

# D'var for Temple Emunah Summer Sermon 2018

By Joel Alpert

## Title: "Bridging the Gap in Our Jewish History"

Summary: Fellow congregant Joel Alpert will bring to our attention a little-known genre' of Jewish literature that bridges a gap in our own individual history that he is working to make available to us.

Bio: Joel, a longtime member of Temple Emunah, is an electrical engineer at MIT Lincoln Laboratory for over 35 years. His decades-long interest in his family genealogy going back to Lithuania was the cause of him finding this genre' which he has now leveraged to the benefit of thousands of readers with ancestors all over Europe.

Joel relates that "last fall, Terri Swartz-Russell came to me and said something. I heard it as 'I am the New Inquisitor.' She actually said 'I am the new Dick Wissokur and I want you to speak about your book project.'" Dick Wissokur used to line up speakers for the summer d'varim. *(If you don't get it, reread this paragraph above out loud.)*

### "Bridging the Gap in Our Jewish History"

What do I mean by **Bridging the Gap in Our Jewish History**?

We do know about the history of the Jewish people after being exiled out of the Land of Israel, with our wanderings over Europe and the Iberian Peninsula, and the Middle East. Then we hear the stories of our immediate ancestors as they immigrated to the Americas. But what do we know about their environment, the towns that they left to come to America? *Yes, we are all the descendants of immigrants.* That is the **gap** – the GAP between the stories that our grandparents and great grandparents told us about their town and the history books.

**Do you know the name of the towns your ancestors came from?**

I am going to tell you how you might fill that gap. Doing research on my family genealogy, I stumbled on this genre of books that are specific to each shtetl that presents us with the picture of the town from the late 1800s through the period of the Shoah. There were about 2000 of these books published from all over Europe.

**Why have you not heard of them?** That's the *bad news*: Because most were not written in English. The *good news* is that they are being translated and made available on the Internet by descendants of these towns.

**How did these books come about?** After World War II, survivors and people who left the towns before the war, gathered with their friends in groups, *landshafts* groups, and in the years after the war, they spontaneously started to write down their memories of their towns, because most often *that was all that was left of their communities...their memories*. Then they started to publish these memories in books, often called Black Books, because the covers were black. Most were written in their native language, Yiddish, or those written in Israel are often in Hebrew. I found many of these original books in the extensive collections at the Harvard and Brandeis libraries, largely unread. When I picked up the book of the town of my paternal grandparents, it had last been checked out 25 years before.

These books contain first-hand accounts of the life in these villages, their institutions, rabbis, characters, intellectuals, the history of the towns from their memories, often going back into the late 1800s, then the eye-witness accounts of the Shoah. Most books then have a list of the victims of the Holocaust at the end, which is of direct genealogical value. From these books one can really grasp what life was like for our ancestors and understand the environment they left. So these books are more than just about the Holocaust and lists of Holocaust victims; they can provide that insight into the environment our families came from. **Filling that gap.**

**How do they get translated?** There is a web site JewishGen.org, Let me repeat – Jewish G E N .org, that is the primary web site for Jewish genealogical research. So about 30 years ago, the “Yizkor Book Project” formed, *Yizkor* means Memory or memorial in Hebrew. So these memorial books are called Yizkor Books. In the project, people who were interested in a particular town would, as we say today, would “crowd source” their efforts to collect money, find a translator and get the book of their town translated and placed on the Web for all to be able to read. Today there are about 700 of the 2000 books from all over Europe in the process of translation and being placed on-line, with about 130 of the books fully translated., An Australian Jew living on a kibbutz in the upper Galilee, Lance Ackerfeld, devotes every spare moment to the project. There are dedicated people from all over the world working together on this project to **preserve the history of our destroyed Eastern European Jewish communities.**

**How did I get involved?** In 1993, 25 years ago, I coordinated the translation of the two books of the towns of my grandparents, Yurburg, Lithuania and Dokshitz, Belarus. By 2001, eight years later, I had raised about \$8000, mostly from my extended family, to translate the Yurburg Yizkor Book and post it up on the web. Then I got the bad news, when my wife Nancy then told me that “no one would read 500 pages on the web” and that I need to figure out how to publish it in book form. By 2003 I learned how to use the new “print-on-demand” business model and technology to publish the book. There is no need for an inventory because the books

can be ordered and printed one at a time. I had hoped to sell maybe 100 so that I could “declare victory,” meaning that if 100 people could hold in their hands, the book of Yurburg, the town of their ancestors, I would have accomplished my goal. I have now lost count at over 400 of this book sold.

