

## Preface

In the course of five generations, our family occupied the vertices of a triangle, with an average side of 10,000 kilometres. My paternal and maternal grandparents were born in various parts of the western Russian Empire, my parents were born in Argentina, and my grandchildren were born in Canada. The world of my grandparents ceased to exist in 1942, its people and culture swept in an instant, buried in mass graves or ascending to heavens in the smoke of extermination ovens. Leaving large parts of their families behind, my grandparents had already abandoned that geography some decades earlier, in their youth, and emigrated to a new land full of promise. I met only my mother's parents, my father's parents having died long before my birth.

As a child, I knew very little about the old family, and it didn't occur to me to ask those who were still alive. The dearth of data, even names and dates, is particularly acute on my father's side of the family. For this reason, I would like in this short account to record the little I remember and the little I was able to find more recently about it. In so doing, my eyes were opened to unexpected insights into the richness of everyday life, cultural activities, social institutions, ideological movements, urban development, community relations, and many other aspects of life in the decades that straddle the turn of the last century.



These notes are dedicated to my seven grandchildren, in the hope that they will be able to answer the questions of their grandchildren if the occasion arises.

Calgary, January 2021

## THE PROMISED LAND

### 1. Introduction

The construction of the Amiral Baudin and her sister battleship Formidable was finalized in 1889. Designed as state-of-the-art war vessels for the French navy, and the first French battleships not to use any sail power, they were quickly superseded by the steel-armoured predecessors of HMS Dreadnought of the Royal Navy. Built in 1906, this “fear nothing” behemoth, which relegated its forerunners to the dustbin of naval history, made some history in WW1 when it sunk a German submarine by sheer power of collision. Beyond this feat, however, neither the revolutionary Dreadnought nor the slightly older French cuirassés, served their original military purpose. Nevertheless, nothing has been created without some hidden reason or ulterior motive.

On November 24, 1899. The Amiral Baudin was moored at the port of Buenos Aires, having brought to shore fresh immigrants from Spain, Italy, and other European countries, just a handful of the millions who helped shape the unique culture of Argentina. The Amiral Baudin would arrive another fifteen times, fulfilling the same function, its last arrival on July 1, 1908, a year before it was sold for scrap. On its third trip, originating from Le Havre and arriving on September 17, 1902, it carried about 90 immigrants, most of them with Ashkenazi last names.<sup>1</sup> The four Epstein brothers were among them. The official document, archived at the Museo de la Inmigración, located not too far from the point of arrival, lists them in descending order of age as Salomón (25), Chaim (23), Mendel (22), and Beer (19), all single, of Russian nationality, unknown place of birth, and without profession. When leaving Baranovich, these four brothers left behind their father Noah and a younger sister Fradl. I don't know whether their mother was still alive.

This voyage constitutes a decisive event in the history of our family, a “before or after” landmark. What they left behind was a culturally unique world that would come to an end in just four decades hence. What they had ahead of them was another unique world about which they knew very little. My intention in writing these notes is to record the little I know about this part of our family history. It is, of necessity, a tiny part of the story, not only because what I know is so little, but also because of the paradox that, as families tend to grow exponentially into the future, so too for any individual the number of ancestors grows exponentially into the past. My mother's father was a Blejer, and her mother was a Guilman. My father's mother was a Goldstein.

All these families came from the Pale of Settlement, a concept that merits a short introduction. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania formed a federation known as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, encompassing the territories of modern Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, parts of Germany, and a large part of the Ukraine. By

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<sup>1</sup> Another source states that the date of arrival was September 1, although this may be a confusion between dates of departure and arrival. Yet another source has the date of arrival as September 19. That year, Rosh Hashana fell on October 1.

1795, the commonwealth ceased to exist, and its territories were divided among Russia, Prussia, and Austria in what is known as the Third Partition of Poland. The Pale of Settlement was a restricted area, mainly in the newly acquired territories, within the Russian Empire as the only permitted areas of residence for Jews. With somewhat variable borders, it existed and was enforced until 1917. By then, the Jewish population in the Pale was of about 5 million, as detailed in the map of Figure 1, representing about 12% of the total.



Figure 1: The Pale of Settlement

Despite the scarcity of data, the natural fading of the ripples of time on the lake of oblivion prompts me to record whatever I have been able to gather from family tales and from historical documents,

so that the generation of my grandchildren may have an idea, however vague, of our relatively recent history. As it has been written: “And these are the generations of the children of Noah ...”<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Baranovich

Although there had been a small Baranovich village since the 17<sup>th</sup> century (with various spellings according to the political vicissitudes of Polish and Russian sovereignty in the region), the town of Baranovich was officially established in 1884. In 1855, Alexander II (1818-1881) became Tzar of the Russian Empire. Under his reign, the fledgling railway network of Russia was greatly expanded. In November 1871, the section Smolensk-Brest of the Moscow-Brest Line was inaugurated, one of whose stations was erected in Baranovich and so named. The small town that emerged in the vicinity of this station was generally known as Rozvadovo, after the last name of the owner of the land, the Countess Rozvadovskaya. This Old Baranovich was eventually merged with the New Baranovich, as the neighbourhood that developed near a second railway station (Baranovich Polesia) further to the East was called. This station belonged to a different line joining the cities of Vilnius and Rovno, completed in 1883. Thus, Baranovich became an important railway junction within the Russian empire. Baranovich is now in Belarus and is still an important railway junction.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 10:1





*Figure 2: The original Baranovich railway station*

As described in an excellent memorial book (Sefer Zikaron, SZ)<sup>3</sup> published by the Association of Baranovichers in Israel, Baranovich felt young and energetic, as compared with other older and more established towns in the region. In a mere couple of decades, it became a modern city, the unofficial capital of the region. The population grew steadily, at least half of it Jewish. In the Hebrew-language weekly Hamelitz (which appeared between 1860 and 1904) an article published in 1899 states that, although small in physical size, Baranovich excels in quality. It adds that fifteen years earlier (that is, in 1884) it consisted of hardly more than a couple of guest houses (in Hebrew: batei orchim) but, attracted by the sound of the whistle of the railway, many families of our Jewish brethren moved in to occupy the space between the two train stations, one at each end of the town, and the formerly almost deserted settlement was transformed into an inhabited city.

The detail of “a couple of guest houses” could be important in our family history. Tradition has it that my great-grandfather, Noah Epstein, known as the Saveiker, owned an “akhsania” (a Hebrew-Aramaic term adopted in Yiddish to signify an inn or a guest house). The only survivor of our

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<sup>3</sup> Available electronically at: <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yizkor-books/yzk-nybc313682>

direct Baranovich family, Shmuel Epstein (1899-1989), whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Israel, told me how the Saveiker would invite children to his guest house and give them candy (cukierki, in Polish). Is it possible that this akhsania was one of the two guest houses mentioned in Hamelitz?

It was a pleasant surprise for me to be able to verify recently that the family tradition was true. I am taking the liberty of translating a few paragraphs from a delightful article in SZ (pp 343-352) by A. Vilkomirsky entitled "Baranovich in 1890", in which the author describes his childhood memories of his family move into Baranovich that year. The family lived in Derevnoye, not far from the town of Mush, about 6 km from Baranovich. Mush, which had existed for hundreds of years, was the place of birth of many famous rabbis. In 1890 there were about 1700 Jews in Mush, but with the establishment of Baranovich and its two railway stations the economic situation in Mush deteriorated rapidly. It simply could not compete.

As the Vilkomirsky family approaches Baranovich from the West in a horse-driven cart, the author tells us,

We finally passed the first house in Old Baranovich

-This is the house of Isroel der Gazlen<sup>4</sup>- said my Mom in a low voice.

The second house, a big and pretty building, belonged to the count Razvodovski; in it lived the police chief (pristav) or the vice-chief (uriadnik). In the third one, a smaller building, was the post office. The fourth house belonged to Itche Turetzky; he had there a guest house (akhsanie or gostinitze) and kept the horse of the post. In the fifth house was Sheike's inn,<sup>5</sup> and on its yard his small Hasidic house of prayer. In the sixth house was Berman's gostinitze. After it stood Kaminsky's gostinitze, and on the little alley Schkolnik's grocery store was found. In the ninth house was Zablutzky's gostinitza. The tenth and last house belonged to Bendet; in the second half [across the rails?], with steel grating on the 4 windows, was the detainees' (arrested prisoners') concentration point. Two houses stood by the crossing [of the tracks, using the Russian word pereyezd]; in one of them lived the Lis family. With this comes the end of Old Baranovich.

