Remembering the Jewish Community of

Kavarsk, Belorussia

Remembered by Robert Carver

In Vilna, our family name was Kavarsky; around 1902 a clerk on Ellis Island transformed it to Carver. Although we are not certain of the origin of the name, we do know that there is a small village called Kavarsk located in central Lithuania about 80 kilometers northwest of Vilna, not far from Kovno. It is possible that my grandfather's forebears moved from Kavarsk to Vilna, and became known as Kavarsky. I do not know if I have any roots in this place, but it doesn't really matter. Someone should remember the Jews of Kavarsk.

The first Jewish settlers came to Kavarsk near the end of the 18th century, and by the second half of the 19th century there was an established community with a Rabbi and a schochet. Some Jews made their livings in trade, dealing in linen, produce, grain, and lumber. Others were craftsmen, peddlers, and woodcutters. According to an 1897 census, the Jewish community grew to 979 people, which was almost two-thirds of the entire town.

Like many communities, the Jews of Kavarsk had their share of internal disputes. In 1883, there was a heated conflict of uncertain description involving the schochet who had served for 20 years. A few years later, upon the death of the Rabbi who had led the community for 30 years, the town split into two factions over the choice of a successor. Rabbi Joshua Segal was selected, and he ultimately managed to restore peace and reunite the factions.

In July of 1915, Cossacks came to Kavarsk; about half the town went up in flames. The Cossack regiments looted, murdered and raped Jews, driving the community from the
town. At the conclusion of World War I, about 100 families -- roughly half of Kavarsk's Jews -- returned to their homes. In 1919 a band of Lithuanian army recruits ransacked and looted Jewish shops, but they were stopped by their own officers.

In the 1920's, Jews were engaged in trade, crafts, and peddling, earning most of their income on market day each Monday and from the four fairs held each year. The economic crisis that gripped Lithuania in the late 20's did not spare Kavarsk, and many emigrated to South Africa seeking better opportunities. A few went to Eretz Yisrael.

By the late 1930's, there were 15 shops in town, of which 11 had Jewish owners. There were also 7 Jewish-owned factories, and several small businesses and craftsmen. There were also a physician and a Jewish bank. The town had a beautiful beit midrash, a library and a Yavneh school for its children. Significantly, the beit midrash was completed after a large donation from some non-Jewish Lithuanian émigrés to the United States. There was also a book club and a drama club that mounted Yiddish plays from time to time. Many of the Jews of Kavarsk were active Zionists, sending representatives to the Zionist Congresses in the 20's and 30's.

In 1940, Lithuania was annexed to the Soviet Union; factories and stores were nationalized, political activity was outlawed, and all Jewish educational institutions were closed. On June 22, 1941, Lithuanian nationals took control of Kavarsk. They vandalized and robbed Jewish homes and arrested 30 Jewish men and women on charges of supporting the Soviet regime. Four days later, German troops arrived and shot the prisoners on the riverbank south of town.

For the rest of the summer, the locals continued to harass and abuse the remaining Jews. In late August, the Nazis and their Lithuanian collaborators herded them to the nearby city of Ukmerge, and on September 5, 1941, all of the Jews of Kavarsk and Ukmerge were shot to death in the Fivonia forest. Today, there are no Jews in Kavarsk.
Note: It is unlikely that the name was changed at Ellis Island. The names were drawn from a passenger manifest that the ship's captain was required to supply. This could have been prepared by the ship's purser, or more likely by the shipping company. Since the clerks that recorded the names probably did not speak the language of the passengers, this could account for many of the differences in the family names.