

The Lithuanian link

Sara Manobla explores her family roots in the town of Zagare



THE LAST Jew of Zagare, Isaac Mendelssohn, poses with his wife, Aldona. (Rod Freedman)



SARA MANOBLA interviews Lithuanian president Valdas Adamkus in 1998. (Joy Hall)

• STEVE LINDE

On July 13, 2012, veteran Israel Radio broadcaster Sara Manobla served as master of ceremonies at a memorial ceremony in the Lithuanian town of Zagare, for the 3,000 Jews slaughtered there in 1941 by the Nazis and their local collaborators. For Manobla, the dedication of the memorial plaque in the town center was not only the culmination of a journey exploring her own family roots there, but “a gesture of reconciliation and acceptance.”

The climax came eight months later, though, on March 19, 2013. Manobla personally tracked down Ruth Yoffe, who as a little girl had been hidden and saved by a Zagarean family together with her grandmother during the Nazi occupation of Lithuania, and now lives in Jerusalem, not far from Manobla’s own home. In a moving ceremony held in Zagare, members of the Levinskas family joined Manobla, her son Ze’ev and cousin Joy in Zagare to receive the title of Righteous Among the Nations.

Zagare: Litvaks and Lithuanians Confront the Past is an elegantly written account of Manobla’s personal discovery of her family’s Litvak past, the legacy of a destroyed Jewish community and its message for Lithuanians. A superb storyteller, Manobla draws the reader in brilliantly as she herself transforms from someone disconnected with her past into a kind of Jewish Sherlock Holmes, uncovering the horrors of the Holocaust and the heroism of a few families while harboring a sense of hope for the future.

Manobla was born Ursula Sara Towb in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the north of En-

gland. Growing up, she was unaware that her paternal grandparents, Berthe Moeller and David Towb, were from the Lithuanian town of Zagare, where they were married in 1889 and left for the UK soon after. “Of Zagare and Lithuania, I knew nothing,” she writes.

Sara made aliya in 1960, settled in Jerusalem, married Eli Manobla, a Jerusalem-born architect, and had three children. Having worked at the BBC World Service in London as a producer of foreign-language radio broadcasts, she continued her career in Israel Radio’s English Service, where she became a popular broadcaster.

What she terms her “improbable” first visit to the Soviet Union, as a member of an Israeli delegation to the annual conference of the International Journalists Ski Club, marked the beginning of her commitment to the cause of Jewish refuseniks and her own voyage of self-discovery. The search for her family’s Litvak roots, she writes, was also sparked by her non-Jewish cousins, Joy and Suki, the youngest of her grandparents’ 13 grandchildren.

Joy and Suki visited Zagare in 1995, four years after the collapse of the Soviet regime, and for the next 15 years, it became Joy’s mission to find out all she could about the town, establishing the Friends of Zagare from their home in the English Lake District, and then a committee, called Lithuania Link, to raise funds, send aid and provide scholarships. Although he knew nothing about Lithuania in the beginning, Alex Gibb, Joy’s 17-year-old neighbor, took on the job as its unpaid director for the next 13 years.

Sara and Joy were among a party of eight that traveled to Zagare in 1998 as the town marked its 800th anniversary. Joy had the honor of addressing the celebra-

tion in Naryshkin Park, together with the mayor and Lithuanian president Valdas Adamkus, whom Manobla interviewed for Israel Radio. They also met Isaac Mendelssohn, the sole survivor of the town’s Jewish community, and developed a close relationship with him and his family.

Manobla also left a copy of Rose Zwi’s *Last Walk in Naryshkin Park* with an English teacher named Aldona Bagdoniene, who promised to read the harrowing history of the Zagarean Jews to her classes. Upon her return to Israel, Sara wrote to Rose in Australia, and thus began a close relationship.

She also found Ruth Yoffe, living in the Katamon Gimmel quarter of Jerusalem, which ultimately led to the testimony needed for Yad Vashem to provide the Levinskas family that hid her and her grandmother with a Righteous Among the Nations award.

This is the final chapter in the book, and you should have some tissues ready for it. To give any more details would spoil the story for the reader, but suffice it to say that Manobla ends on a hopeful note. “To a great extent, it seemed as though Zagare had accepted us and we had accepted Zagare,” she writes.

Zagare is a book that should be read not only by Litvaks and Lithuanians, but by anyone interested in the history, present and future of the relationship between Lithuania, Israel and the Jewish people.

Manobla told *The Jerusalem Post* that the book, just published by the Jerusalem-based Gefen Publishing House, was an 80th birthday present to herself. She celebrated her birthday on March 6, while the official launching of the book is to be held at the Eden-Tamir Music Center in Jerusalem’s Ein Kerem neighborhood on March 25. ■



JEWS OF Zagarean descent gather together in July 2012. (Courtesy)



THE MEMORIAL plaque in Zagare town square. (Courtesy)



SARA MANOBLA and Valdas Balciunas address the people of Zagare at the dedication ceremony in July 2012. (Courtesy)

Accepting Zagare



The following excerpt is from the preface to Sara Manobla’s book, *Zagare: Litvaks and Lithuanians Confront the Past*.

This is a story of facing and coming to terms with history. Accepting Zagare was something all of us found ourselves doing – in Zagare – on July 13, 2012. From its inception, the project of erecting a plaque in the town square commemorating the annihilation in 1941 of the town’s entire Jewish community was a joint undertaking by Jews of the Zagarean descent, together with local Lithuanians led by Valdas Balciunas. At no stage was it a gesture of revenge or a settling of accounts. Accepting, acknowledging, remembering and educating – these were our goals.

In a letter written after we returned home from Zagare, one of our group, filmmaker Rod Freedman, wrote: “I think the word ‘reconciliation’ is appropriate – for me personally, and

because of Valdas’s attitude and other non-Jews whom we met. We’re not talking about meeting with the perpetrators; it’s almost too late for that now, so it’s not about reconciling with those who participate, or about forgiving. For me, it’s about acknowledgment and showing respect.”

Paying tribute to those noble Lithuanians who risked their lives and the lives of their families to save Jews in distress was also part of our mission. The testimony of Ruth Yoffe, a Holocaust survivor living in Jerusalem, would enable us to pay homage to a Zagarean family who had rescued her and her grandmother Batya: the Levinskas family were to be honored by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority as Righteous Among the Nations, and would be remembered on our memorial dedication day alongside those who had been killed.

We were a group of eight, descendants of the families that had left Zagare – in good time – before World War II. Our ancestors had fled in order to escape persecution and make a better life for their children. We came from England, America, South Africa, Australia and Is-

rael looking for roots and for a connection with a place and history inherited from our parents and grandparents. Each of us had a different perception of Zagare and what it meant to us. My initial engagement developed through my interest in Jewish genealogy and family history; it continued through my involvement with the struggle of Soviet Jewry, promoting the cause of refuseniks who wished to immigrate to Israel.

There were those in our little band who had come to say Kaddish for their relatives murdered in 1941, and to lay a flower on the mass grave. There were those who genuinely wished to reach out to the young generation of the town and help them to improve their lives. When we met in Zagare we all found ourselves striving to come to terms with the perceptions of the other people we met on the way. Acceptance could be an all-embracing word for this process of coming to terms and for what I would like to believe we accomplished – not forgiving, not forgetting, but a measure of tolerance, respect, hope, listening, supporting, agreeing, accepting and letting go, all sorely needed in our world today. ■

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