Five years ago, having retired, I was looking for a use of my newly found time, and conceived the idea to make use of that experience and knowledge of publishing using the Print-On-Demand model to books for towns all over Europe that had nothing to do with me. I approached JewishGen and now 5 years later, I coordinate the “Yizkor-Books-In-Print Project” of JewishGen and with the help of dedicated volunteers from all over the world. We have published 72 titles and sold over 6000 books. So, on average, that is about 86 books sold per title, so I am close to declaring another 72 “victories.”

I’d like to tell you about some of my experiences in that project, **but first I want to tell you what motivates me.**

In doing my own genealogy, back in 1997, I had found a woman in Dallas who was part of a distant branch of the family that I wanted to include in my personal family tree. She told me that a cousin of hers had a family tree in a memoir that he wrote, so she lent the book to me. The author was Josef Rosin, a step-second cousin once-removed. *Did you get that? Remote.* He lived in Haifa, but when I wrote to him, he did not respond. However I noted that in the dedication to the book he thanked a dear friend Professor Dov Levin, who had urged him to write his memoir about his survival in Lithuania during the Shoah, and get it translated into English. That memoir we eventually published. I felt that Josef’s book could easily become the basis for a movie script. It is amazing what these people lived through. These memories must be preserved.

Back in 1998, the International Jewish Genealogy conference was being held in Boston, and to my surprise that same Professor Dov Levin, head of the Oral History Department at the Hebrew University, was a guest speaker. I approached the professor while he was eating dinner after his talk and told him that I was desperately trying to contact his friend, Josef Rosin. He wanted to finish his dinner, so he told me to go off into a side room and write a note to Josef and he would “personally put it in Josef’s hands.” He then told me that the two had met in the forests of Lithuania as partisans during World War II, made their ways across Europe after the war, immigrated to Israel, made productive lives for themselves and had remained close friends ever since. They had just published the monumental work in Hebrew, *Pinkas Lita, The Encyclopedia of Lithuanian Jewish Communities*, a 750 page book detailing the history of nearly 500 Jewish shtetach. Josef came to *Eretz-Yisrael* in the illegal Aliyah in 1945, fought in the War of Independence, earned two degrees at the Technion in civil engineering and worked for the Water Authority in Israel, retired and collaborated with his friend Prof. Dov Levin to research and write this book that was published by Yad Vashem, Dov the editor and Josef the assistant editor. Actually all the articles were researched and

written by these two former Partisans. Today this book is the most authoritative book on Lithuanian Jewish Communities before the war. As I said, it is written in Hebrew.

**During that conversation Dov Levin tells me “The most important thing, Joel, is to get this kind of material translated and into hands of English speakers.” That is what urges me on even today, 20 years later. I still hear Dov’s voice.**

Since I created and run the Yizkor-Books-in-Print project, I have much to say about what we publish, so we also publish Shoah memoirs and also books concerning the Holocaust or Eastern European Jewish History in addition to the translation of these Yizkor Books. I widened the scope of the books we can publish.

So I got the idea and approached *Yad Vashem* that they allow Pinkas Lita to be translated and posted on the web so English readers could access this important information. Unfortunately *Yad Vashem* declined saying that they were planning to publish the book in English.

Then one night, at 3 am, I had the idea to do an “end run.” I proposed to Josef Rosin that since he did the research on about half the 500 shtetlach and had been restricted to about 2-3 pages per town in that book, that he go back to his research and write longer articles and then we could publish these new articles that had no copyright restriction. Josef replied, “Why do that? Who cares? All the people are dead.” I countered with, “but their children and grandchildren would likely be interested.” He finally agreed and we published Preserving Our Litvak Heritage with 31 articles in just over 700 pages. Later, when I wrote to Josef about how many books had sold, he responded that “he had already started the second book.” In all we published three such books covering 101 Lithuanian shtetlach. Unfortunately, both Dov and Josef have passed away in the last two years, both over 90 years old. I am indebted to and miss both men with whom I had developed close relations and received much inspiration.