A lot of mud was everywhere, particularly in front of the station. Going on to the crossing, the barriers were closed, and we were left standing. Like a lightning a train [poyezd in Russian] rushed by with whistle and noise. Our little hearts began to beat out of fear and Avremele, who had kept crying all the way, became silent out of fear.

We crossed the rails and passed by Berman's house, Noah Epstein's guest house, Galperin's metal shop, Itche Golde's, Moische the butcher, Djeme the baker's little house and Chaim Yelniker's house. To the right, by the tracks, between the trees, opposite Noah Epstein's, were the houses of the Pole Tzelinski; in one of them lived the lawyer Adler. Near Chaim Yelniker, in a small house, the seamstress Minke Tretzky had her workshop together with her sister Sara.

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<sup>4</sup> Literally, Israel the Thief, Israel Mishansky, also known as Israel the Guest-House Owner. This colourful character was one of the earliest Jewish settlers of Baranovich. The story behind the first sobriquet is amply recounted in an article in Hamelitz (May 18, 1897). Accused of theft and murder of an Austrian government official in 1875, he was eventually condemned in 1897 to twelve years of hard labour.

<sup>5</sup> Sheike Baranovich (or Baranovitsky) was the first Jewish settler of Baranovich.

Apart from the moving remembrance of family scenes, the author of this article provides us with a street by street and house by house description of Old Baranovich in 1890. During the First World War, the town was occupied by the German Army. At the end of the war, according to the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles, Poland regained its independence, but its borders were not precisely defined. The Polish army was eventually successful at the end of the Polish-Soviet War (1919-1921) in obtaining a partition of Belarus into a Soviet and a Polish part, which included the city of Baranovich. At that time, the total population of Baranovich was 11,000, two thirds of whom were Jewish.

The Polish period lasted until the beginning of the Second World War when, after the invasion of Poland by the German Army, the Soviet Union annexed Baranovich. In 1941, the city was occupied by the Germans. By 1942, the Nazis had exterminated all the Jewish population (about 12,000 souls, including refugees from other towns), except for 250. One of the survivors was Shmuel Epstein, who had been recruited earlier by the Red Army. Upon his return to Baranovich, he learned about the fate of his wife and two daughters. After the liberation of the city by the Red Army in 1944, Baranovich became part of the Byelorussian SSR and, with the fall of the Soviet Union, it is now in Belarus.

### 3. The Chaussée

Among the many additional details contained in Vilkomirsky's article, we can find further detail concerning the precise location of our akhsania. Indeed, he tells us that Noah Epstein's and Berman's houses were on the street that later became known as the Shosei. This is an obvious transliteration of the French word *chaussée*, a paved avenue. The name of Baranovich, albeit in different alphabets and with some minor phonetic differences, was preserved to this day. This is not the case with street names.

We have at our disposal, in addition to the present-day maps, a few older maps of Baranovich. It may not be completely unrealistic, therefore, to try to zero in on the approximate location of my great-grandfather's house. The map below (Figure 3) is from the Russian period. There are no discernible street names, but the perpendicular rail lines are clearly indicated, and a few areas are labeled. At the lower-left corner we can read Baranovich-Razvadovo (as the old city was originally called), while further up we can distinguish Novy-Mysh (New Mush). At the upper centre, we read Svitolovich, another small town. Near the lower centre we read Kazarmi, which stands for the military barracks. One of the city blocks is marked with a cross to indicate a Russian Orthodox church.

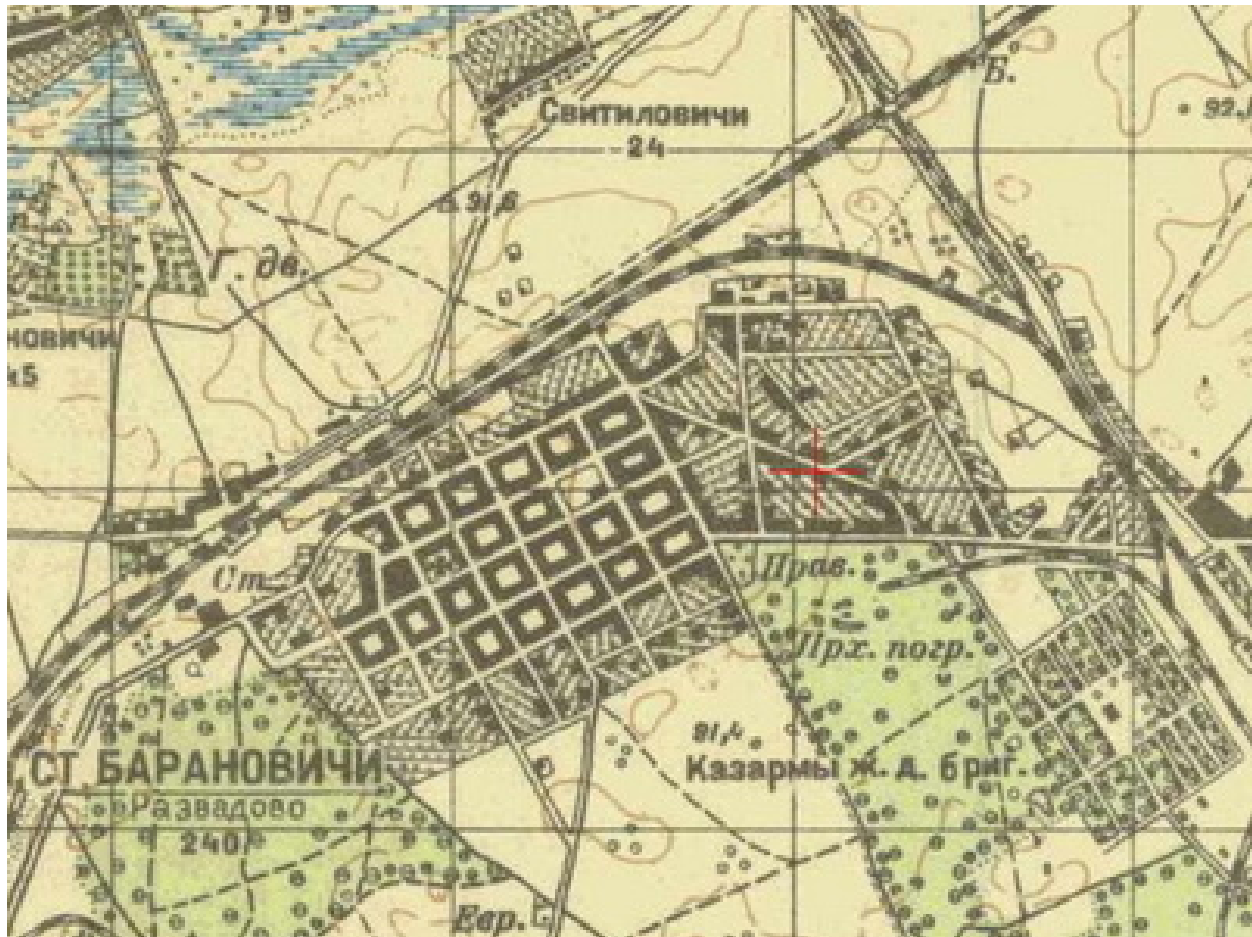


Figure 3: Baranovich map ca. 1905

The next map (Figure 4) is from the Polish period, two decades later. It does not display street names either. The old (Stare) and new (Nowe) parts of the unified city are clearly labeled. The city has expanded in several directions, while remaining always to the south of the Moscow-Brest line. For reference, we also show (Figure 5) a satellite view of present-day Baranovich, with a population of about 170,000. We are very fortunate to have yet another map drawn from memory by M. Zuckerman as it appears in SZ (p8). This map (Figure 6), referring to the Polish period (as it can be ascertained by the names of the streets) has street and place names printed in Yiddish. The Chaussée is clearly labeled and, moreover, we can picture on it (Figure 7) the trajectory described in detail by A. Vilkomirsky.



