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„Estonchik“

Excerpt from „CHILDREN OF DOLHINOV: OUR ANCESTORS AND OURSELVES“¹

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There remained for me, after all this, one more duty. Of all the children of Dolhinov after that victory parade in Minsk in July 1944, none remained unaccounted for. All had either been murdered by the Germans and their collaborators, or died fighting in the partisans, or had lived mostly to come to Israel.

Yet there was one remaining, a young man who I felt unaccountably close to, who had come from afar and been caught up in the tale of our town. His name was Joseph Blechman, or as I was to learn more fully Joseph Abraham ben David Blechman, the Estonchik.

Everyone had liked him; all respected him. Far from his own family and his own small town, which was no doubt suffering their own torments, he had helped so many others' lives, including two of my cousins.

And to be honest, too, I wanted to test both my abilities and the resources we have today. Could a man who disappeared be traced after two-thirds of a century when

¹ "Dolginovo - a village in Vileyka district, Minsk region, Belarus." "In 1942, the population of Dolginovo was almost entirely destroyed by the Nazis. From 5000 Jews, that inhabited Dolginovo, by the summer of 1942, only 278 people survived. 218 of them were brought across the front line by partisan Nikolai Kiselyov, for which he was awarded in 2005 the title of Righteous Among the Nations." Wikipedia. [MR]

virtually no one remembered his name at all? Did some trace remain of a man brave and upright?

Blechman, as I now know, was born in 1920 in Rakvere, Estonia. The family must have been poor. His uncle was a shoemaker. He had seven years of schooling and then went to work at the age of 16. At 20 he was drafted into the Soviet army, which had only recently annexed his home country. At 21 he fought in Poland against the invading Germans and was captured. At 22 he escaped and through a chain of circumstances I will tell about in my book, "Zosia of Estonia,"² as he was nicknamed, participated in saving the lives of around 200 Jews, including two of my relatives and a number of people I have met who still live today.

As a partisan he survived a deadly ambush when Germans shot down almost 40 unarmed Jewish refugees he was trying to escort to safety, smuggled Jews out of ghettos in several towns, fought with tremendous courage, and earned the admiration of all those around him. Promoted to sergeant in the Jewish platoon of the People's Avengers, he participated in many battles. People who knew him described him as handsome, sweet, and innocent, naive despite all he'd been through, as kind as he was courageous.

Here is how Avraham Friedman, himself a man of tremendous bravery and intelligence said of him:

"The Estonchik was very famous among all the survivors in the area....He was a real brave guy and helped rescue many Jews from the ghettos, from Kriviczi to Ilya to Kurenets, and also Dolhinov, Myadel, and Globocki. He was everywhere. He was always walking in the forest.... He planned many transfers of Jews across the front. He somehow always knew how to escape from the Germans."

In July 1944--almost exactly 65 years ago today--he participated in the liberation of Minsk, which effectively ended the war in Belarus. All the other partisans were mustered into regular units which went on to capture Berlin. But alone of them Joseph disappeared. No one knew what happened to him. Few remembered his name, though my cousin Leon Rubin discovered it.

I was determined to find him. Since there had never been more than 5,000 Jews in Estonia, the task seemed possible. By an amazing coincidence, I had just that day received a new book by Efram Zuroff, the hunter of Nazi war criminals who lives in Jerusalem. There is a whole chapter on Estonia. He referred to his expert on that country, a man named Yakov Kaplan, who lives twenty minutes from me. Zuroff

² Regretfully, this book remained unwritten [MR]

couldn't have been friendlier or more helpful. When I mentioned Kaplan's name, he laughed warmly. I was soon to discover why.

Kaplan seemed like the ultimate Yiddish *altekokker*, a wonderful type of whom few remain. He pounced on my question and wouldn't let me go until he had gleaned every possible fact and then held forth, Ancient Mariner style, till I would have despaired of any escape if I hadn't shared in the obsession.

Consulting his personal records, Kaplan quickly found the birth notice of a man named Abraham Joseph Blechman. He was precisely the right age. And this was a key to the mystery. In those days, Jews often had a double first name. Not a first and middle name but two names that might be used interchangeably. So to find Joseph Blechman, I had to look for Abraham Blechman.

But what precisely became of Abraham Joseph? Might he still live today. Might I fly thousands of miles or walk three blocks from home in Tel Aviv and shake his hand?

