

B'NAI B'RITH IMPACT

B'NAI B'RITH IN YOUR COMMUNITY AND AROUND THE GLOBE

2023 Summer

Celebrating Amazing Journeys: My Thoughts During Jewish American Heritage Month

By Daniel S. Mariaschin
CEO, B'nai B'rith International

This issue of IMPACT is appearing among the spring holidays of Mother's Day and Father's Day. I hope that those who celebrate the occasions, set aside to honor one's parents, had meaningful and enjoyable time together in person, by FaceTime or by phone.

While I lost my parents many years ago, the ties that bind seem to have grown even stronger over the years. I find myself repeating sayings or phrases they used in response to matters big and small. I find myself recalling issues or problems they resolved and trying to apply their solutions to what I encounter today.

Most important, I reflect on the Jewish compass they conveyed to me: how they saw the Jewish world, as immigrant children from Eastern Europe; how they viewed anti-Semitism over a span of eight decades; how their Zionism far predated the establishment of the Jewish State in 1948; and how they continued to show the respect they always had for Jewish traditions, customs and prayer.

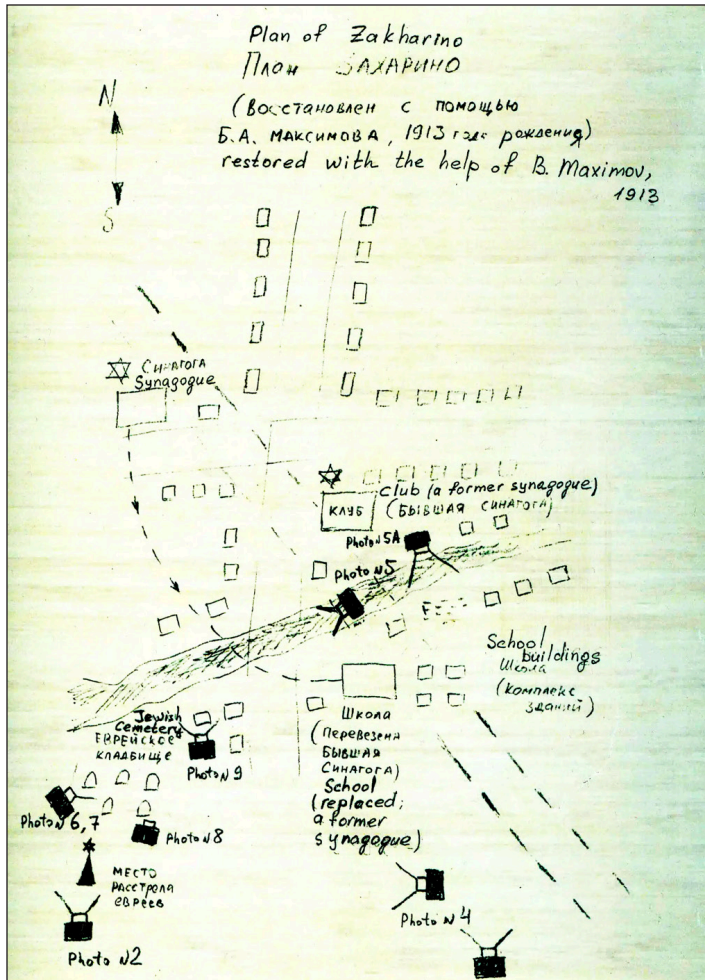
But there is one more thing for which I am supremely grateful: the decision by their parents to journey from the shtetl to the United States.

My mother, born in Lithuania, arrived in New York harbor on July 2, 1903, on SS Pennsylvania, sailing



My mother's family had anglicized their last name from Berzak to Berson by the time that they posed for this family portrait, photographed in Bangor, Maine, c. 1909-10. My grandmother, Sophie, holds the baby; my mother stands between her parents.

from Hamburg. She was three years old, in the company of her mother, Sophie, and her six-year-old brother, Jacob. According to the ship manifest, my grandmother had \$3 in her pocket. Within a few days, they made their way to Boston, and then, by boat, to Bangor, Maine, joining my grandfather, who was already a peddler in the Maine countryside. Four additional siblings would be born once they settled in Bangor.



A rudimentary map of my father's Russian shtetl, Zakharino, which was drawn based on the memories of B. Maximov, one of its inhabitants. Among the landmarks indicated is the community synagogue, which appears at the upper left.

My father, from Czarist Russia, arrived in New York on August 10, 1913, on RMS Caronia, out of Liverpool. His family settled in Brooklyn, where my grandfather, Shlomo, was a tailor. My grandmother passed away in Russia when my father was six; his father re-married and eventually there were 12 children in that family, five of whom were born in the United States.