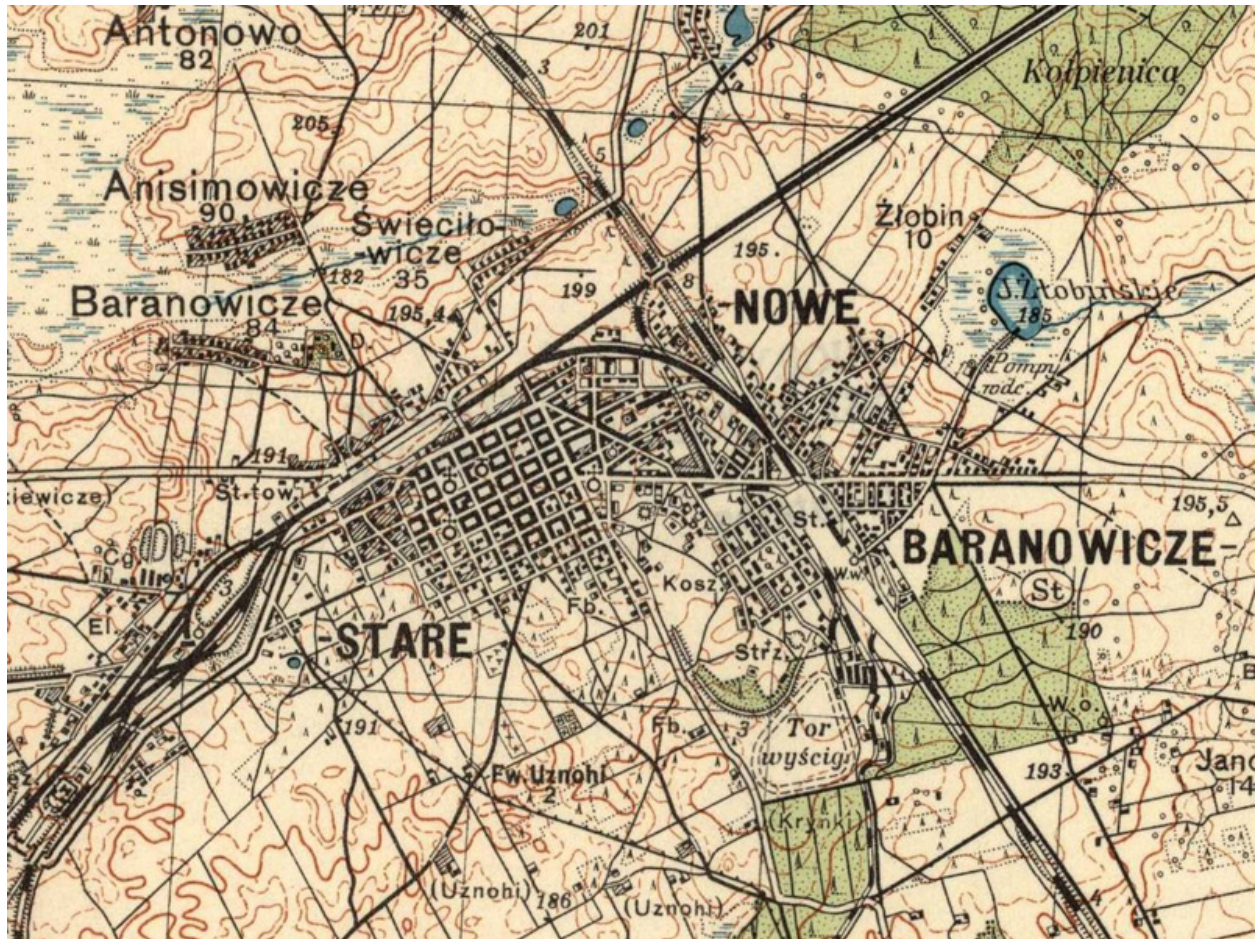


Figure 4: Baranovich ca. 1930

In Vilkomirsky's sketch, the curved street immediately below (and roughly parallel to) the Moscow-Brest track (running from the North-East to the South-West) is our Shosey. It is the main artery connecting the old city with the new one. We notice that the block marked with the number 6 is a "Tzerkve", which means a Russian Orthodox church, just as in the old maps. The building marked with the number 1 is the old railway station. When comparing with the present-day map, we can identify the old Chaussée with the modern vulica Bresckaja (that is, Brest street). Moreover, we see that the present-day Cathedral of the Intercession is precisely in the same place as indicated in Vilkomirsky's sketch. According to this admittedly imperfect reconstruction, Noah Epstein's akhsania was located within the area enclosed by the white circle indicated in the second satellite view (Figure 8). The third satellite view (Figure 9) shows the intersection as it looks today. If my interpretation of the story is correct, our akhsania was at present-day Brest street number 77 or 79, on the South side of the street!



