

The Estonians

by Len Yodaiken

Estonia, which had been ruled through the centuries, by such regimes as the Livonian Knights, the Lithuanians, and the Swedes, passed in the mid 18th century into the Russian Empire. Under all those regimes the Jews never managed to gain a foothold in that province, and it was not until 1860 that the Russians finally opened up Estonia to certain categories of Jewish settlement. These categories were primarily, demobilized Cantonists (Jewish children who had been snatched from their homes, at the approximate age of eight years, brought up lonely and most cruelly in Military academies and then obliged to serve 25 years in the army), Nikolai Soldaten (Jewish youth of military age who were obliged to serve 25 years), and people who had specific trades and were sufficiently liquid to set themselves up. The idea behind the Tsarist thinking was, that having divorced the first two groups from their Jewish communities for 25 years or more, and having caused them to compromise their religious beliefs, time and again, they would continue in the process of assimilation by being encouraged to remain apart from the main-flow of Jewish life. Indeed by Eastern European Jewish standards, the small Estonian Jewish Community (4,500 at its peak) was regarded as being assimilationist.

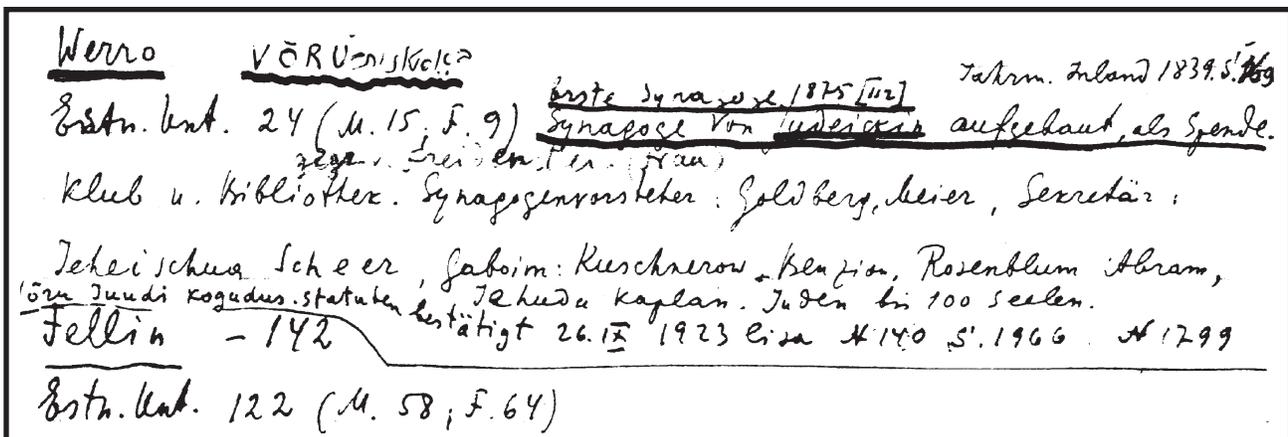
From the Revision lists (See introductory matter at front of this book) we can draw a picture which shows that Meir Judeikin inherited the estate at Kalnel from his father Hennech (Channoch) sometime around 1835. Meir's heir should have been Shmuel, his eldest son, who was born in 1823. We know from the Land Register that Meir's brother Yosa Kalnela bought the estate in 1848, when Shmuel was 25 years old. This would seem to indicate that Shmuel who seems no more than a shadow in the family's traditions was in fact the Nikolai Soldat mentioned in some of the myths. All we

really know of him is that he fathered six children, the siblings that founded the Estonian family and that he was dead by 1872, when the eldest of his grandsons, to bear his name was born. That is to say he could not have been more than 49 years old.

Shmuel's eldest son and heir was called Yossel (Jossel) and he was only 9 years old when Yosa Kalneler bought the estate. It appears that there must have been some sort of arrangement whereby Shmuel's family grew up on the estate and when the time came for them to go their own way, they were paid off by Yosa Kalnela.

