

## **A Love Story by Glenda Levitt**

In 2015, Allan Evans of New York contacted us following an article our new young Lithuanian friend Merunas had placed on his Face Book page about our visit to his town of Birzai that May.

Allan wrote to us that his father, young Shmuel Evin from Birzai, in 1938 left Lithuania for America. Allan was aware that Shmuel had had a close relationship with a young Lithuanian girl, Jadviga. Shortly thereafter while on a business trip to New York, we made a point of meeting with Alan before our planned return visit to Birzai that November. Although Allan had hoped to join us on our visit to Birzai, unfortunately, his health prevented him from doing so.

Allan told us that his father had kept a diary in the 1930's. From it, it was clear that there had been a romance and that the couple were aware of rumours about their relationship. Shmuel's father was the town Shochat, as well as being a Talmudic scholar and respected member of the Jewish community. For Shmuel's family a Jewish boy and a Catholic girl going out together was an unacceptable scandal.

Allan's father Shmuel had died suddenly in 1986. In about 1990, Allan visited Latvia, but was unable to get a visa to enter Soviet controlled Lithuania. With the help of a friend, he hid in a car and was smuggled across the border. He met with Jadviga for 3 intense, unforgettable hours. He described her as his second mother.

Allan maintained contact for a number of years and then there was silence. At Allan's special request we undertook the task of trying to find Jadviga now age 102. We messaged our friend Merunas to try and trace her. He succeeded and on our return visit to Birzai in November he arranged for us to visit her.

We all entered the very modest Soviet built apartment to meet with Jadviga and her dedicated neighbour, Erena who took it upon herself to be a care-giver with love and devotion.

Jadviga told us that sometime in the 1930's at a gathering of a crowd of young people, she felt someone staring at her. She saw a young man across the room and her words to us were "I felt something." They started seeing each other. It was not easy. There was gossip when they were seen walking together. Jadviga's parents were neither aware of either her relationship with Shmuel, nor her brother's relationship with his Jewish girl friend.

Shmuel's parents were however extremely upset and there were many highly emotional arguments. Shmuel and Jadviga would try to meet after dark so as not to be seen. Their meeting place was the moat surrounding the magnificent castle of Birzai.



Shmuel's diary described day to day Jewish life in the town and his love of Jadviga and how they had to cope with the obstacles in their relationship.

Conditions were becoming more and more difficult for Jews. In 1938 an uncle and aunt of Shmuel's in New

York lost their only child. They appealed for permission to the American government for an entry permit for their family from Lithuania. Although there was a clear policy by the American consulate of dramatically limiting the entry of Jews into the country, they did permit Shmuel, but only Shmuel out of his family, into the USA.

In 1938 Shmuel left Kaunas, Kovno in Yiddish, by train at the start of his journey to America. Jadviga was understandably not at the station to see him off. She told us that when they parted, he wanted to give her a small gift. He bought two identical bars of soap one for her and one for himself and said to her, "when we wash with this soap I will know how you smell and you will know how I smell."

When they parted, they assumed that the war would be over shortly and she would join him in America.

She was studying law at Kaunas University, when the Germans invaded Lithuania in 1941. Her best friend was a Jewess. Jadviga hid her for the duration of the war in her apartment which she shared with her brother. After the Jews were herded and forced into the allocated ghetto area, Jadviga would sew a yellow star onto her dress at enormous risk, so that she could smuggle in food to distribute. She and her brother managed to help a number of friends escape out of the

ghetto and together, kept them hidden in their apartment. She described how they furnished a basement in their building. When they were suspected of hiding Jews and their apartment was searched, a basement was found but without any sign of people living there. Unbeknown to the people searching for hidden Jews, Jadviga and her brother had built a secret second basement below the upper room, where their friends remained safe.

With the war over, Lithuania was under communist rule. Jadviga had only three more exams to write before qualifying as a lawyer. However, she refused to submit to the communist regimes instituting changes to laws to suit the communist ideology and so changed her profession and became a teacher.

After the long years of war, and after Shmuel managed to trace her, they were faced with the realization that there was no chance that the Soviet authorities would allow her to leave. Shmuel, after a while, wrote and told her that he had married and had a baby, Allan. A few years later, when Allan was little, his mother took ill and died. Shmuel who, it seems, never stopped loving Jadviga, wrote to her inviting her to join him in America as his wife and be a mother to his son. He had now obtained all the papers necessary for her to enter the USA.

She made application to the local Soviet department for permission to leave to join her fiancé in America. Her request was denied. She described how she was laughed out of the office, with the mocking question, "Are there not enough Lithuanian men for you to marry?" She in fact did marry, but the failed marriage lasted for a very short while and there were no children. Her only and lifelong love was Shmuel.

We looked at this 102-year-old woman, highly intelligent, an extraordinary heroine, a symbol of the best of her country's history, nurturing a love that was never allowed to be fulfilled and was never extinguished, a woman of such modesty that her story has never been told.

As we left, in fact tore ourselves away, she gave us 2 gifts for Allan. The gifts were, a box of chocolates, chosen for the illustration on the box cover of two young lovers and a set of coasters, with the image of the beautiful and impressive Birzai Castle.

As we were leaving, Jadviga's companion, Erena, took us aside to tell us that Jadviga has told her that when she dies, she wishes to be cremated and her ashes taken to the moat of the castle and be scattered at the place where she had known love with her Shmulka.

On 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2018, we received the news from Allan and Merunas that Jadviga had passed away at the age of 104. Erena told us that after the cremation, she buried the urn according to

Lithuanian law. However, she quietly removed some of the ashes and during the evening she went to the castle, strolled along the moat and fulfilled Jadviga's wish.

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A word about me:

I am Glenda Levitt. We, that is Abel and I live in Kfar Saba, Israel and made Aliyah with our 4 children from Cape Town, South Africa in 1979. After our first visit to Lithuania in 1998, we became deeply involved, in particular with the town of Plunge, *Plungyan* in Yiddish, Abel's ancestral town where his grandmother, uncles, aunts and cousins were murdered. Over the years we have undertaken a number of projects in Lithuania. Our most recent activities have been in the town of Birzai, *Birzh* in Yiddish, where members of my family are among the Shoah victims. The following story is a Birzai love story.

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