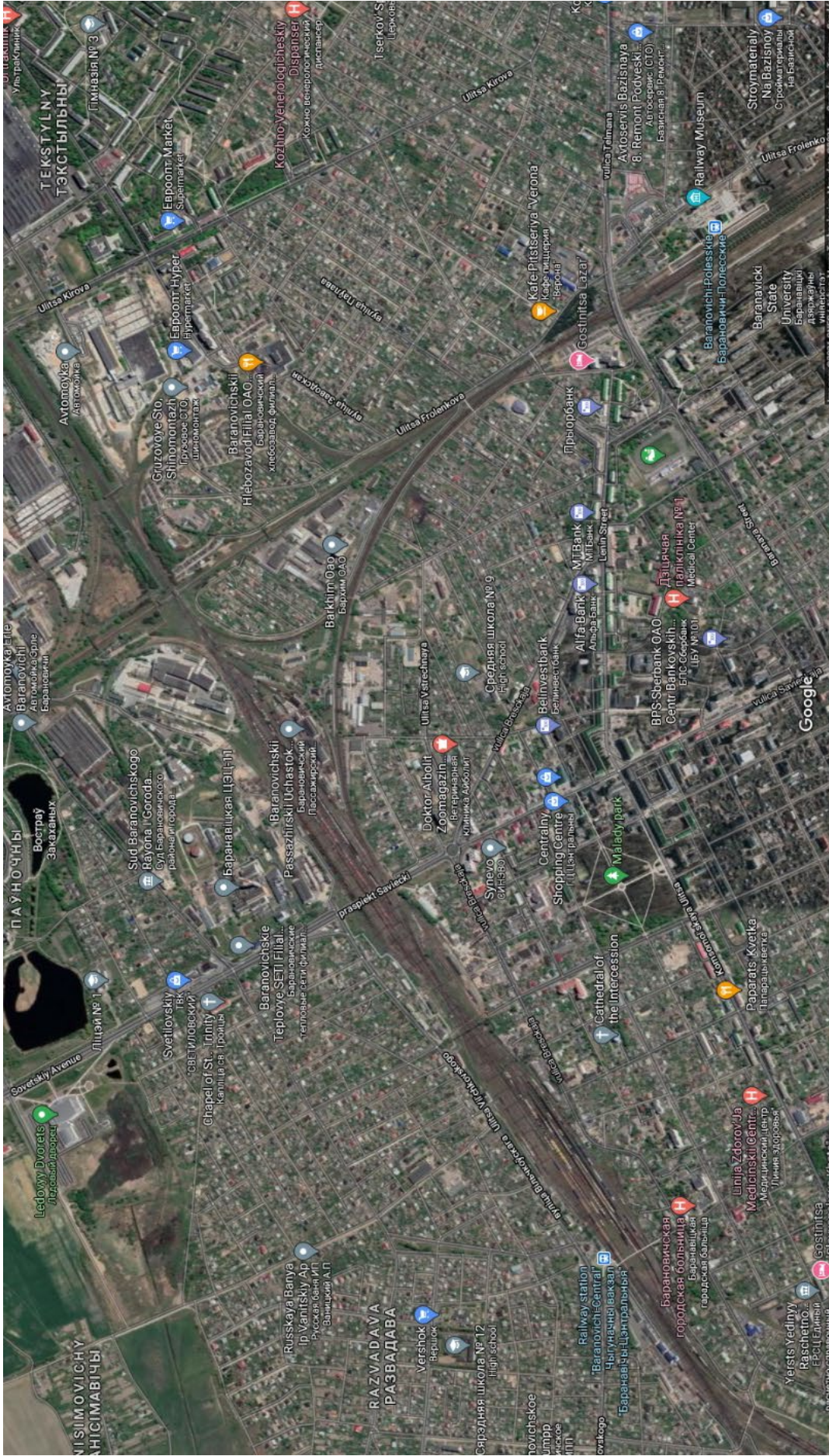
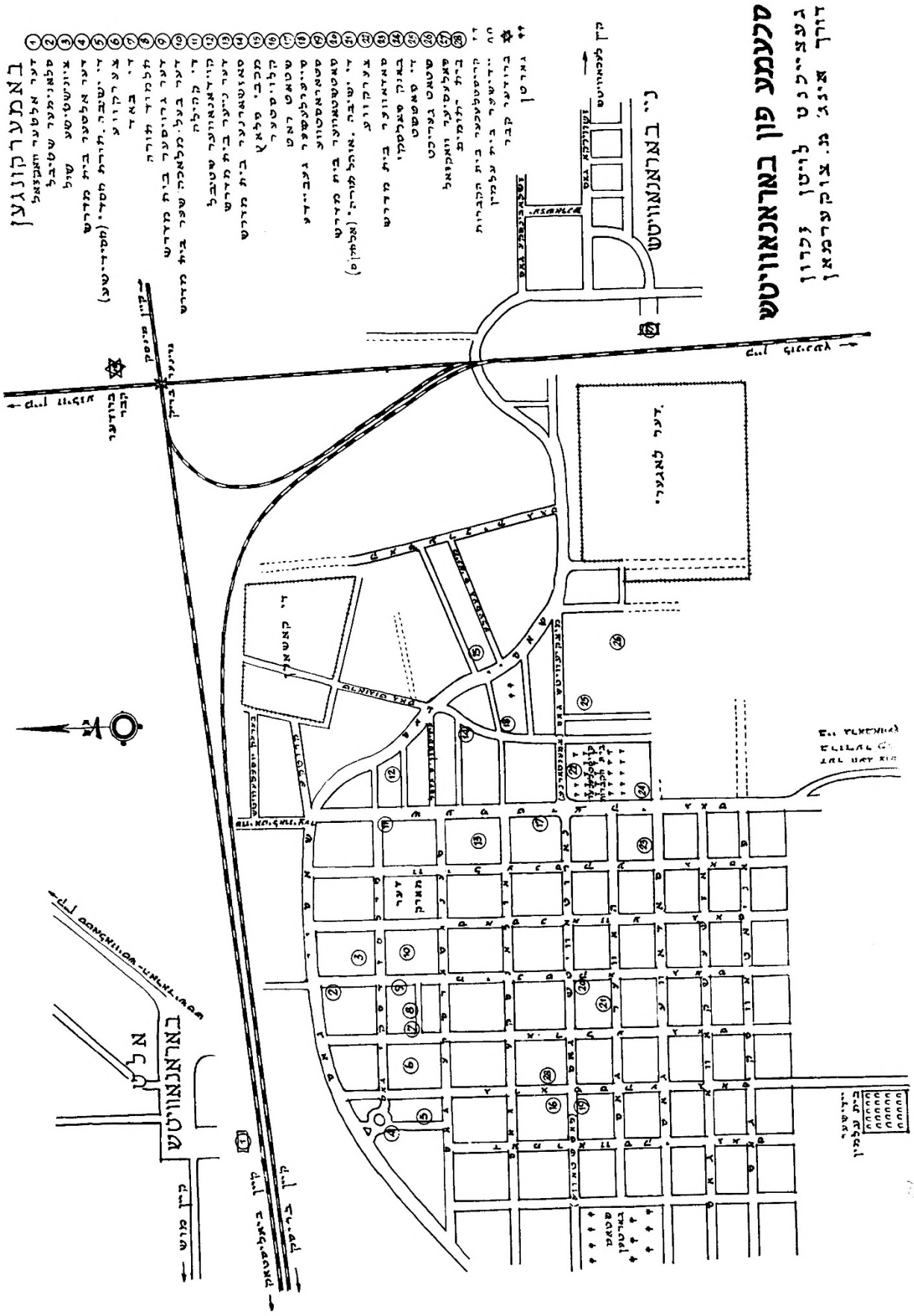


Figure 5: Satellite picture of present-day Baranovich





**סעמע פון באראנאוויטש**  
 געצייקט לויטן זכרון  
 דורך אייג' מ. צוקערמאן

Figure 6: M. Zuckerman's map



Figure 7: The Vilkomirsky family trip

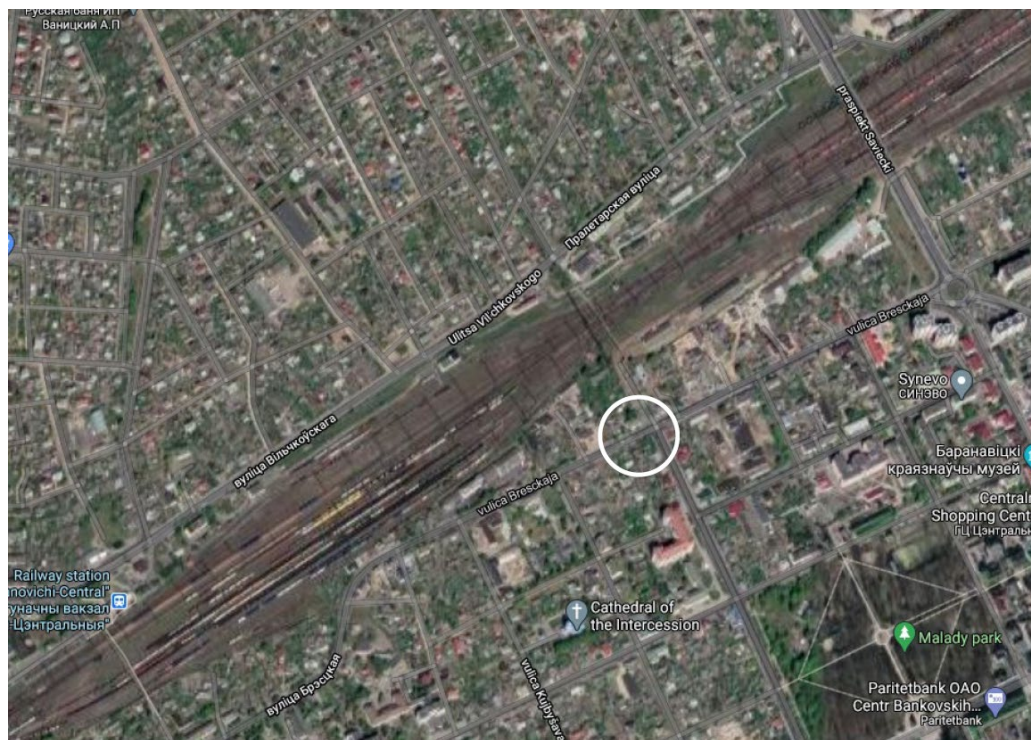


Figure 8: Probable location of Noah Epstein's akhsania





Figure 9: The present-day intersection, with the probable location being the first or second house on the SW, facing Brest street

There are many photographs available on the Internet of Baranovich at various periods of its short history, including during the German occupation in the First World War. Fortunately, some of these photographs were taken in the Chaussée. Our first example (Figure 10), of precisely that period and with an explicit mention of the name of the street, also has the added attraction of a horse-driven (military?) cart. A few houses are visible, giving us an idea of the general look of that area at the earlier Russian period. This photograph is available at

[www.eilatgordinlevitan.com/baranowice/pages/baranowice\\_old\\_scenes.html](http://www.eilatgordinlevitan.com/baranowice/pages/baranowice_old_scenes.html)

The same website contains a few more photographs of this period, including some of the more modern New Baranovich with its impressive train station. Some of the streets were renamed (such as Kaiser Wilhelm-Strasse). A particularly interesting one (Figure 11), for its horrific premonitory connotations, is labeled: Russian Jewish Types. It is shown below.



