

20th Century Family Visits to Panemune

A. Account of Trip to Poniemon, 1920 By Bernard Horwich, 1939¹

...In the course of the several trips I made to Europe during this period, I took the time, on one of them, to visit my native Poniemon, which I had not seen for over forty years. I was anxious to view again the scenes of my childhood.

On arriving, I decided to go first to the home of the Rabbi of the town, although I did not know him. I found the door of his house open, and saw the Rabbi inside, sitting behind a big book which completely screened his face. Only his skull cap was visible behind it. I entered and knocked on a chair to draw his attention, upon which he raised his eyes above the rim of the book. At my "Good morning, Rabbi," he nodded his head somewhat vaguely, and disappeared again behind his book.

"Rabbi," I said, "I am a stranger from America. I want to have the pleasure of talking to you." The man lifted his head, murmured something, and again disappeared from view. "I see that you are engaged in the hard study of God's torah," I commented, thinking this remark might draw him into conversation. But he only murmured something unintelligible and continued with his reading, paying no attention to me at all. Finally, I said: "If you do not want to listen to me, I will have to leave. All I wanted to know is whether you knew my father, Yankel Horwich."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, putting the book down, and jumping up. "Yankel! Sholom! Sholom! Peace to you! You are the son of our unforgettable Reb Yankel! May he rest in peace! Why didn't you say so in the first place?" "Well," I answered, "I had quite a time getting to the first place."

The Rabbi immediately became very attached to me, to such an extent, indeed, that it made me rather uncomfortable. He told me all he knew about my family, and talked especially about my father. Apparently, he considered my coming quite an event. The news spread, and soon the whole town was out on the street, surrounding me and greeting me, and asking me about their relatives in the United States.

I knew none of the townspeople, with the exception of two men and a woman. These were Chaim Hersh Bregstone and his wife, Reva, and a man by the name of Abe Meyer, "son of Moishe." The first-named was a brother of Joseph and Ike Breakstone of New York, whom I have previously mentioned.

Abe Meyer was an old man, of about ninety years, and blind, and a terrible hater of "Columbus and America." He held on to my arm for nearly half an hour, telling me what America had done to his two sons. They had forgotten all about the Jewish religion, he had learned. They never went to "schul," did not pray and did not eat "kosher" food, and were just like "Goyim." He told me he was busy day and night praying to God to have mercy on them.

I remained in Poniemon for a day and a half, and found my town very much the same as I had left it. I noticed, however, that while, in my time, the houses had been on a level with, or higher than, the street- the street now seemed to have risen considerably, and looked higher than the houses. This, no doubt, was due to the accumulation of dust for over forty years.

The Rabbi took me to see the old synagogue, which they still used. As a child, this synagogue was to me the greatest building and most important place I had ever seen. Now I found it to be a dilapidated wooden shanty. As I entered, memories of my childhood appeared before me. There were the same benches where I had stood beside my father, often for three or four hours at a time, hungry and miserable, beating my breast and praying and crying to God to forgive me for a multitude of sins which I had never committed-as well as for the sin I actually did commit with regard to Herr Ashfort, as related in the early pages of this book.

At my request, the Rabbi next took me to see the house where I was born. It had changed hands twice, and the rooms were somewhat altered. At the time of my visit, it was owned and occupied by a young couple, and I was pleased to see that it was being kept in rather nice condition. I asked to see the barn in the rear of the house, which caused some surprise, until I explained why.

When I was about thirteen years old, the other members of my family all went away one summer afternoon, leaving me and several of my young playmates at home. We decided to have a little private party and dug some potatoes from the garden with the intention of baking them. We found, however, that we had no wood for our fire. Undaunted, I hit upon a way of securing some, by chopping out the threshold of the barn, which I considered a nuisance and only in the way. I got a hatchet, and each of us chopped a little until we had chopped out the threshold. We built a fire, baked our potatoes, and were enjoying them, with sour milk, when my uncle, Chaim Eleazer, suddenly arrived on the scene. When he discovered how we had secured the wood for our fire, my troubles started.