**I want to tell you about a couple of stories of the project.** The overriding themes are how personal it has become even for our Temple Emunah congregants and that many people have deemed this project so important that they volunteer to help out however they can. Basically this project is helping preserve the history of Eastern European Jewish communities.

The first example is that after I published one of the three Preserving Our Litvak Heritage books, I was at a lecture at Hebrew College and by chance was sitting next to Paula Dangel from Temple Emunah and mentioned the book. She remarked that her family came from Lithuania, so I asked which town, she told me, and I recognized the town as one of the chapters in the Rosin book just published, so sent her the chapter. Upon receiving it, later that day, she responded that she was shocked and pleased to find that the one photo chosen for that town contained an

image of her great-grandfather's family in front of their home in that town. **Small Jewish World!**

It turns out that for the **Memorial book of my paternal grandparents town**, Dokshitz, Belarus, I had a tremendous amount of help from Aaron Ginzburg, whose father also came from the town. Aaron's sister is Beth Levine of Temple Emunah. **Small Jewish World.** There is a whole other fascinating story that Aaron went on to actually rehabilitate the destroyed Jewish Cemetery in the town, a holy and tremendous work. No time now to tell about that. Maybe, next summer.

Another personal example was that Nancy and I were out to dinner with **Sylvia and Ben Perlman** and I mentioned the book project. Ben remarked that he had just received an email from a cousin in Chicago about the publication of a book about the town of their family's origin. I asked him if the email was from Myrna Siegel and the book about the town of Molcad? He was shocked and said YES and that Myrna was his first cousin. Myrna had managed the translation of the book and its placement on the web. We had just published the book that week. Ben ordered several copies of the book for himself and his family. Myrna's son was so taken by the project that he donated money to the project to have the book distributed free to libraries and memorials. We received another such grant to distribute another town's book too. **Very dedicated people.**

I had an almost identical experience like the dinner with the Perlman's but in Tucson when we went out to dinner with friends originally from Detroit, when I told the couple the name of the person whom they received an email from about a Yizkor book of their ancestral town. **It's a very-very small Jewish world!**

As it happens a number of Temple Emunah congregants have participated on the project. It turned out that some of the early books only had the translations done and posted on the Internet, but without the images from the original books. So we borrowed the original Yiddish books from the Harvard and Brandeis collections and then scanned the images. **Joe Canter** and **Ken Bruss** each graciously scanned one of these first books. It's a huge undertaking, and they did a great job. **Wendy Russman-Halperin** also helped out by getting the books from the Brandeis library with the help of the head librarian, her former room mate from college. Our Temple Emunah librarian **Toni Steckler** has dedicated space in the library for many books that the project has donated to our library.

Then there is the help we received from **Bernie Jacobson, Alava Shalom**. I was approached by the children of Jerzy Einhorn, a concentration camp survivor from Czestochowa, Poland who sought refuge in Sweden after the war and eventually became a prominent figure in Swedish life, as a Professor of Oncology, a Member of Parliament and a member of the Nobel Prize Committee in medicine. His memoir, [The Maple Tree Behind The Barbed Wire](#) was first published in Swedish, and translated into Polish and Russian with 200,000 copies sold in Swedish a country with a very small population. His children approached me to publish the English

translation. However they said that the English translation needed editing to improve the English. We normally do not edit the books, but use the material that is placed on the web by the translation coordinators, format it for book form, have covers designed and publish using Print-on-Demand. My wife Nancy suggested that maybe Bernie Jacobson might be interested in a challenging retirement project. Bernie willingly accepted and then reported to us that his wife Margareta Jacobson had read the book in Swedish. Bernie, who was a biochemist, coincidentally the same field as Einhorn, and had done his post-graduate work in Sweden in the 1960s. As he was editing the book, he reported that he knew many of the colleagues who Dr. Einhorn mentioned in the book. What an amazing coincidence and thrill for Bernie and Margareta. Margareta has her copy of the original book in Swedish, if you'd like to see it. It is an extremely well written book. Jerzy really puts you in his shoes so you get a real sense that you are there with him to experience what he experienced. I highly recommend it. The book is in the Temple Emunah library with many other of our publications, located in the far corner on the bottom shelf listed under "Yizkor Books."