Figure 10: The Chaussée in the First World War, under German occupation



Figure 11: No comment



Another view (Figure 12) of the Chaussée, probably dating back to the Polish period (1921-1941), appears in SZ (p12). It shows the street as it curves towards the new city. This would be about 3 blocks away from the akhsania.



*Figure 12: A view of the street as it curves towards the new city.*

#### 4. Cultural life

It is not in my power to provide even an imperfect approximation to the richness of cultural life in Baranovich. Fortunately, the SZ provides a detailed and lively description of many of its aspects as they remained engraved in the memories of survivors. My intention here is to highlight those few details that have a direct or indirect relation, however remote, to the history of our family.

One of the first requirements of any Jewish community was the hiring of a “Shoichet” (in modern Hebrew pronunciation “Shochet”), namely, a ritual slaughterer of edible meat according to the laws of kashrut stipulated in the Torah. We learn from an article in SZ (pp 17-94) by N. Kroschinsky that until 1886 the Baranovich Jewish community got its meat from Mush, a few kilometers away. In 1886, a Mush resident, R’ Moshe Kopeliovich, was persuaded to move to Baranovich to become its first Shoichet.

This looks simple enough, but nothing in Jewish communities is ever simple. The problem goes back to the emergence of the Hasidic movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Its founder is known as the Baal Shem Tov (or Besht, 1699-1760) who advocated a perhaps more mystical, but also more joyous and participatory, brand of orthodox Judaism. A conflict developed between this increasingly popular movement and the religious establishment whose adherents became known as the opposers (Yiddish “misnagdim” from the Hebrew “mitnagdim”). Their leader was the Vilna Gaon (1720-1797), and during his life the antagonism grew to open hostility that included excommunications and forbidding of intermarriage between the two communities. From my

father's conversations, I know that our family was not sympathetic to Hasidism. It may be said that we always put reason before passion.

Now, the problem in Baranovich was that R' Kopelioovich was a member of the Hasidic sect known as the Slonimer Hasidim, originating in the city of Slonim, about 65 km from Baranovich. The Baranovich misnagdim, therefore, went ahead and hired another Shoichet, one R' Abraham, who came up with a nice piece of Midrash, as follows: It is written in the book of Genesis that, after Abraham was prevented by the angel to slaughter Isaac, he lifted up his eyes and saw a ram and thereafter "Abraham went and took the ram". But ram translated to Russian can be rendered as "baran". We learn from here, he reasoned, that God has awarded Baranovich to R' Abraham.

This competition brought about a legal suit to be resolved (in a Solomonic way) by a rabbinical tribunal, composed of a rabbi representing the misnagdim and another rabbi representing the Hasidim. A curious detail is that the latter, from the city of Mush, was R' Lazer Yehuda Epstein. This does not mean that we are related, since the last name Epstein is quite common and there are many famous rabbis with that last name. It is assumed that the first Jewish Epsteins were originally from Spain, where they were called Benveniste. They emigrated to Germany, to the town Eppstein near Frankfurt, and eventually changed their last name. Even if this account were true, it appears that in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, when required by the authorities to provide a family name, many people chose the surname Epstein.

The 1890s saw a considerable social and economic development of Baranovich that made it stand out in comparison with the surrounding towns. A Talmud-Torah school was established in 1897. Two Zionist organizations were founded about the same time and they had a positive impact on the educational program, by introducing more modern teaching techniques than those used in the traditional Cheder. The Talmud Torah school was supported by community funds, so that children from poor families could attend.

The local branch of "Agudat Hazionim" was affiliated with the Hovevei Zion movement, which advocated the establishment of agricultural colonies in the Land of Israel. Below (Figure 13), we reproduce a photograph of a document of the Agudat Hazionim in Baranovich that appears in SZ (p 50). The third signature on the left column clearly reads "Chaikl Epstein". Chaikl is the diminutive of Chaim, the second Epstein brother who emigrated to Argentina. What seems a bit problematic is that the document is signed in 1904, and Chaikl had left Baranovich on his way to Argentina, as we know, on the Amiral Baudin in 1902. We will come back to this issue later.

The Agudat Hazionim and other Zionist organizations were very active in the city which, by 1900, comprised 600 households. Discussion groups were established as well as a small library and reading groups that would get together to discuss (often in Hebrew) issues of the day. The Hebrew periodicals Hamelitz and Hatzefirah, which were received and discussed regularly, began to carry more and more articles on the rising importance of Baranovich.

Already in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Baranovich had a circle of amateur actors that presented Yiddish plays. That Chaikl was an amateur actor I know from having seen (but, unfortunately, not copied) a photograph kept in the family of a troupe after a performance in Baranovich. Chaikl is one of the actors and the photo displays the name of the play: Mirele Efros.



אנחנו חברי אגודת הציונים מפנה עיר באראנאוויץ פתך מינסק  
 נמטי אפריון למר אליעזר זאב בן ישעיו שלמה הלוי זוכאוויצקי  
 נין ונכד להגאון ישעיו מזוכאוויץ על עסקו באמונה במשך ארבע  
 שנות שבתו פה במרכי צבור מכלל ובעבודת הציונית בפרט ובהיזרנו  
 גבאי אצלנו בבית הפולתנו ובמוסד הצדקה לינת הצדקה וגיבר מקפת  
 אגדתנו עבד תמיד בהרצות ובמסירת נפש ויוקיר מאד את פרוטרת  
 הצדקה וידאג לטובת הענין כארם הדואג בעד עסקיו וקניניו. לזאת  
 יקבל עתה מאתנו תודתנו היוצאת ממעמקי לבנו ודי ישלם לו כפועלו  
 וכמכול ידו ישיב לו. על זה באנו על החתום היום יום ג' עשרים יום  
 לחדש מר חשוון תרס"ד פה באראנאוויץ

טז	נאום	זאב	נאום	א
יז	נאום	זאב	נאום	ב
יח	נאום	זאב	נאום	ג
יט	נאום	זאב	נאום	ד
כ	נאום	זאב	נאום	ה
כא	נאום	זאב	נאום	ו
כב	נאום	זאב	נאום	ז
כג	נאום	זאב	נאום	ח
כד	נאום	זאב	נאום	ט
כה	נאום	זאב	נאום	י
כו	נאום	זאב	נאום	יא
כז	נאום	זאב	נאום	יב
כח	נאום	זאב	נאום	יג
כט	נאום	זאב	נאום	יד
ל	נאום	זאב	נאום	טו

Figure 13: A certificate of thanks emitted by the Agudat Hazionim in Baranovch in 1904. The third signature on the left reads Chaikl Epstein.

Written in Yiddish in 1898 by the Ukrainian-born American playwright Jacob Michailovitch Gordin (1853-1912), the play is also known as the Jewish Queen Lear. It is under this name, for example, that a Polish 1907 edition of the play displays the title.<sup>6</sup> A silent movie based on this play was produced in Poland in 1912, starring the famous actresses Esther Rachel Kaminska (1870-1925) and her daughter Ida Kaminska (1899-1980). Esther Kaminska acted in Baranovich at least once. An undated signed photograph (Figure 14) from one of her visits is shown below. The photograph is available at: <http://www.eilatgordinlevitan.com/baranowice/baranowice.html>



Figure 14: Esther Rachel Kaminska in Baranovich

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<sup>6</sup> Or, more literally, The Jewish King Lear. This edition is available electronically at: [Der Yudisher Kenig Lir : drama in fir akten : Gordin, Jacob, 1853-1909 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

The year 1907 saw the creation of the Jewish Literary-Artistic Society of Baranovich, one of whose founding members (p 70) was Chaikl Epstein. As already mentioned above, at this time Chaikl was supposedly tilling the land in Argentina. His sister Fradl is also mentioned lovingly (p 71) as a member of the literary group.

More movingly, though, Shmuel Epstein, already mentioned above, a younger family member (I believe he was my father's second cousin, born in 1899), was himself a member of the Jewish Drama Group, established apparently during the German occupation of Baranovich in the First World War. He authored a chapter on this organization in the *Sefer Zikaron* (SZ, pp 165-178), where he is pictured there in 1922 together with other members of this organization. It seems that theatre was in the family genes. His knowledge of many languages (another family trait) earned him a probably then undesired recruitment into the Red Army during the Second World War. His life was saved, but upon returning to Baranovich at the end of the war, he found that his wife and daughters had been murdered by the Nazis, together with most of the Jewish population of Baranovich. He moved to Israel, remarried, and became an educator specializing in Hebrew literature. He died in Tel Aviv in 1989.