The trail had not gone cold despite this being a very cold case indeed. I found the answer within minutes. It wasn't the one I preferred. Armed with his full name, Abraham Joseph Blechman, I went to the Yad ve-Shem registry of names of those killed in the Shoah. There are said to be three million names with more added every time. Blechman's name is there, but it shouldn't be. After looking at thousands of entries this was the first time I've ever seen anything like that. It was a one-in-a-million coincidence—or rather an error—made for me to find.

Abraham Joseph Blechman was killed at the Battle on Sonnemarra in October 1944. I had never heard of the place. But before I could look it up, an email arrived in response to one I had sent a week earlier to the Estonian Jewish community.

A kind Jew still living in Estonia, whose name I'll leave out and will explain why later, helped me fill in all the details.

What must have happened is this: Worried about his family, when he got up to the NKVD desk at the big white building in Minsk, where partisans reported for reassignment, Joseph begged for transfer to a Soviet army unit further north, hoping to get back home and find them. The secret police, perhaps figuring it would be useful to have one more soldier who knew the territory, agreed. He was put into the 917 Rifles. In fact, he became a second lieutenant, commanding the first squadron's third platoon.

On October 5, 1944, he came ashore with the 2nd Battalion of the 917th Rifles, in the Red Army's only amphibious attack of the war, on Saaremaa, one of several small islands that control the entrance to Tallinn harbor.

It must have been terribly cold. As night fell, they were advancing next to a dirt road deeply cratered by the Germans to prevent the Soviets from using it. The exhausted men's boots crunched forward step by step through the unfamiliar terrain. In the confusion, a German unit, the 2nd Battalion of the 67th Potsdam Grenadier Regiment, more than twice the size of his battalion, fell in alongside. The Germans, looking for some way to break out of the Soviet encirclement, were marching just 200 yards away. The Soviet soldiers' mistake was no doubt due partly to the fact that the Germans had with them a captured Red Army U.S.-built M3 Stuart light tank, a big red star on the turret.

Suddenly, the enemies realized their proximity. Flares lit up the night. Shots were fired in every direction. After having survived more than 40 months of constant combat, Blechman's skill was of no use to him here. He fell dead; his unit was decimated.

But the Germans soon ran up against stronger Soviet defenses. There was desperate hand- to-hand combat with both sides suffering heavy losses. The Germans lost about 200 men; the Soviets took no prisoners. While the fighting continued for several weeks, the Germans retreated late on November 23, crossing the frozen waterway back to the mainland.

"Yes," my Estonian Jewish correspondent informed me in his email. "On the island of Saaremaa is the tomb of a warrior named Blechman."

He is still there near the causeway connecting Muhu and Saramaa islands, by the straits of Väike-Väinö, places I had never even heard of that morning. There's a stone with his name on it among the 90 men buried there, one-third of his battalion lying side by side. I hope to stand there one day, lay some flowers on his grave, and say thanks.³

Of course, Blechman is not a hero in Estonia itself. It is a Soviet war memorial, an island of Russia in an—understandably--unfriendly country. The Soviets are hated for what they did to the country. As a semi-official history of neighboring Latvia, where the same factors applied, put it, the brutal Soviet occupation of 1940-1941 had "created such fear and hatred in the populace that in a very short period the common view of the Germans as the Latvians' primary enemies—developed over the centuries—as suddenly replaced by the view that the primary enemy was Russia and the Communists."⁴

³ This information is not correct. Abram Blechman is not one of the 90 men buried in the Tehumardi cemetery (90 stone cubes with the names of the fallen soldiers). See more details at the end of this story. [M.R.]

⁴ Daina Bleiere et al, History of Latvia: The 20th Century (Riga, 2006), p. 260

The Soviets' return in 1944 for another almost half-century of occupation had only intensified such feelings. While many Jews had been Estonian—and Latvian, Lithuanian, or Polish—patriots to some extent, the association of Jews with Communism and the USSR intensified antisemitism then and now. It was a major factor, too, promoting collaboration with the Nazis in genocide.

Matters remain very delicate today for Jews who still live in those countries. Indeed, Estonian Jews begged me not to refer to the Soviet presence as “occupation” in my writing, feeling it only added fuel to that fire.

In other words, I wasn't going to persuade the Estonian government to put up a plaque or museum exhibit in Joseph Blechman's honor.

On the other hand, though, Joseph Blechman knew who he was. And he'd no doubt be both pleased and appreciate the irony of the fact that when my research assistant, Katya Minakova, checked at the Soviet military archives in Moscow, she found his service record. Born and died in Estonia, kidnapped into the USSR, fought in Poland. And his nationality is listed as none of these but as Jewish.