Although my uncle was generally good-natured, he had a quick temper. He ordered us to at once take the cows out of the barn, as it was likely to collapse, claiming that the threshold was what kept the barn from falling down. He did not explain this to us calmly, but became very excited and shouted at us at the top of his voice. We forgot our potatoes and sour milk, as he chased us around with a whip, which he wielded right and left, until he became tired. "Well," he remarked as he stopped, "I have done my duty. The rest I will leave to your mother." When my mother came home, there was more scolding, beating and excitement. Later we talked about engaging someone to put in a new threshold, but as that would cost money, it was delayed from day to day, until the matter was forgotten.

Since this had been one of the major misdeeds of my youth, I had always had it on my conscience, and wondered whether anything had happened; so on this visit I was most anxious to see how the barn looked. To my great surprise and delight, I found that there was still no threshold in the barn, and that it was still standing, just as I had left it.

I then went to visit the grave of my father. Standing beside it with the Rabbi, who accompanied me, reciting the "kaddish," I lived over again my childhood days, and there rose again before me the image of my father, with the beautiful expression on his face which denoted his character, his piety and the loveliness of his spirit, which I shall never forget.

B. Account of Trip to Poniemen, Summer 1933
By Stanley A. Leavy, December 1971

...I was permitted through grandfather's² family piety to get a glimpse of the life of my ancestors when I accompanied him in the summer of 1933 to their little village outside Kaunas, in Lithuania, where they had lived so long. Quite a few relatives were still living then in the village, which was named Poniemen (on the river Niemen), a name that always brought laughter to grandfather and others of the family.

The visit in Poniemen was short; grandfather saw his relatives, probably distributed large amounts of money (he is said to have virtually supported the village) and talked briefly with them. I recall that he stood weeping silently while his sister replied in Yiddish with "gestorben, gestorben, alle gestorben,"³ to his inquiries about his old friends and relatives, alive, I suppose, when he had last visited. The village was a single street just above the Niemen River on which Kaunas is located. There were plain wooden houses, some painted, some not, little fences, scrubby trees, small gardens, maybe a cow. It was probably an all-Jewish village, a "shtetl". Lithuanian nationalism had been active there, so that many of the Jews had added the national "-aitis" to their names....Did we sit with some of the relatives in Poniemen in a little summer house in the garden and eat?

C. Account of Trip to Paniemunias, Lithuania

By Walter B. Miller

August 30, 1989

This is an account of a trip to the ancestral village of the Breakstone family by Walter Miller and Andrea Berman on the 30th of August 1989.

Having been informed that we could not stay overnight in Kaunas/Kovno, we stayed at the Lietuva ("Lithuania") Hotel in Vilnius/Vilna, about 60 miles away. For the first of our two trips from Vilna to Kovno we joined a tour bus party taking a guided tour of Kovno, having arranged to leave the tour after we got to Kovno in the morning and to rejoin them in the afternoon.

The landscape on the road between Vilna and Kovno (Route A227) bore a remarkable resemblance to the eastern Pennsylvania farmland where Jacob Nathan (Yekl) Breckstein and his family settled in the early 1880's. By contrast, the outskirts of Kovno, with acres of modern high-rise apartments, resembled the northern outskirts of present day New York City.

When we arrived at the major historical square of Kovno we asked the English speaking tour guide if she knew whether there was a Jewish cemetery in Panyemunyas/Poniemon and if so where it was. She said that there was indeed such a cemetery, a very exciting piece of information, since we had been very doubtful that it was still in existence. She wrote for us the words "PANEMUNZ IUDU KAPINES" (Poniemon Jewish Cemetery) to show a taxi driver. Taxis were scarce, but one finally came to the square. When we showed him the words he launched into a long discourse in Lithuanian, the gist of which seemed to be either that there was no such place or that he was unable to take us there. After another wait we hailed a second cab. A real stroke of luck. He spoke halting but intelligible English. We told him what we were looking for. A resident of Kovno, 43 years old, he said that he had never heard of a Jewish Cemetery in Poniemon, but would be willing to help us look for it.

Kovno in the 1880's was a city of about 75,000 people. Walter had imagined that we would go to the central part of the city, walk down to the Nieman River, cross the bridge to Poniemon, and

walk along the main street to the Cemetery. Kovno today is Kaunas, a sprawling city of over 400,000--the largest non-capitol city in the Baltic Republics, and the fourth largest city in the three Baltic states.