Another mention of two of the Epstein siblings appears in a short article in SZ (pp 355-360) by M. Liman, in which the author reminisces about his childhood experience with the first library in the city. I quote,

In the mid 1890s there was in Baranovich no state or private library. One could obtain a Russian book [from a few professionals in town]. Here and there a book would pop up by Mapu, Smolenskin, Mendele, and Sholem Aleichem. [...]. The circle to which I belonged then was too young and I had selected a few members of it such as ... Berl Epstein and his sister [and others].

Berl's sister mentioned above is none other than Fradl. Berl was the youngest of the brothers.

Sholem Aleichem, the foremost Yiddish writer, had a special connection with Baranovich. A photograph kept in our family, which I saw as a child but is now probably lost, showed him in Baranovich with a group that presumably included members of our family, most likely Chaikl. I remember being told that Sholem Aleichem stayed in our family's guest house, but I was able to ascertain that this was not the case, as will be detailed presently. Sholem Aleichem's visit was an event of great importance not only for the cultural life of Baranovich, but also, as it turned out, for the eminent writer's life, as recounted in great detail by Sholem Aleichem's daughter.<sup>7</sup>

Sholem Aleichem is the pen name of Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich (1859-1916). He had a unique genius to capture the minutiae of everyday Jewish life in the shtetl as well as the depths of hope and despair of the Jew vis à vis the world of his generation. At the superficial level, his

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<sup>7</sup> Marie Waife-Goldberg, *My father Sholom Aleichem*, Shoken Books, New York, 1968. Marie, born in 1892, was the fifth child out of a total of six.

works can be read as humorous depictions of Jewish characters, but the tragic aspects of the human condition are hardly disguised by this literary device. He is best known nowadays by the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, loosely based on Tevye the Milkman, the main character in several of his short stories. Sholem Aleichem had already become a living legend by the time. After two years spent in New York, Sholem Aleichem joined his family in Geneva in 1908. In spite of great prospects, the financial situation had deteriorated and, in the words of his daughter Marie, “in this extremity my father turned to his sole escape, his one refuge – his readers. He decided to go on a reading tour in Russia, revisiting the cities and towns in which he had appeared at various times before leaving that country, and hoping that other places might also invite him.” She continues:

“The tour was overwhelmingly successful, surprisingly so, even for those who knew his great popularity among the masses. In Warsaw he had five appearances on five successive nights at one of the largest halls in the city, the fifth being as packed as the first. Equally enthusiastic was his reception in other cities, when a flood of invitations from all sorts of towns came begging for at least ‘just one more appearance.’ It was not in my father’s nature to refuse a call from his readers, and the result was a grueling, exhausting circuit, with one-night stops, night after night, hopping on and off trains to meet scheduled appearances.”

One of those towns was Baranovich. Her description of the hectic atmosphere is interesting:

“Baranovici was typical of many towns my father had already visited in the course of his tour. Despite their sharp divisions on ideological lines, as was customary at that time in Russia, the youth of Baranovici united in the cause of bringing Sholom Aleichem for a reading in their city. Upon hearing that my father had accepted their invitation the young people at once began to organize his visit: a general reception committee was set up, and a hall committee for the box office ushering; and a sort of bodyguard who would stave off the expected crashing crowd when the celebrated guest arrived and departed from the hall. Posters were put up, and my father’s picture with headlines announcing his reading could be found all over town.”

As he came on stage, Marie tells us, he was pallid and fatigued. He went through with the programmed reading and added more than the program called for, to satisfy the excited audience, reading one encore after another. Back at this hotel, he coughed and brought up blood. A doctor was summoned. The whole town, having been apprised of the situation, went into action. Specialists from Vilno and Minsk were brought in, who diagnosed acute pulmonary tuberculosis. Sholem Aleichem stayed in Baranovich for almost two months, August and September 1908, under the loving attention of local volunteers.

“My father felt he owed his recovery largely to the good people of Baranovici, and he was grateful to them for their love and devotion during those fateful days. All through the years, the very name of the town evoked a pleasant smile, and anyone from there was a special person to him, like a distant relative. When some of his daughters had to return to Russia for



a brief stay, he had them stay in Baranovici, and the good people received them as their own.”

Marie had not accompanied her father on this tour, but she was kept informed of every detail. In passing, she mentions that “towns in the vicinity of Baranovici sent delegations to the Slavyanskaya Gostinitza, the hotel at which my father lay ill, to ascertain the condition of the patient.” This is, of course, not our gostinitza. A hotel by this name still exists in Baranovich!

Years later, Marie joined one of her sisters, Tissa, for a period in Baranovich. “Like the rest of us”, Marie tells us, “she felt kinship with the good people of Baranovici.” “I lived with Tissa for a while”, she continues, but then “I moved to another better place on the Chaussee, as they called the high road or boulevard.” In a letter to her in those days, Sholem Aleichem teases her in the following terms:

“Dear Maroussia: Inasmuch as you have rented a new apartment on the Chaussee [here he imitated the Lithuanians who mispronounce the *s* as *sh*] and are now paying fifty kopecks more a month, it is no more than right I should address my letter directly to you, and you will turn it over to Tissa, instead of the opposite as heretofore.”

Sholem Aleichem, whose connection with Baranovich was only circumstantial, felt a special kinship with the town and went on to immortalize its name in one of his famous railway stories, appropriately called “Station Baranovich”. Baranovich was, indeed, first and foremost, a station. His funny “shoshe street” appellation is remembered also in the SZ (p11). In article by N. Kroschinsky (SZ, pp 83-86), many of the details described by Marie Waife-Goldberg are corroborated. A small difference is that the writer had originally been housed in an akhsania on Aleksandrovska street, and only after his attack was he transferred to the best hotel in town in those days, known as the Slavisher Hotel, clearly the same as the Slavyanskaya Gostinitza.

## 5. Epsteins in Baranovich

I only ever met two members of the family that had actually lived in Baranovich. The first one was my great-uncle Berl Epstein, already mentioned above. I remember him from the annual Passover celebration, one of the few occasions in which the entire Epstein family got together. Berl’s wife Sonia belonged (if I remember correctly) to the Elman family, a well-known family in Médanos. While Berl, as I remember him in his old age, was quiet and circumspect, Sonia had a sharp memory and was vivacious and talkative. My father’s brother Moishe married their daughter Ester, his first cousin. Of them I have many recollections, of course, but they had been already born in Argentina.

The other family member I met who had been born in Baranovich is Shmuel Epstein, already mentioned too. My brother Silvio discovered him in Israel, and they became friends. I met him in Israel, while I was a student there between 1968 and 1973. He was then in his early seventies. I am not sure about the exact family relation, but I believe that he was the son of a cousin of my great grandfather. From his tombstone, I learned that his father’s name was Michael Noah, so that both cousins may have been named after a common deceased ancestor. A person of great refinement and culture, he was wont of talking about his life and adventures. He had been recruited into the Red Army and thus managed to survive the war. His

wife and two daughters were murdered by the Nazis in Baranovich. He was fluent in several languages and a lover of literature, which he taught in Israel. He was remarried to Tziporah and they lived in Tel Aviv in 6 Meggido Street. It is not without a sense of guilt that this little irrelevant detail is one of the few things I remember from all the stories he told us. The arrogance of youth stood in the way of my paying more attention and asking more questions. Only recently, while writing these lines, I got to know that he had been an important figure in the cultural life of Baranovich during the 1920s and 1930s.

This new information I gathered from the fortunate circumstance that he authored a few articles in the memorial book (SZ) and included a few photographs of the theatrical activities of which he was an enthusiastic participant. In Figure 15, taken in Israel in the 1950s, he is the fourth person from the right in the standing row. This is how I remember him about 15 years later. Sitting, 2<sup>nd</sup> from the right, is N. Koschinsky, who contributed important articles to the SZ.