**Then there is the story of the Englishman, the survivor – and the famous Jewish artist Samuel Bok who lives here in the Boston area. [Note: There was not time to tell this story on Saturday July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018, but included here.]**

In March 2017, I received an email from a Peter Harris, a retired journalist who had sent most of his career writing for "The Daily Telegraph," one of the biggest newspapers in England. He was cleaning out his office and came across a 40-year old typed manuscript that he had written for a survivor, Alan Weiler, whom he had met in a pub on the English coast. They had struck up a conversation, and Alan, the survivor told Peter, the journalist, the story of his survival during the Holocaust. Ultimately Peter wrote Alan's story into a book that was never published, with only three typed copies. One had been sent to Russia, one of the few countries that prosecuted Nazis, as evidence, one had been destroyed by fire, and one remained in Peter's office. Peter decided to donate it to the Wiener Library for the Study of the Holocaust and Genocide in London. When he took it there, the archivist studied the manuscript and told Peter that it should be published. Peter then approached several publishers, who all told him it needed to be retyped to start with and that would cost at least \$10,000, just for that. Peter, in desperation, sent that email to me. I asked Peter to send a scan of the book and I'd see what we could do. The scan was not adequate to use as a reprint, so I first tried to use OCR, Optical Character Recognition software on it. Total failure! I tried all sorts of different settings and all the tricks I could think of. No deal. Finally one night, again at 3 am, I came up with this scheme. I sent an announcement out to the JewishGen Listserv asking for volunteers to each retype 20 pages of the scanned material. We completed that typing in two weeks, and published the book a few months later.

The name of the book is God's Sabbatical Years. Here I quote an email from Peter: "When, after more than a year, we completed the book, we discussed numerous possible titles. But Alan was always adamant that it should be called "God's

Sabbatical Years”, explaining that if there is a God in heaven “ he must have been on holiday” during those long years of suffering.”

The book has an interesting tale about the cover. Alan had mentioned that in the Vilna ghetto, Alan, the survivor, became a friend of an artist, Samuel Bak, who eventually became a well-known painter of Jewish themes, so Peter suggested contacting Sam Bak, to see if one of his painting could be used for the cover. Turns out that Bak lives nearby in Weston and graciously agreed to the request. Bak’s art work is handled by the Pucker Gallery on Newberry Street in Boston.

So this title led me to engage 15 eager volunteers, many of whom read the material and reported that they could not put it down, reading more than their assigned 20 pages, and a very satisfying contact with the artist Sam Bak. Please take a look at this book for its cover and many other of the books that have been donated to the Temple Emunah Library.

So in summary, we now know how to bridge that GAP between our *bubbies* stories and the history books. I have had the willing help of many volunteers locally and worldwide to write books, translate, type, help format the material, scan images and create most interesting covers. Please view a few of the books during the Oneg and in the library which is open now so you can see even more of the books.

So please take advantage of this material on the internet to “Bridge the Gap in your Own Person History” by going to the JewishGen web site at Jewishgen.org and go to the Yizkor Book project to see if your family’s town has a Yizkor Book and see if there is a translation so that you can close your own personal gap.

**I will be happy to answer any questions during the oneg and I want to wish everyone Shabat Shalom.**

**BONUS: Directions to see if your ancestral town has a Yizkor book and more:**

1. Go to Jewishgen.org and find the pull down menu “Research” and click on “Yizkor Books.” Click on “Translations” and go to the Alphabet on the right and try to find the town. Or go directly to

<https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/translations.html>

- If you do find a book, go to that web site and look in the table of contents and see that the articles with hyperlinks have been translated. Those without hyperlinks have not been translated. If you want to help get more translated, click on the translation coordinator’s name and write to them. If you find that there is a book written for your town, but it is not being translated and you want to help write to Lance Ackerfeld at **[lance.ackerfeld@gmail.com](mailto:lance.ackerfeld@gmail.com)**
2. Go to Jewishgen.org, go to the “Data Base” pull down menu and put in the town name as best you can spell it, use the “Phonetically Like” option and see if you can find a match to your town. Lots of information there too. Some

times a Yizkor book is listed with a link (even if there is no link, there still maybe a Yizkor Book). See the various spelling for the town too.

<https://www.jewishgen.org/Communities/Search.asp>

If you want to see the original Yiddish or Hebrew, go to

<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yizkor-books>

scroll down to find the box that says “Search all 647 books” then enter the name of the town and search.

To see all the books available in the Yizkor-Books-In-Print project, go to:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/ybip.html>