can be traced to there.

The Vilna Gaon, hailed by the *Chazon Ish* as a *Rishon*, has influenced our views on many things, especially the way we learn, *pasken*, and conduct ourselves. Rav Chaim Volozhiner, his prime *talmid*, founded the first *yeshiva* as we know it and authored *Nefesh Hachaim*, a blueprint of Jewish thought.

Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spector, the towering giant who was the *rov* of Kovno, was viewed in his time as the leader of all Torah Jews. His Talmudic brilliance earned him universal respect and his kindness won him everyone's love.

Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzensky was the king of *Litvishe bnei Torah* and the Jewish people. Nothing happened without his involvement. His home was the central address for difficult *halachic* queries, Talmudic discussions, charitable endeavors, and everything else on the Jewish agenda.

The *rabbonim* in the *shtetlach* were giants, one a bigger *gaon* than the next. They lived in financial poverty, but amidst spiritual richness.

Infused with a love for Torah from a young age, the townspeople spent much time in the local *shul*, *davening* and studying to whatever degree they were able.

My mother's father was a *rov* in a small *shtetel* named Vashki, a position he inherited from his father-in-law, a *talmid* of Volozhin.

The people and *rabbonim* were known to be unfailingly humble, oftentimes serious, and basically good. Many went on to earn much fame, as word of their brilliance spread, by word of mouth and by virtue of the *seforim* and *divrei Torah* that they published.

So much of the Torah that was replanted after the war can be traced to the *yeshivos* of Lita, such as Slabodka, Kletzk, Ponovezh, Mir and Telz. So much of the Torah we study is from Brisk and its great *talmidim*. So many of the stories we grew up with were about *gedolei* Lita. Brisk, Kletzk, Ponovezh, Radin, Vilna, and Kovno are names known to every school child.

The *Chofetz Chaim* and Rav Elchonon, the *Bais Halevi* and Rav Chaim, Rav Meir Simcha, Rav Shimon, the Alter of Slabodka, the Alter of Kelm, Rav Doniel and Rav Yeruchom, Rav Boruch Ber and Rav Naf-toli... So many giants of that world guided our nation and raised *talmidim* who led our

way in uncharted waters.

Lita... Where would we be without you?

.....

I find my seat and take out the *seforim* and books I brought along for the trip. First one I read is Rav Elchonon Wasserman's *Ikvisa D'Moshicha*. Rabbi Ephraim Oshry's *Annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry* is too sad to read. I usually take it out on *Tisha B'Av*. I brought it along for the trip and begin to read about the cities and towns of Lita and how thousands met their end across the country. And I wonder: Why am I going? Why in the world would I go to the place where so many were butchered to death for no reason other than being Jewish?

But I read on.

I read of what was and how it ended. I want to grasp on to what was. I want to

walk on those streets our ancestors walked on. I want to be where Jews once scurried about, buying food for *Shabbos*. I want to stand in front of the *shuls* and imagine little *Yiddelach* running to *daven* and to learn *Ein Yaakov*.

I want to stand at the corner where Torah went forth to all of *Klal Yisroel*. I want to paint in my mind's eye the majestic Slabodka Yeshiva that stood on that spot until its students were ripped out and killed 76 years ago last month.

I want to be in Kovno and feel the golden and sometimes acidic pen of my great-grandfather, Rav Yaakov Lipschutz, and be inspired never to quit or compromise. I want to find the secret of his genius. I want to tap into the *gadlus* of Rav Yitzchok Elchonon and the greats of the ages. I want to feel it. I

The anticipation increases.

Flying to Vilna? Do planes actually land there? Is it a real place with an airport and not just the mythical subject of much lore?

We walk through the hot airport, which is teeming with people. I look in their eyes, trying to determine which ones are Germans and which ones are just passing through. Many don't seem bad at all, and I'm sure that the vast majority are fine people.

People say much time has passed and things have changed. They buy and enjoy luxury German vehicles. After having been there, I can safely say I'd never purchase one.

Call me a *golus* Jew if you will, but after a few minutes, I begin identifying the Aryans - blond, serious, no smiles, with a certain smugness and self confidence. Yes, they



A monument erected in memory of the Jews killed at the Ninth Fort.