The cab driver had a very difficult time even getting to the river; most roads were blocked by construction or standing traffic. We drove what seemed to Walter like a very long time, given his image of Poniemon's location. We drove along the river for about 3 or 4 miles, and finally crossed a bridge to the Poniemon area. The main street along the river, described by Bernard Horwich in his book, was and is called "Viadoto"(Viaduct).

The driver stopped several times to ask people the location of the cemetery, but no one knew where it was. Nor did we see a cemetery at or near the location indicated on Jeff Marx's map. We finally drove to the Catholic Church on Viadoto, where the driver was told the location of the mortuary building where bodies had been prepared for burial in the Jewish cemetery. We finally located the building, but no cemetery was visible. The mortuary is now a dwelling whose address is 178 Viadoto. Our driver knocked on the door, and the current occupant, Peter Migonis, a man in his late 50's or early 60's, came out to talk to us.

Migonis talked at length to our driver, who translated a relatively small portion of what was said. His major piece of information, tragically from our viewpoint, was that the cemetery had been destroyed after World War II. We asked if there were any remaining stones. Migonis took us to the left side of the house, and said "I walk over this every day". He pointed to a flat slab engraved with Hebrew letters, embedded in the ground, half covered with sod. We uncovered most of the stone. The inscription was quite legible. It was divided into two parts vertically, like facing pages in a book, with about 10 lines of Hebrew on each side.

Andrea photographed the stone while Walter tried to decipher it (since time was limited we did not want to spend the time it would take to do a rubbing or careful attempt at translation; we intended to return but were unable to). Walter made out the word "bat" but the following name was unfamiliar--possible M?H, but not Moshe.

Migonis said that the cemetery had been divided into two parts, one on each side of the mortuary building. The section on the right (facing the Nieman River) was the larger section. We went first to the section on the left. It appeared to be about 50 by 100 yards, but we could not see any clear boundaries; the section probably extended to the steep drop to the river. It was heavily overgrown with underbrush, tall weeds, and stinging nettles. However, scattered on the ground in various places were at least three and possibly more gravestones. All were tipped over on their faces, and we could see no inscriptions. Trying to push aside the underbrush was difficult, since the nettles were very painful, and the ground was wet.

Migonis said that at one time there was a steel fence or border surrounding the cemetery. He described it as a pleasant place with walkways and large trees. He said that one night in 1946 or '47 Russian soldiers entered the cemetery and engaged in a wild orgy of vandalism, overturning stones and doing extensive damage to the whole area. I asked him what happened to the gravestones. He said that the Russians threw them down the steep incline to the riverbank where they were taken to be used in construction projects. We were later told by a Jewish family in Kovno that they had been used as paving stones. There is little doubt that Migonis' story that the cemetery had been destroyed is true, but one can doubt his version of the identity of the vandals. The local residents tend to blame the Russians for everything; it is also quite possible that it was local Lithuanians who destroyed the

Poniemon Jewish cemetery.

We then went to look at the section of the cemetery to the right of the house. This area is quite flat, with fairly well cared-for grass and a grove of light-barked trees, probably birch. Migonis said that the trees had been planted about 20 years ago, and seemed to imply that each had been planted on a grave or a grave area, although this seems unlikely. The river can be seen from this area, and appears to be at least 50 feet below the level of the grassy section.

The former mortuary building is a one story brick structure with a corrugated metal roof, about 20 by 30 feet, with windows on three sides. The fourth side, facing the grassy plot, has a bricked-up doorway. Migonis, as interpreted by our driver, said that the building was the place that "dead Jewish men" ("Yudisha mens") were taken after they died but before they were buried. An old Lithuanian woman lived there before the war. The Jewish people paid her money to work there. Inside the house was a well, presumably for water needed in the mortuary. Migonis said that he had been doing some construction about five or six years ago (he seemed to say he was working on the roof, but this doesn't fit with his story) and found many skulls and other bones (something like this; we supplied words as the driver groped for vocabulary)--many, many, he said. When he was finished with the work, he said with an air of deference and respect, he replaced them in the ground.