The next story we have, came from another Joseph Judeikin, a nephew of Jossel. He, after being questioned by his own grandson, told him that Jossel and his brothers, including his own father, Hennech, had made a lot of money in Kalnel and so gave the farm to a poor relative. Well if we take out the nucleus of the story it would appear that Jossel and his brothers sold their rights to Kalnel to Yosa Kalnela in 1848 as they could not or were not interested in managing the estate and eventually used their privilege as the sons of a Nicolai Soldat to settle in Estonia. It may also be, that they were allowed to settle there by virtue of their relative wealth. At any rate all six brothers and sisters moved to Võru, and five of them stayed there permanently.

One of their first undertakings was in 1875 to build a synagogue, this in itself indicating that they were very comfortably off financially. We have this on record from the Estonian Jewish historian, Nossen Gans. About this time Benjamin (Benyamin) Marcus, Jossel's next brother was taken to the army and served in the Russo-Turkish war of 1879. When Benyamin returned to Võru, Jossel who was an astute and successful business man, along with Benyamin as his



An entry into the research notebook of the Estonian Jewish historian Nathan Ganns, testifying to the establishment of the Judeikin Synagogue in Võru in 1875.

junior partner, together, built up quite a commercial empire. They controlled much of the trade of the town before the First World War. Jossel had a large wood mill on Lake Tamula on the edge of the town and logs were floated across the lake from the forests on the other side to be processed. Jossel's son, Meir eventually became the largest exporter of timber in Independent Estonia (1918 - 1940). Joseph's other brother, Hennech was a sickly man probably suffering from some form of lung disease picked up from working leather, as that was his trade. Avraham Mendel the youngest married into a wealthy family and after his son Zalman was born they returned to Žagaré and eventually went to Dublin. The two sisters Sarah and Rosa married respectively Abraham Glant and Leib Lasikin, both of whom worked in the family businesses. Benyamin Marcus had many businesses ranging from a very successful clothing store (which is still in existence and functioning in Võru, though not under the ownership of the family), and a candy store to an import-export business, which also involved him in bartering horse hair with a fellow Jew in Scotland in exchange for salt herrings.

Jossel's and Benyamin's sons worked in each others businesses and we know that Shmuel Zalman worked as the bookkeeper in Benyamin's clothing emporium. Jossel, known in the family as Uncle Yosa, was the Patriarch and absolute arbitrator of all five families. In this capacity he informed Benyamin that he must

give his clothing store to Shmuel Zalman, his book-keeper. Benyamin's wife was furious, but nobody could gainsay Yosa, least of all the gentle Benyamin. Shmuel Zalman became a very wealthy man with a chain of such stores throughout Estonia. He put all his sons through university. He even bought land in Palestine which one of his grandsons inherited after immigrating to Israel in 1992.

Uncle Yosa even behaved in this arbitrary manner within his own immediate family circle. It has been told that he slapped his married son's face in public for arriving late in Synagogue on a Sabbath. On another occasion he forbade the marriage of one of his sister's daughters to her chosen, even though her parents consented, on the basis that her eldest sister was as yet unmarried. There was a Jewish custom that required that the eldest daughter be married off first, before the other siblings could marry. This custom dates back to the biblical story of Leah and Rachel, the wives of Jacob. The unfortunate niece remained a spinster for the rest of her life. On the other hand he was well known in the Baltic as a Jew who kept open house for all comers. Visitors were always assured of an interesting discussion and hospitable reception in his home.

The third brother Hennech, as we mentioned before, was a very sickly man. He had eight children, and we suppose eked out some sort of living with the help of his brothers, but we have only a very hazy picture of



The gateway to the Jewish cemetery in Võru in 1970. It was erected by the Judeikin family.



Yosa Judeikin, the founder of the Judeikin family in Võru, Estonia.

him. Benyamin (the author's grandfather) had five sons and a daughter, and they lived in a very large house, with each son having resident in the house his own personal tutor, both for religious and secular subjects. The author's father once related how on the Sabbath the whole family with its entourage would sit down to lunch and sing Sabbath songs (Zmiroth), and crowds of non-Jews would gather outside the large bay-windows to listen. It appears that life there was, on the one hand, very good. There was a well integrated greater family, good warm homes and an active communal life. On the other hand, the Russian Government continued to harass the Jews, and one son and then another had to flee the country in order to avoid the draft.