A monument in memory of Jews who were reinterred in Alexot.

want it to impact me.

I will be staying in Kovno and I hope it will.

I have another book with me. My friend gave it to me when he drove me to the airport. It's for tourists. The book is enlightening, but also depressing. It contains a brief history of each town. They all end the same way. A *kever achim*. Every town has a *kever achim*, where the townspeople were buried when the Nazis marched in.

Lithuania was overrun by Germany in the early stages of the war, before the death machines were put in place in the concentration camps. The Jews were taken to the outskirts of the town, shot, and thrown into a pit. They were the lucky ones. At least they were buried.

People come every once in a while and take pictures of the monument, shake their heads, shed some tears, and move on to the next town, where they do the same.

How tragic.

I put away the books, learn the *Daf Yomi*, read something on the *parsha*, and try to sleep.

Who can sleep on a trip like this?

.....

After an uneventful flight, we land in Frankfurt and wait for the connecting flight to Vilna.

I have never been to Lita before. Till now, it was a mythical place, something from the past.

are the perfect race and they know it. They stare at me. *What are you doing alive and in my country? How dare you?*

I stare back just to make them feel uncomfortable. They stare back at me with a menacing look and I thank Hashem that our encounter is taking place in a public place and not on an empty street of some picturesque small town. They give me that look again and again. It haunts me.

No, they are not all that way. Most are not. But I look at those who are and want to ask them if they would join the SS, and if their father and grandfather did. I think the better of it and move on to my gate, where I wait for my flight to mythical Vilna and a taxi ride to Kovno, where my grandparents lived and fought many battles for Torah.

.....

Our flight is announced. We get on a bus for a ride to the plane. I take a window seat opposite the door to the rear of the empty bus. I watch the bus fill up. The seat next to me remains vacant. People get on the bus, look at the seat, look at me and say to themselves, “No way.” The seat remains empty. Elderly people get on. They look longingly at the seat and shake their heads. They’d rather stand than sit next to me. And so it goes. Right before the bus leaves the gate, an elderly couple hobbles on. The husband motions with his steely blue eyes to the wife to sit down. She shakes her head. *Nein*. But she can barely stand. He tells her to sit and she does. I smile and say hi. And that was the end of the conversation.

(When I took the bus on my return route after the flight from Vilna landed in Frankfurt, I tried the little test once more. This time, as packed as the bus was from the plane to the terminal, every person who got on looked at me, with hate and spite, and decided that they’d rather stand than sit next to the Jew.)

I look around and try to pick out the Lithuanians from the Germans. The Lithuanians have a Jewish appearance. Just put a *yarmulka* on them and they would be counted for a *minyan* wherever they go.

The bus arrives at the plane taking us to Vilna. I climb up the steps and I am greeted by a smiling stewardess. “So, you must be Mr. Lipschutz,” she says with a smirk. I smile and say, “How did you guess?”

I make my way to my seat and sit down. It is near the front. People walk by as they search for their seats. They look at me, some stare, and move on. I want to ask them what they are staring at. I know the answer, so I don’t. I stare back.

I know how it feels to be black.

.....

I had come with my brother-in-law, Rav Meir Gelley, to participate in the *chanukas habayis* of the first *mikvah* in Kovno since the horrible events of the war.

Mr. Zev Stern from London does business in Kovno and noticed that many Israeli students come to the city to attend its medical school. He established a *moadon* community center, where the students would be able to fraternize with Jews. There would be outreach, kosher food, *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov* celebrations, and hopefully, one day, Torah classes.

His dream was realized. The center is run by Rav Moshe Schonfeld, a *talmid* of Rav Moshe Shapiro, and his wife. The *mikvah* is an indication of the success of their efforts.

At a location just one block away from the house of Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spector, a property was purchased and renovated, with a gorgeous *mikvah* inside. It was dedicated partly in memory of my mother *a”h*, who personified the holiness and purity of *Litvishe* women. She was born in a Lithuanian *shtetel* where her father served as *rov*



The home of Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spector zt”l in Kovno.



Kovno’s infamous Ninth Fort.