But back to the Yad ve-Shem entry. There are basically two kinds of sources for those listed at Yad ve-Shem as being murdered in the Shoah. One is taken from lists—German records or immediate post-war documents—which simply provide a name and a date of someone who was deported or died. The others are forms filled out by relatives many years later. Blechman's name, and that of his brother, Moshe, was put in by his niece, Riva Shubinsky, who had written it in Russian fifteen years earlier.

Since she was in Israel but writing in Russian, her own story was instantly clear to me. She had been caught inside the USSR at the end of the war and not gotten out until the early 1990s. Since her father was ten years older than Yoseph and himself had also died in 1944, there was a small chance she might remember her uncle.

But could she be found? She was not living at her old address and a search of phone directories found far too many Shubinsky's to interrogate.

Then, drawing of a lifetime's watching of television shows and films, the answer came to me: hire a private investigator. Licensed detectives have access to the national population registry and thus can find anyone unless they are really, really deliberately hiding. At that precise moment, the daughter of a lawyer friend was in the next room playing with my daughter. Dudu is just about the only lawyer I have ever met who is actually happy in his profession. Always good-natured, wiry and quick-moving, he's an energetic guy who gets thing done.

Contrary to all clichés, his detective friend is precisely the same. Instead of the burly, tough-talking guy, the detective has a somewhat high-pitched voice, is balding, slight, and scrupulously polite—which in Israel is quite noticeable in any profession. He promises to find out the answer within 48 hours and he actually does so.

I nervously await the call. Is she alive? Will she speak to me? Does she know anything? She's on a trip, says the detective, in fact she's in Estonia at the moment. And any way, she only speaks Yiddish and Russian. But here's her son's phone number.

And so the next link in the chain. I instantly like the son, Boris, the names given people are so often such an indication of a point in history. If he were 20 years older, he'd have a Biblical/Yiddish first name; 10 years younger, a Hebrew one. He's intelligent and articulate, his Hebrew unaccented and his English quite fluent also. Clearly, he has a job of some import, as his phone rings constantly in the background. Clearly the lineage, like mine, has come up a long way since the shoemaking days of 75 years ago.

Boris says he has heard something vaguely about an Uncle Joseph and promises to discuss it with his mother when she returns. I let five days go by and then telephone him. Yes, he says, I have the right Blechman, but there are no photos of the uncle and no direct memories either.

There's only one thing she remembered, one tiny detail that I find profoundly comforting.

After the Red Army took the capital, Tallinn, and thus simultaneously liberated and re-enslaved Estonia his mother somehow made it back there. Her older son had already died in the Red Army's ranks. Somehow, too, there was a reunion. Joseph, on leave, found his mother and they were able to be together one last time before he went off to fight and die a few days later. She talked about it for the rest of her life.

History is both an attempt at truth and a form of respect. Or, at least, it should be. It gives us the opportunity to resurrect at least the memory of those who have done great deeds and earned great merit, though they gained nothing material from it. In a world obsessed with pop stars who drug themselves to death or screen stars who pretend heroics, we would do better by honoring those of no fame, no wealth, no power who really deserve our admiration and emulation.

People like Joseph Blechman, and Moshe Blechman, too, and many others who did what they had to do and did it both well and honorably. There can be no reward for them except how we feel and what we remember.



This is the mass grave site in Tehumardi village. The name of Abram Blechman is not written on any of these 90 cubes. This is the list of soldiers whose names are there:

AASMAA G.J., ABRAMOV P.G.,
 AFANASJEV P.A., ALBER V.J., ALBERT I.F.,
 ALLIK A.A., ALMEJEV H., ANASKIN P.A.,
 ANUTŠKIN V.P., ATLUKOV M.P.,
 ATŠKASSOV T.M., AULIK O.A., BARMATOV
 V.I., BENDER P.P., BENŽENTSEV J.A.,
 BEREŽNOV P.F., BOGDANOV I.A., BOGZA