Migonis pointed to the hills overlooking Poniemon on the same side of the river (south?) and said that was the location of the Fourth Fort. During the war, when he was a small boy, a group of Jewish men were there (Andrea said "resistance?", and both men nodded), and a battle took place with many bullets and many casualties. He said that the bodies were taken to another place (the mortuary? not clear) and that he was involved in, or watched, the bodies, which were naked, being washed. Migonis began to blink and turned away from us. When he turned back his eyes were wet, and he became withdrawn and uncommunicative.

We drove back on Viadoto toward the traffic circle and bridge to Kovno. On the way we stopped to take pictures of the houses on Viadoto, some of which undoubtedly had been Breakstone residences. Most were quite small, with faded paint on wooden slats, and steeply slanted roofs made of tar paper or corrugated metal. Each house had a large house number. It was hard to estimate their age, but they would appear to be at least 50 years old, possibly a hundred or more. They seem to have been the same kinds of houses, and probably the same houses, described by Stanley Leavy during his trip with his grandfather to Kovno and Poniemon in 1933.

We were very pleased that the dwellings in Poniemon seemed to have changed so little since the time family members had lived there, but our driver did not share our feelings. He said that it was a disgrace that Kaunas, a city of over 400,000, the fourth largest in the Baltic republics, should have such dilapidated houses. We thought they were picturesque and charming, and relieved that Jeff Marx's fear that they had been razed to build a sports arena was unfounded.

We returned to Kovno with a great sense of regret over the destruction of the Poniemon Jewish cemetery and the tragic events of the 1940's.

D. Trip to Paniemunias (Panemune)

By Rabbi Jeffrey A. Marx

January 19, 1990

This is an account of a trip to the shtetl of Panemune on January 19th, 1990. I greatly benefited from Walter Miller's and Andrea Berman's report of their trip to Paniemunias in August of 1989, which allowed me to dress properly for the expedition and alerted me to the necessity of hiring an interpreter.

Upon my arrival in Vilnius, on January 18th, I engaged the services of a driver and translator through the Intourist desk at the Lietuva hotel. At 8:30 A.M. the next morning, the winter sky still not fully lit up, we left Vilnius for Kaunas.

As we traveled along route A227, I explained to Zita, my translator for the day, that the primary purpose of our trip was not to visit Kaunas but rather its suburb, Paniemunias. Zita knew of the town and seemed quite amenable to taking me on an extended "detour" from the normal tour itinerary. She was quite delighted when I produced the National Archive's map of Paniemunias drawn up in the late '30s or '40s (!), as well as the hand-drawn map I had made of the shtetl from the 50 year old recollections of Ralph Codikov and Alter Shaymes. She explained to me that, due to Soviet fears of invasion, maps were simply not to be had in Lithuania and that those that existed were deliberately falsified. On top of that, the Lithuanians were currently in the process of changing all the Russian-named streets to Lithuanian names.

Once we reached the outskirts of Poniemunias, the driver stopped periodically to shout at those passing by and get directions. On try number three we were in luck. The middle-aged man we stopped knew Poniemunias well, and gave us directions which took us from Kaunas over a bridge north of Poniemunias (near the artificial lake created by the dam). The road from the bridge led directly into Viadoto Gotveh at the northern end of Poniemunias by the church.

Our first stop was the site of the old Jewish cemetery which Walter's report gave as 178 Viadoto Gotveh. We knocked several times at the door of the former mortuary building and hearing no answer, boldly entered inside. There we found Mr. Peter Migonis, the current occupant, rising from his bed to meet us. Zita quickly apologized for our intrusion and explained the purpose for our visit. Mr. Migonis did remember Walter and Andrea's previous visit and, in response to my questions, stated that most of the cemetery stones had been taken away over 20 years ago, that one stone remained on the side of his house, and that several others were in the over-growth just to the south. He was not interested in showing us around, but waved his arm towards the south of the house and invited us to explore.