The kever of the Vilna Gaon zt”l.

and carried its memory with dignity.

It is an emotional occasion as I quietly think about her and the renaissance the *mikvah* represents on a road my great-grandfather had definitely spent much time.

Later, there is a festive dinner, with what seems like 150 Israeli guests, plus a few locals and some tables of people who have come to mark the historic occasion. The Stern family is there to celebrate with their parents, as are Mr. and Mrs. Leiby Levin-

son, who dedicated the *mikvah* in memory of Mrs. Levinson’s father.

Dayan Broide from Bnei Brak delivers a fiery *drosha* and the students hang on to his every word.

A concert follows. I leave. Tomorrow is another day.

.....

On Friday, we visited sights of Kovno and Slabodka. It was a moving, emotional, heartrending experience. It was also spiritu-

ally fulfilling in a strange sense. We started at the *kever* of Rav Yitzchok Elchonon, whose remains were moved to the cemetery of the city of Alexot from Kovno, when the large historic cemetery there was threatened.

Due to my family’s connection to Rav Yitzchok Elchonon, being at his *kever* was, in a certain sense, coming full circle for me. Here I was, “meeting him” for the first time, asking On High that we be blessed in the merit of his Torah and many activities



seems to carry more grief than is possible to grasp. And then you come upon another opening, another *kever achim*. This one contains the remains of the Jews of another locale. A marker memorializes them and indicates that on one side lie those who were killed, and on the other are those who died of natural causes and had been laid to rest in the town's cemetery. They were all brought here. May they be awakened soon at *techiyas hameisim*.

We then visit the Greenh Barg Bais Olam, where Rav Yitzchok Elchonon was originally buried. The cemetery is huge and the communists were going to destroy it. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, he aborted that plan and Kovno's dead Jews were spared.

A large, sprawling site, it is not well-maintained. *Matzeivos* are knocked over and even those still standing are hard or impossible to read.

We located the remains of the *ohel* that had stood atop Rav Yitzchok Elchonon's *kever*. Around it are members of his family, including his wife, his son Binyomin, and his daughter-in-law. The son who succeeded him as *rov* was moved with him to Alexot.

I know that my great-grandfather was also buried near him, but I cannot locate his grave.

We say some *kappitlach* of *Tehillim* and leave for our next stop.

We approach the Ninth Fort, where thousands of our brethren were shot to death in front of open graves, most famous among them Rav Elchonon Wasserman, the towering student of the *Chofetz Chaim*.

At the grassy knoll of that infamous fort, I heard the voice of Rav Elchonon as he spoke to the Jews who were about to be killed. He told them that they were being offered as *korbanos* on behalf of the Jews of America. "In the merit of your sacrifice, they will be spared and will flourish."

So many years later, if you listen carefully in the awful, bitter, stillness, you can hear him. Then you hear the voices of the *korbanos* calling out from the ground. They beg the American Jews for their *korbanos* not to have been in vain. "Don't let go. Don't fall prey to temptation. Don't forget who you are and where you are from. We died for you. Please don't ever forget that."

Thousands met their end right where I now stand.

Rabbonim, roshei yeshiva, shopkeepers, shoemakers, *yeshiva bochurim*, older women, young girls, mothers and fathers, grandfathers and grandmothers. They were brought here and shot.

If you listen carefully, you can hear echoes of gunshots and cries of *Shema Yisroel*.

Only a heart of stone is not moved here.

You begin to wrap your mind around the fact that this country is literally saturated with Jewish blood.

The Jewish presence is marked throughout the country. All in the past. This town's Jews were wiped out here. A cemetery stood here. There was once a *shul* here, a house, a *yeshiva*. Now? It's all in the past, gone for all time.

From there, we go to a large house. It occupies a corner and has two addressees, Karnevas 12 and Panera 9. The basement served as the office of the Slabodka Yeshiva. On the main floor resided Rav Avrohom Grodzensky, who was later killed by the Nazis. Rav Elchonon Wasserman sought refuge here when Baranovitch was overrun. Someone sneers at me from an upper floor window. For all I know, it was in that very room that Rav Elchonon stayed. I snap his picture and ignore him.