My grandparents were part of that great wave of Jewish immigration to America. For some, the incentive was to be rid of anti-Semitism and discrimination that they confronted at every turn. For others, it was the promise of a better life. Or both. These were remarkable people: My grandmother spoke Yiddish, Polish and Lithuanian—

but, as she boarded that ship in Hamburg, she knew no English. With two young children in tow, she managed not only the two-week voyage, but the bureaucracy they encountered at Ellis Island. I can picture her speaking in Yiddish, asking this fellow immigrant or that, “Which way do I go now?” or “Where do I get the railroad tickets?” or other basic questions of the moment.

My paternal grandfather had a tailor shop near the Brooklyn Navy Yard. New York was then a city of tailors—thousands—many of whom toiled in the burgeoning garment industry. Tailors worked long hours for meager compensation. Even though my father pursued a more studious track, he must have watched my grandfather at work: We had an old Singer sewing machine in our house, and it was my father who could sew hems and make pant cuffs, if needed.

I celebrate my grandparents' drive and ingenuity, but most of all, I'm eternally grateful they did not stay behind in Europe. The German occupation of Lithuania began in 1941. My mother's shtetl, Musnik (Musninkai, about 35 miles from Vilna), was liquidated in the summer of 1941. There were a little over 200 Jews living in the town; they were rounded up by Lithuanian district police, and first held in the two synagogues in town. On Sept. 5 women and children were taken first and shot in Pivonija Forest, outside the district center in Wilkomir (Ukmerge); the men were forced to do strenuous, and continuous “sport exercises,” then taken to Pivonija to be killed. Among the victims were my mother's aunt and uncle.

My father's shtetl, Zakharino, in Russia's Smolensk district, met a similar fate. The town, whose population of about 300 was nearly all Jewish, was occupied by the Germans on August 1, 1941. According to Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, a ghetto was established in the town, and Jews from the surrounding area were relocated there. On May 2, 1942, all the ghetto's inhabitants were shot some 200 meters from the edge of town. According to Yad Vashem's page on Zakharino, the Germans, the local Russian police chief and the leading county official participated in the killings. Its report concludes: “Zakharino was liberated on Sept. 27, 1943. The village no longer exists.”

I have visited my mother's shtetl and had hoped to visit the site of my father's. In the 1990s, responding to a request I made for information about the town, the Jewish University of St. Petersburg sent an ethnographer to the area; he found only one survivor, who was able to reconstruct a map of what the village looked like in 1942.

The website JewishGen and Yad Vashem have assembled the names of those who were shot in Zakharino that day. Scanning the list of victims, I looked for the names of men and women more or less my father's age: Boris Belyanky, Isaac Berezkin, Leya Dovin, Leizer Dubovin, Bella Golubov, Luba Leikin, Yewel Minkin, Riva Teleshov and others. Could they have been neighbors, classmates or good friends of my father?

Had my grandparents not made that arduous trek to America (how they were able to get from tiny shtetlach to the big ports of Hamburg and Liverpool, so distant from their homes, continues to amaze me), I most likely would not be here today writing a brief overview of the Mariaschin and Berzak families. Musnik (as a Jewish village), and Zakharino were liquidated, to the last Jew.

Memory is a Jewish imperative. Each epoch of our thousands of years of history is vital to understanding who we are as a people. In the span of that history, the period of great immigration from Europe, and the Holocaust, are still within living memory, or close to it. Thanks to the internet, we have so many tools available to connect us to that history and especially our personal ties to it.

B'nai B'rith is very much connected to both: We were founded by German Jewish immigrants 180 years ago, in October 1843, and counted thousands of immigrants among our members and leaders. In Europe, B'nai B'rith was the Jewish organization most present in countries throughout the continent until, on Sept. 1, 1939, the curtain fell on one Jewish community after the next with the murder of the Six Million by the Germans and their collaborators.

My story is personal, but it is not unique. Many families living here in the United States learned, over time, the fate of relatives and millions of other European Jews. I remind myself, though, over and over again, how fortunate I am that my grandparents, children in tow, had the foresight to take a leap into the unknown and make the journey West.

I write this in gratitude, and in their memory.

The top document is a "LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED STATES" for the RMS Caronia, dated August 24, 1913. It lists passengers including Boris Belyanky, Isaac Berezkin, Leya Dovin, Leizer Dubovin, Bella Golubov, Luba Leikin, Yewel Minkin, and Riva Teleshov. The bottom document is a "STATES IMMIGRATION OFFICER AT PORT OF ARRIVAL" form, dated August 24, 1913, listing the same passengers.

Highlighted in yellow, my then 13-year-old father's name is listed among the passengers on the Aug. 24, 1913, manifest of the English ocean liner, RMS Caronia.