פעילי „ארגון יוצאי ברנוביץ“ בישראל  
 יושבים מימין: רבקה לימון, ד"ר נחמיה קרושינסקי, שיינדל פלדנקרייז, אהרן כהן, סוניה שץ (פוצ'פובסקי), משה מוקסיי.  
 עומדים מימין: צבי וולפוביץ, יהושע קושניר, אהרן קושצ'יץ, שמואל אפשטיין, ד"ר שלום פרס, מיכאל מוקסיי

Figure 15: Shmuel Epstein, standing, 4<sup>th</sup> from right, as a member of the Israeli Society of Baranovich Landsmen

Figure 16 is taken from Shmuel's article in SZ about his theatre company in Baranovich. We see a collection of programmes during the period 1917-1921, an interesting period that straddles the transition from the German occupation during WW1 to the Soviet period before Polish independence. During the German occupation, programmes had to be printed in German. We can see parts of Kreuzer Sonata, by Jacob Gordin, and of Nathan der Weise, the classic play of religious tolerance written by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1728-1781). Gordin is the author of

Mirele Efros, mentioned above in relation to Chaikl's theatrical activities twenty years earlier. Shmuel's name appears in every programme whose cast is visible.



פראגראמעס פון פארשטעלונגען אין די יארן 1917-1921

Figure 16: Sundry programmes of Yiddish theatre in Baranovich in the period 1917-1921

A group photograph of the Theatrical Society, taken in 1922, shows Shmuel sitting in the second row, the first from the right, Figure 17. When I first saw this picture and read the names of the participants, I recognized a few of them from having read several articles in SZ. But more recently, while searching the Yad Vashem archives of Holocaust victims, I found out that Shmuel's wife was Sime Kaplan. She is the first person from the right in the front row. They were the same age, 23, and this photograph may have preceded their marriage.





ידישער דראַמאַטישער פאַרײן (1922)

אונטן פון רעכטס: סימע קאַפּלאַן, מלכה מיסקין, נחמיה קראַשינסקי, פרוי לעווענטאַל, סאַניע ראַדקעוויטש, אהרן יאַסינאווסקי, שלום קראַשינסקי.  
 עס זיצן פון רעכטס: שמואל עפשטיין, משה מוקאַסיי, יודל בוסעל, יוסף גאַלדשמיד, הינדע וואַלקין, חיים אַסטראַווסקי, שייע זעליקאוויטש.  
 אויבן פון רעכטס: שרה בערענשטיין, אברהם'ל קראַשינסקי, בולאַנסקי, חיה פיינשטיין, יהושע ווינגער, חיה איראַעל, יוסף ראַיעווסקי, דבורה פרידמאַן, הירש וואַלקין, פרץ ראַבעץ.

Figure 17: Members of the Yiddish Dramatic Society (1922)

Sima Epstein (néé Kaplan) was born in 1899 in Horodyszczce, Poland, not far from the triple point where the borders of modern Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine meet. In the SZ, apart from her mentions in Shmuel's article, she appears in another photograph, dated in 1921, as a member of Tzeirei Zion, a Socialist Zionist organization. She was shot to death in the Baranovich ghetto in December 1942, together with her and Shmuel's two daughters Rut and Lea, shown in Figure 18.





*Figure 18: Above: Sima Epstein. Below from right: Rut and Lea Epstein*

The Yad Vashem archives list about three dozen Epsteins from Baranovich who perished in the Holocaust. There is no way to know how many of them, if any, were related to us. One Noakh Epshteyn, born in 1917, carrying a common first name in our family, was evacuated to Uzbekistan, but no other information is given. A detailed search of the SZ, on the other hand, contains information and occasionally photographs of several other people with the last name Epstein.

One of the most prominent appears to have been the lawyer Shlomo Epstein. My brother, who was also a lawyer, shared that name and, because the first name Shlomo was prevalent for the first-born son over several generations in our family, it is probable that he was indeed related to us. He is shown in Figure 19 with other members of the Revisionist party. His wife Itka was last seen boarding a truck and being driven with other women from the Baranovich ghetto southward towards the Grabovitz woods to be murdered during the so-called second wave of mass murder in Baranovich. This was in September 1942. Shlomo was interned in the Kolditchevo concentration camp and his fate is unknown.



ועדי כל ההסתדרויות הצה"ריות בברנוביץ  
 בשנת 1934  
 יושבים מימין: קרפובסקי, משה סולר  
 מיאנסקי, א. מסלובסקי, ישראל גולדין,  
 דוד סדובסקי, צ. ברגמן, שרגא קרושינר  
 סקי, עו"ד זלטה שוירנסקי, וורניקובסקי,  
 יעקב רבינוביץ.  
 שורה ב' מימין: מנדל, חזנוביץ, שמחה  
 טונקל, אסתר יוסלביץ, מאטיק גורביץ,  
 הדסה ברגמן, שמואל ישראל, ברסלב,  
 עו"ד צבי וורניקובסקי,  
 למעלה מימין: לא ידוע, יוסף פוקסמן,  
 יצחק רוזנהויז, עו"ד קוריניץ, עו"ד לויכ"ר  
 טר, עו"ד שלמה אפשטיין.

Figure 19: The lawyer Shlomo Epstein (top row, first from left) at a meeting of the Revisionist party in Baranovich, 1934

David Epstein, shown in Figure 20, was one of the founders and secretary of the Baranovich branch of the Macabi sports club in 1922. A few years later, the Macabi soccer team was one of the finest in the region and was included in League A in the competitions of the Vilna region. The club excelled also in other sports and carried out cultural activities. A special article devoted to this organization can be found in SZ (pp 202-208).



הנהגת האגודה להתעמלות וספורט „מכבי”  
ברנוביץ (1922)

יושבים מימין: דוד אפשטיין, ב. קפלן, אהרן  
גולדין, מיכאל קושניר, יענקל אשרובסקי.  
עומדים מימין: אלתר ביטנסקי, צבי מדרש,  
שלום קרושינסקי, מ. לאטרייצ'יק, יוסף טורצקי,  
פסח גבוה.



Figure 20: David Epstein (sitting, first from right) as secretary of Macabi in Baranovich, 1922

Four school children with the surname Epstein, part of a large group of students holding a Hebrew sign that reads “Long live the Hebrew language!” and another that reads “Long live Tarbut”, appear in a photograph taken in Baranovich in 1929, Figure 21. Their first names are Moshe, Abraham, Mira, and Lea. The motivation behind this manifestation is, curiously enough, also related to the last name Epstein.



השובתים בימי מלחמת תלמידי גימנסיה „תרבות” על קיומה, בשנת 1929, נוכח המזימה להפוך את המוסד לגימנסיה בלשון ההוראה הפולנית.

בשורה העליונה מימין: קודביצקי דוד, אפשטין משה, קסליץ אברשקה, שינברג איטקה, וינוגרד פריידל, היילפרין שרה, קוקיס אלטה, ינקלביץ רבקה, קוקיס רבקה.

בשורה השניה מימין: אברמוביץ אליה, לוינבוק יצחק, וויינגר אהרן, קפלן שרה, פלדנקרייז מלכה, נייפלד פייגל, קצב אהרן, מנסקי שמעון (מאחורי קצב), וינוגרד יענקל, לא ידוע, גורדון משה (נציג מרכז „תרבות”), ברסלב זלמן, גולדשמיד אהרן (מאחורי ברסלב ואיינשטיין), איינשטיין (מפקח „תרבות”), גלמן אליה (נציג הסתדרות המורים), רביצקי אברהם, שקליאר משה, דומשביצקי יחיאל, גבוה דינה, קפלן, וולכונינסקי ציפקה (מאחורי קפלן), איסקין דובה, קצנלסון גדעון, הוברמן זיסל, ברמן שמואל, מוקאסי דוד.

בשורה השלישית מימין: וולפוביץ שרה, גוטליב טייבל, וינוגרד פואה, גרינברג מאיר דוד, מוקאסי מאטיק, גרינשפן יעקב, לא ידוע, פרבר ראובן, וולכונינסקי שלום, פקר לייבל, אנגילוביץ יוסף, ניידוס יחיאל, פוצינסקי יוסף, אפשטין אברהם (מאחורי פוצינסקי), יוסלביץ שיינדל, בוסל אהרן (מאחורי יוסלביץ), אילביצקי, מיסקין פרומה, מיסקין חיה.