G.V., BONDARENKO M.F., BOTŠKARJOV N.F., BRJUHHANOV R.N., DIDVA E.J., DJOMIN F.A.,
 EISENBERG V.F., FILIPPOV A.J., FILIPPOV C.P., FROLOV I.S., GALDINSKI V.M., GINSBURG A.M.,
 GLADKOV V.I., GLAGIN M.I., GRIGORJEV N.P., GRINTŠUK I.S., GUDKOV V.H., GURJEVIŠ Z.M.,
 GUSSEV I.S., IGNATJEV V.F., ILITŠEV M.I., ISSAJEV I.I., JAGAFOROV H.J., JAKOVLEV I.F., JAROŠŠ I.F.,
 JÄRVISTE J.V., JASSONIN D.F., JATSENKO A.I., JEKORJASIN K.F., JERMAKOV P.N., JEROFEJEV P.P.,
 JESKOV N.D., JÕESAAR E.J., KAARE E.F., KALMUS H.A., KARAPUZOV I.J., KARGIN R.J., KARTŠIKOV P.S.,
 KASE J.M., KASEMAA E.M., KIISK R.J., KIVISTU P.J., KLEIN H.J., KOMAROV V.M., KONDROV M.J.,
 KONONOV P.S., KORNITŠOV G.F., KOSATUHHIN A.G., KOZLOV I.I., KUDJUROV D.P., KÕIV N.G.,
 KURENKOV S.F., KURMATŠEV M.K., KUUSK E.A., KUZIN I.A., KUZNETSOV A.O., KUZNETSOV V.S.,
 LAANDE A.R., LAANSALU H.G., LAARENTS E.J., LAATS A.F., LAUGEN V.P., LEIB J.H., LEONOV V.J., LEPP
 J.A., LILLES F.M., LINDER A.J., LITVINOV F.I., LIZIKOV F.J., LOKK V.H., LOSSMANN K., LUKMANOV J.L.,
 LÕSIKOV F.I., MÄESTU L.J., MÄGI H.J., MAIER A.A., MANTAJEV S., MARAN R.A., MARTENS V.R.,
 MATVEITŠUK V.P., MEERITS E.V., MENDELEV, MERI A.P., MEŠKO A.J., METS F.J., MIHHAILOV P.I.,
 MILOSERTOV M.K., MINAJEV I.P., MIRONOV A.M., MIROŠNIKOV M.P., MOISSEJENKO A.R., MURD
 A.T., MUSLIMOV A.A., MÜTS E.P., MÜÜRSEPP J.J., NAZAROV V.I., NESTOR K.P., NIKOLAJEV G.A.,
 NIKULIN V.M., NOSKOV P.S., OJA K.A., ORLOV I.G., PAHHOMOV K.F., PAIST A.V., PAISTER A.K., PANG
 H.J., PARAMONOV N.V., PARIS A.K., PÄRTEL N.I., PAVLOV A.A., PAVLOV I.S., PETROV I.J., PETRUHHIN
 A.J., PLOOVITS E.V., PÕDER A.G., POKLADENKO G.G., POLJAKOV V.D., PROKOPENKO A.S., PROKUDIN
 R.F., PULMAN R.R., PUNGA E.A., RABIJENKO A.G., RÄNI P.P., RÄNK A.F., REISNER R.H., RUMJANTSEV
 A.D., SALLOK R.P., SARÕTŠEV F.V., SELIVERSTOV M.M., SEMJONOV N.F., SERBAK D.P., SIIMSALU
 H.A., SILE A.J., SINJUTA I.N., SOKOLNIKOV I.O., SOLODKOV A.F., SOONISTE A.A., SOOTS F.P.,
 ŠOROHHOV V.F., ŠTAKAL P.V., STOLJAROV N.S., STREKALOV N.J., SULGA V.I., SUVI N.S., TAAMSAAR
 E.H., TAIMBEKOV V.P., TAMMIK R.A., TARAN M.G., TARASSOV F.I., TÄTTE E.K., TEESAAR A.A.,
 TEESALU O.J., TIHHONOV N.I., TJASTO V.S., TOHVER V.K., TOKS I.A., TOOTS K.G., TRAPEZNIKOV J.F.,
 TRUMMAL O.M., TŠEREPOVSKI A.I., TŠUTŠELOV P.D., TSVETKOV I.V., UUSTAL A.J., VAGUR J.K.,
 VAINULA E.N., VARBLANE J.J., VARES V.J., VASSILJEV A.V., VASSILJEV V.P., VELKMAN E., VENKOV I.J.,
 VIDRIK K., VILOP N.E., VTJURIN I.I., VÕSSOTIN N.T., ZIMIN R.V., ZUBKOV T.M.

From the archive documents we can see that Abram Blechman was buried in Salme parish, Torgén village. Torgén was the German name for Torgu. The village does not exist anymore, the place is called Vanatorgu. Today it is in the Torgu parish.

The possibilities are as follows:

Most probably Abram is buried in the mass grave adjacent to the Torgu cemetery (actually Iide cemetery).



Other possibilities are:

Mass grave at the side of the road near the Vanatorgu bus stop:



There is another monument at the other side of the road, but it has 18 names. Abram is not among them.

At the road side near the Lõupõllu village (Torgu parish):



Mark Rybak