The community in Võru was very small, at most 200 - 250 at its peak. We also know that it was built around two enlarged family groups, the Judeikins and the Goldbergs. Just as the Judeikins built the synagogue and set up the communal cemetery, which has since been encroached upon by the Christian community, so the Goldbergs set up a communal library and club. This was the time of all sorts of Revolutionary and Zionist organizations, and the author's father remembered going out to the woods with his older brothers and their friends, and playing with a revolver, which accidentally went off in his hand. He got such a fright, that he gave up revolution for life. Then came the First World War and again the Jews from rural areas including Võru, were driven into Russia proper. When the War was over, very few Jews returned to Võru and the centers of gravity of the family moved to Tartu and Tallinn.

From the tombstones in the cemetery and vital statistics found since the opening up of Eastern Europe we have been able to build with greater accuracy a picture of the family in Võru. Amongst the Christian graves in the cemetery there still stand a few Jewish tombstones including that of Uncle Yosa and Shmuel Zalman and his wife, and some other members of the family. We have been fortunate to find many of the records of the family from the period before the First World War and we have all the birth records of the family in Võru from 1883 to 1914. We have found records of a number of children who died as tots including two previously unknown uncles of the author. In these records Benyamin appears as a "Merchant of the Second Guild", indicating that by the administration's standards he was a man of some substance.

After the First World War, Estonia became an independent Republic with one of the most progressive constitutions, especially as concerned minorities, that existed at that time and even when an extreme right wing group took power, the Jews were still treated well. Võru, however did not return to being the center of the family. They dispersed throughout Estonia to Tallinn (Reval), the capital, to Dorpat, Walk and other places. Some became active in Communal affairs, some in

Zionist societies or sports organizations, and some even emigrated to Palestine. The old generation had died out, and the Germans came again; the Estonians turned into fiends, like the Lithuanians and Latvians. Many of the family succeeded in fleeing to Russia and returned to Estonia in the fifties. During the years of thaw in the seventies, some thirty members of our family managed to emigrate to Israel, from all the Baltic States. Finally after Perestroika all but a handful of the remaining Judeikins made their way to Israel.

We cannot conclude without relating an interesting family tale. Whilst visiting the cemetery in Võru in 1994, we found that the only Jewish grave that was intact and tended was that of Shmuel Zalman and his wife Emma. There were several other Jewish tombstones there but no formal graves. So the lone grave struck me as being very strange and there was obviously a story behind it. At some later date I raised the question with Shmuel Zalman's grandson, Boris, who had inherited the land that his grandfather bought so long ago in "Palestine" and he told me the following tale:-

Shmuel died in 1939 and the clothing chain was inherited by his second son Max. Max was a very astute and erudite man, an attorney by profession and was regarded as the head of the family by his siblings and their families although he, himself, had no children. We have documents from Tartu University attesting to his great Academic achievements.

In 1940 the Russians entered Estonia with their Communist philosophy. One of their laws or rules was that the wealthy should surrender all their property and valuables. Max himself also had a philosophy which roughly said, that no matter what the regime might be, it was a citizen's duty to abide by its laws. Max was duly visited by the local Estonian Commissar and his committee who demanded his worldly goods. The Commissar himself had been a worker in one of the Judeikin businesses. Max passed over all his goods and chattels and as the visitors could see nothing more of value, they departed.

The Commissar, however, could not believe that Max had surrendered all so willingly and therefore decided to organize a night raid to Max's home to recover "the rest".

Much to his surprise and consternation, after having aroused the household in the early hours of the morning, he found nothing. He slowly came around to the understanding that Max was a truly honest man and from then onwards there developed a certain mutual respect between them which blossomed after the war into a measure of friendship. Although living in different towns, (Max by then lived in Tallinn) they visited each other from time to time. In due course Max passed away and the "Old Commissar" to this day, continues to tend his friend's father's grave in Võru.