I head for the back of the house. It was from here that the martyred giant was taken



The Jews of Zezemer and two other towns met their ends in this forest.



With Chaim Bargman, one of the last Kovno Jews.

on behalf of the Jewish people, which were aided by my great-grandfather.

The setting is serene. You glance around and see the memorial erected on a seemingly empty site. It is only upon getting closer that you see the words on the memorial and learn that untold numbers of victims of the cruelty that transpired in the Kovno Ghetto, who, as the monument says, "*zeinen gepainikt un gebrent*, who were tortured and burned," are buried in that area.

We have all heard stories of the Holocaust and of the millions who were killed. This burial place of Kovno's finest citizens was the first "*kever achim*" I was at. It is hard to describe the experience. That awful period was always real, but now it is more real than ever.

"*Kol demei achicha tzo'akim min ho'adama*." The cries of the innocent victims still ring out, reaching Heaven. All I hear is a still silence. All I feel is a still silence. The stillness is overwhelming and deafening.

We move on to the *kever* of Rav Boruch Horowitz, whose son was ripped out of the Slabodka Yeshiva and murdered. More sadness. The enormity of the tragedy is overwhelming.

Nearby is the *kever* of the *D'var Avrohom*, Rav Avrohom Duber Kahane Shapiro, last *rov* of Kovno before the war. He led his people through the period of the ghetto until he succumbed to illness there at the age of 73. He is buried in the Alexot cemetery.

Every cemetery is a sad place. This one



At the kevorim of Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spector, the Devar Avrohom, Rav Itzele Ponovezher, Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzensky, and the victims of the Kovno Ghetto.

by Lithuanian devils. He was learning with several *bochurim* when he was snatched and brought to the Ninth Fort.

I look at the flowers growing there now as if to cover up the awful crime that was committed. Once again, I am overwhelmed by the silence. I gaze again at the flowers and find them dark and ugly, nourished by the *sitra acher*.

I stand by that house and feel attached to it. I don't want to leave. It calls out to me and says, "Stay! Stand here and give witness to the sins of humanity perpetrated at this site." It says, "This is a place of holiness. Don't be fooled."

We cross the street and continue walking down Karnevas or, as it was known until the war, Yeshiva Gass. From nowhere, a dog begins to bark. I look up and see a large, ferocious canine on the steps of the house going wild as it watches us march down the street. Other hounds echo the first, and before we know it, from all sides, dogs are barking. It was the first and last time I heard dogs bark in that country.

mussar went out to the world.

I sensed hundreds of *bochurim* rushing to and fro, and imagined them coming to the *bais medrash* from their nearby *stanzias*. Was I hallucinating or are their spirits still there, *kidshom lesheetom vekidshom le'osid lavo*? The Torah studied there and the *mesirus nefesh* exhibited on this spot will be there forever, benefitting us and providing for us sources of merit as we go about our daily battles.

"Let's go," they tell me. "The time is late. *Shabbos* is coming. We must go."

I think to myself, "The time is late. The *golus* is long. Too long. The world is dark. Too dark. We must go. The time for *Moshiach* to arrive will soon be here. We must ready ourselves. Let's go and prepare."

We walk back down that street and the many dogs that have been barking the entire time are finally satisfied. They tell each other that we are leaving and the street is silent once again.

We drive to the formerly Jewish town of

Zeizmer to see an old wooden *shul*. It is now undergoing renovation. We step inside and are awed by its former majesty.

We get back into the car and make a sharp turn into a forest. We drive on a pock-marked earthen path through the trees and come to a clearing. Neat grass covers the site of a massacre. We read the monument erected there: "*The Nazis and their helpers tortured and then buried half alive 2,200 Jewish men from the neighboring towns at this location.*" Women and children were liquidated at a similar spot nearby.

We learn that the monument has been defaced and destroyed several times, and the one that stands there now is not the original. Kind local authorities look after the hallowed spot and ensure that it remains a respectful area.

We return to perfectly clean, neat, quiet Kovno and rush to get ready for *Shabbos*.