Leaving Mr. Migonis in his bed, I walked outside and immediately spotted the gravestone on the south (left) side of the house. Several lines of Hebrew were visible. Deciding that I could always apologize later, I took a shovel which was leaning against the side of the house, and pulled away the sod from the rest of the stone. The driver fetched a bucket of water to wash the stone, and we dried it carefully. The Hebrew was quite legible, stating that the stone (originally) marked the graves of two women who died in 1840 and 1852.⁴

I next donned a pair of hip boots and work gloves I had brought with me, thanks to Walter Miller's warning about nettles and brush, and plunged into the southern section of the former cemetery. I was extremely lucky that the winter weather had stripped all the leaves and nettles off the underbrush and that there was no snow on the ground. I found several round cement pillars on square bases, which Walter indicated in his report were large overturned gravestones, but which turned out to be the remains of the cement posts that once marked the southern boundary of the cemetery. I found only one other tombstone, mostly destroyed, which yielded the date of 1862.⁵

There is a possibility that other stones may exist six inches to one foot below the ground but there is no way of ascertaining this without literally digging up the cemetery area. The ground to the north of the house was completely devoid of stones.

Leaving the cemetery, we proceeded to the former site of the schul and cheder (on the E. side of the street, just where the Paniemunias bridge runs into Viadoto). A petrol station now marks the spot. We proceeded to houses N. on Viadoto, where we encountered an elderly inhabitant of Paniemunias. She pointed across the street to the west side of Viadoto, and showed us a yellow house directly next to the bridge, in which, she said, had lived twin Jewish girls. Next to them (on the right) in the green house, lived Avram, his wife, Belaminah, and their two daughters who had problems with their legs. Next to them on the right was the blacksmith, also a Jew, who survived the war and went to live in Vilnius.

We next drove to try and find #31 Viadoto where Ralph Codikov, a former resident of Paniemunias, now of Los Angeles, had lived before the war. As I photographed the house, I was approached by its current inhabitant, Antonis Bagdonas, who was curious about my activity. He explained that he had lived in that house all of his life and that all of the house numbers in Paniemunias had been changed after the war. His house was originally number 29. He pointed next door to where an empty lot stood and explained that it was the former site of number 31.

Antonis asked us, since I was interested in Napoleon, if we wanted to see Napoleon's Hill(!). We traveled south on Viedoto Gotveh, then bore right, following the curve of the river. On the Paniemunias side, just as the river made a sharp upward (westerly) turn, in the town of Freda, was a high hill. Antonis told us that the legend in Paniemunias was that each soldier in Napoleon's army, scooped up a helmet-full of dirt and dumped it on that spot, creating a high hill for Napoleon to stand upon and survey Kaunas, planning his attack on the city in 1812.⁶ Zita, now joined in, telling me that the Lithuanians are full of stories concerning the hidden treasures which Napoleon secreted in Lithuania as he fled from the Russians.

We dropped Atonis off at home with many thanks, and proceeded across to Kaunas, not on the Paniemunias bridge but on the Alexsota bridge.⁷ We had no problems leaving Kaunas and returned safely to Vilnius a little over an hour later.

¹ Excerpted from: Bernard Horwich, My First Eighty Years, Chicago: Argus Books, pp. 363-367.

² Isaac Breakstone (1863-1945).

³ "Gone, gone, all gone".

⁴ The stone, measuring approximately three feet across, was rounded at the top and scored down the middle so as to resemble two tablets. The right hand tablet reads: "Here lies my virtuous mother, Hinda, the daughter of our teacher and Rabbi, Yitchak Isak, who died on Shabbat, 28th day of Nisan, 5612 (1852), may her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life." This is the stone of Hinde Anixter. (See 1850s list in "Jewish Families and Individuals in Panemune 1780s-1940s"). The left hand side of the tablet reads: "Here lies our virtuous mother, Chaya Pesha the daughter of our teacher Sheftal, who died on Shabbat, 19th day of Sivan, 5600 (1840)..."

⁵ The upper left part of the stone was destroyed. The stone reads: "...Av ___ the son of ___ Zweig, 21st Iyar, 5622 (1862)."

⁶ While the account of the hill's creation is clearly fiction, the hill would command an excellent view of Kaunas.

⁷ We again proceeded South on Viadoto Gotveh, bore right as it merged with another road, and followed the signs to Alexsota. (All told, perhaps one mile from Paniemunias). The Alexsota bridge goes directly into the old historical square in Kaunas. (Directions now for future visitors to Paniemunias become quite easy: go to the historic square in Kaunas, pass over the bridge, keep bearing left along the river to Viadoto Gotveh.)