More people have joined us now. Mr. Aron Wolfson, a leading supporter of the endeavor, has come to share in the *nachas*,

as has Rav Yosef Chevroni of the Chevron Yeshiva in Yerushalayim, and others.

The Friday night *Shabbos seudah* was attended by many dozens of students. We were all one happy family, celebrating the gifts of *Shabbos* and Torah in a way that the city has not seen since the *churban*. What a beautiful site.

Shabbos morning, the crowd is sadly much smaller, as there are university classes to attend. Several students have become *Shabbos* observant and, at great risk to their grades, come to *daven* rather than going to school. Their *mesirus nefesh* is duly noted and appreciated.

I am called to the Torah for *Levi*. We are back. The first *aliyah* for a member of my family in this city since the liquidation of the Kovno Ghetto.

Bittersweet, yes, but sweet nevertheless.

Shabbos was amazing, no doubt the largest, most festive meals and *tefillos* held here since the war.

On Sunday, we leave Kovno and head

These flowers are fed by the *sitra acher*.

We approach the end of the block and the spot where the famed Slabodka Yeshiva stood before it was burnt to the ground by its evil neighbors.

I was frozen at that corner. I felt a magnetic pull as I never felt before. I belonged there. My *neshomah* has roots at that corner, not only because my grandfather learned there and my dear father-in-law grew up in its shadow. It was a gravitational pull, a sense that I had been there before, that we had *all* been there before.

It is from that location that Torah and



Rav Elchonon Wasserman Hy"d was taken from this spot to the Ninth Fort.

The old Kovno cemetery.



The famed house on the corner of Paneriu and Kernaves streets, home to the Slabodka Yeshiva office and many great *talmidei chachomim*.



A home built on the former site of the famed Slabodka Yeshiva.



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magnetic
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felt before. I
belonged there.

to Vilna. There is no time to stop at every significant place, but as we move through the bustling metropolis of Vilna, we are told that here Jews were killed, here was a *shul*, and here was something else of Jewish significance.

Here was a Jewish neighborhood. Here is the apartment where Rav Chaim Ozer lived.

You just sit there alone in your thoughts, imagining the people on line out the door for an audience with the *rabbon shel kol bnei hagolah*. *Chassanim* and *kallos* seeking *brachos*, a broken *almanah* looking for moral and financial support, a *rov* from out-of-town with a serious dilemma, local *askonim* and some from far away seeking direction, *yeshiva bochurim* waiting to talk in learning with the father of all *bnei Torah*, and refugees looking for a place to rest their weary bodies. A bird's-eye view of *Klal Yisroel* lined up on this Vilna street.

How can you not be moved?
You stand at the *kever* of the Vilna Gaon and contemplate how this special *neshamah* learned all of Torah. Everything. And it sinks in that it is something that is possible for a human to accomplish.

Frightened by the holiness of the place, you say some *kappitlach* of *Tehillim* and pray for yourself and your loved ones, feeling sure that your pleas will be answered.

Right nearby is the *kever* containing the ashes of the *Ger Tzedek*, whose story comes alive in your head. *Mesirus nefesh* for *Yiddishkeit*. Again, the heights that man can reach overwhelms you and the *niggun* he sang on the way to his death plays in your head.

Vilna, the Yerushalayim of Lita, is now a *bais hakevaros*, comprised of a few empty buildings and markers, and a disturbing bust of the great Gaon where his house stood until it was demolished by the communists.

The *kever* of Rav Chaim Ozer is nearby, as is the gravesite of Rav Itzele Ponovezher.



At the ribbon-cutting ceremony at the new *mikvah* in Kovno: (R-L) Mr. Zev Stern, Rabbi Moshe Schonfeld, Dayan Broide, and Reb Leib Levinson.



The Stern family being welcomed at the hotel in Kovno.

They were moved here ahead of the destruction of the old *bais olam* by the Russians.

We said *kappitlach* of *Tehillim*, asking to be aided in the merit of the great men who lie there. I merited to publish some of Reb Itzel's Torah and asked that it be a *zechus* for me and my family.

We drive to the old cemetery, where so many are buried. The vast area was bulldozed by the communists to erase any memory of the Jews who were laid to rest there. The *kever* of the *rebbe* of *bnei Torah* everywhere, Rav Boruch Ber Leibowitz, was located a few years ago and a *matzeivah* was erected. We *daven* there. It is the only grave in the cemetery that is marked.

Oy, *meh haya lonu*.
I wonder again why I am here. Why did I come to visit such an awful place?

.....

Vilna is quite unlike Kovno. While Kovno is quiet and muted, a large city that feels as if it has had its air taken out of it and lost its spirit, Vilna is full of energy and people. There was a large marathon when we visited, and people were out cheering and strolling. While the people in Kovno seemed reserved and respectful, those in Vilna looked bigger and stronger, many with a menacing look as they gazed at us. They were louder and more boisterous. The city has life and spirit.

Kovno-ites look down on them and say that they are like Russians. Far be it from me to weigh in on this, but there does seem to be a stronger Russian influence in the capital city.

There is a large church at the entrance of the old city of Vilna that seems to have major religious significance to the locals. As we passed it, the tour guide became quite apprehensive and asked me to please remove my hat. I refused. She said that it was quite dangerous to go with a hat there as a Jew. I told her that enough Jewish blood was spilled in that small area, and if they are of-

The grassy knoll at the Ninth Fort.



fended that I walk as a proud Jew in a place they had thought was *Judenrein*, then tough luck on them. Let them spit at me, I said. I can handle it.

She said that it was right here that the *Ger Tzedek* was stoned while he was yet a Christian, for he committed the crime of helping a Jewish girl. I am not one of those people who insist on parading through places of obvious danger to make a point, but I felt different about it here.

They tried wiping us out. Let them see that *netzach Yisroel lo yeshaker*.

Besides, I felt that her fear was something that was inbred but was misplaced. No doubt, if a movement would rise there against Jews for some reason, some people would join, but at no time did I feel any real sense of danger. *Golus* is not meant to be comfortable. Vilna reminded me of that.

We continued our walk through the old city, passing by where the entrance to the Jewish ghetto was in medieval times and in the modern period.

No, I will not remove my hat.

We found a small kosher coffee shop in the Old City, where we had coffee and some “*lekach*,” honey cake, and “*imberlach*,” a sweet *Litvishe* treat I had never heard of. You’re not missing much, by the way.

It was from there that we came upon the location of the Vilna Gaon’s house. Chills go down your spine as you imagine the holiness that was there. The Gaon! Like a *Rishon*, a spiritual father for all generations. He lived here. He learned Torah here. He had *ruach hakodesh* right here. He wrote his notes on *Gemara* and *Shulchan Aruch* at the spot on which I stand. How small I feel. I walk the same street he walked, tracing his footsteps to the small *kloiz* where he *davened*. Rather than *davening* in the big *shul*, he chose this small place, because there was much less of a chance of hearing *lashon hora* here. I am lost in my thoughts.

The Gaon! The Vilna Gaon walked on these same stones to escape *lashon hora*.

How small I am.

.....

The walk ends and it’s time to head to the airport. We walk to an area where taxis wait for passengers. The guide advises us to stand back while she finds one. “You stay here,” she says. “When I find one, I’ll motion to you.”

We are reminded yet again, as if we needed another reminder.

We fetch our belongings and continue to the airport, gratified that we had come, but happy to soon be gone.

We head back across the Atlantic on a Lufthansa plane. The service is impeccable. The staff goes out of their way to make us feel at home. I admit that I feel some comfort in that.

It felt good to take leave of the European continent and head back to the United States. This was my second time staying more than a few hours in Europe. When I am able to get away, I’d much rather go to Eretz Yisroel than anywhere else. That is our home and base. That land holds our connection to the essence of life and Torah.

Kovno and Slabodka are a distant second, but I hope to return to Lita, visit those places once again, see the town where my mother was born, and perhaps even find out why I want to go there.

May we all merit a safe and healthy year as we await the call of *Moshiach*.



The “*nayer*” *bais medrash* of Kovno, today a car repair shop.



The original site of the Rav Yitzchok Elchonon’s *ohel* before the *kever* was moved to Alexot.



The site of Vilna’s *Shul hoif*, today an empty field.