בשורה הרביעית מימין עומדים: קצב אלעזר, ברמן — בולוצקי איטה, גבוה סוניה; יושבים: אפשטין מירה, לא ידועה, גרובצקי רחל, שלובסקי רוזה, רבינוביץ רוזה, פולונסקי בת שבע, וולנסקי שפרה, בולוצקי יהודית, לוינבוק צילה, אפשטיין לאה, וולקוביסקי גניה, פין בילה, ז'וכוביץקי מאשה, קרליצקי אסתר, רוזובסקי זלדה, איסקין איסר.

למטה מימין: דובקובסקי, לא ידוע, רצקביץ אברהם, גבוה למה, לוינבוק, רודמן, מלוביץקי דוד, זובלביצקי, פרבר לויסיק.

Figure 21: A group of student protesters, including four named Epstein



In 1916, in the city of Vilna (Vilnius, Lithuania), Dr. Joseph Epstein (1874-1916) founded the “Tarbut” society to promote Jewish and general education imparted in the Hebrew language, including general subjects such as Mathematics and Science. From a modest beginning as a home school, where Joseph and his wife Bat-Sheva taught, Epstein’s idea rapidly expanded to encompass a chain of hundreds of Hebrew schools throughout the whole area, from kindergarten to high-school and to teacher seminaries. Naturally, under the Polish administration in the 1920s, a day school needed to operate under governmental authorization. An alternative to the Tarbut system, offering obvious advantages, was to attend the regular Polish language school and to supplement this program with private Hebrew classes. The story becomes somewhat fuzzy, since by that time the Epstein name in Vilna appeared to have been used for a system of the hybrid kind, rather than for the original Tarbut. Be that as it may, the seventh graders, confronted with a parental decision to switch to the hybrid system, declared a strike, which attained international press coverage. In the end, the original school continued to function under the new name Yehudiah, and followed a government approved high-school program. It was also popularly known as the Epstein school. A new (only elementary) Tarbut school was created, faithful to the old principles. It is this school that was visited by the great poet Haim Nachman Bialik in 1932. This visit is lovingly remembered and amply described in an article (SZ, pp 179-195) on the educational system in Baranovich, by Z. Livneh (Lerman).

It is written (Psalms 6:6) that “in death there is no remembrance of thee”. Perhaps so, but for many of those who perished in the Holocaust, entire families vanished in a flash, two or three generations together, and there is not even one person to remember their names. I am thinking of our beloved Shmuel, who did survive and carried on with his new life. He did not have any more children, and perhaps some of his students still carry some of his legacy. Of the few other people mentioned in this section, some may have survived. I don’t even know whether they were related to us, beyond the fact that they were from the same town and had the same last name as our family. But even this serendipitous fact may be a worthwhile infinitesimal excuse to rescue them for a moment from oblivion and to bless their memories.

## 6. The voyage

The port of departure of the Amiral Baudin was Le Havre, in northern France. How did the four brothers make their way to there from Baranovich? The most logical assumption would be that they rode by train, given the available railroad stations. Nevertheless, I remember having been told that they first travelled South for a visit to Odessa, the cultural capital of the Ukraine and an important port on the Black Sea. I remember seeing some blank postcards purchased by them there with photographs of famous writers. Odessa was the centre of the Hovevei Zion and other Jewish associations, and the home of salons where Hebrew poets and intellectuals (such as Bialik and Tchernichovsky) met regularly. Chaim, better known by the sobriquet Chaikl, was an amateur

actor in Baranovich and, more generally, the Epsteins, though most probably respectful of the Jewish traditions, were modern in their outlook and avid readers of literary works in Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew. The visit to Odessa on their way to what must have felt like another planet would have been a fitting goodbye to the old world. According to my recollection of conversations with my father, my grandfather (Shlomo, or Salomón in Spanish, the older of the brothers) admired Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, whom he read in the original, even though he refused to ever speak Russian again.

The hypothesis of the trip to Odessa is probably unfounded. They may have visited Odessa earlier. The passage of time, the irrelevance of the details, and the reluctance to pass them on make it very difficult to be certain of anything. But as I read more and more collateral material, a picture emerges of a rich life that wants to be remembered, one that does not want to die by being forgotten from all human recollection. I picture it as a silent scream, Munch's scream dreamt at the end of a nightmare. A little-known book about the history of the colony of Moisés Ville<sup>8</sup> includes a description of a trip to Russia by one of the colonists' representatives (Noah Katzovitch, known in Argentina as Noé Cociovitch), who accompanied a group of 25 families to the port of Lubau (today Liepāja, Latvia) on the Baltic sea and embarked with them on August 15, 1902, to Buenos Aires. The distance from Baranovich to Lubau is about 500 km, and from Lubau to Le Havre by sea another almost 2000 km. The trip by ship from Le Havre to Buenos Aires covers about 11000 km. This last leg of the trip, arriving at Buenos Aires on September 19, may very well have been aboard the Amiral Baudin, as we have already pointed out some discrepancies in its date of arrival. Under normal conditions, the speed of the Amiral Baudin is known to have been 28 km/h, which is consistent with those dates.

The trip to Argentina was sponsored by the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA, usually referred orally in Spanish as "La Ica"), a creation of the Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831-1896). To alleviate the plight of Jews in the Russian empire, Hirsch negotiated with the Argentinian government the acquisition of vast extensions of land for the establishment of agricultural colonies. This idea, in direct contradiction with the mainstream Zionist movement's, gave rise to the emergence of the literary figure of the Jewish Gaucho. The first and most iconic colony was named Moisés Ville (some say, without proof, in honour of the Baron's Hebrew name).<sup>9</sup> It is to this place, in the province of Santa Fe, that the four Epstein brothers were headed after their arrival.

The JCA colonization program (in Argentina and other countries) was amply covered by the Hebrew press, consisting mainly of Hamelitz and Hatzefirah, already mentioned.<sup>10</sup> These periodicals were available and widely discussed in Baranovich, particularly among the younger generation. A sample follows.

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<sup>8</sup> נח קאצאָוויטש, מאָזעסוויילער בראשית, יידישער וויסנשאפטלעכער אינסטיטוט, בוענאָס איירעס, 1947

There is a Spanish translation: Noé Cociovich, *Génesis de Moisés Ville*, Editorial Milá, Buenos Aires, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> On this point, see: Mendelson J, *Génesis de la colonia judía en la Argentina*, in "50 años de colonización judía en la Argentina", DAIA, Buenos Aires, 1939, pp 83-143.

<sup>10</sup> The collections of all the issues of both periodicals are accessible and searchable on the Internet at [Search | Newspapers | National Library of Israel \(nli.org.il\)](http://Search | Newspapers | National Library of Israel (nli.org.il)). They constitute an invaluable window into Jewish life between 1860 and (in the case of Hatzefirah) 1930.

In Hamelitz, January 16, 1900, Mr. S. Belkin writes:

A few days ago, I visited the Argentine representative, Mr. Noah Katzovitch, whom I already mentioned in Hamelitz, issue 226 of last year, in the city of his residence Amstibava<sup>11</sup>, with the intention of obtaining clear and correct information about his mission and about the situation of the wandering brothers from our country, who have established themselves there for several years. I will present here a summary of the responses that Mr. N. K. gave to my questions.

The colony Moisés Ville, in which he has been living for a few years, is the choicest of all colonies in Argentina. Although its land is inferior in value as compared with the land of other colonies, the farmers do not complain of their lot and they are content with their produce, from which they derive their income and pay the administration the percentage stipulated to cover the expenses that the administration carried on their behalf. And considering that their situation is secure and that good prospects await them for days to come, the settlers are desirous to attract their family members who live in our country. For this purpose, a hundred settlers from the colony gave him written permission to bring these family members, and the administration approved this document so that he may fulfill the wishes of the signatories. The administration did not impose any explicit conditions for the acceptance of new immigrants since the Argentinian administration cannot do anything without the approval of the heads of the JCA in Paris. The administration formulated its opinion only in terms of bullet points, which will be clarified in detail on arrival of the new immigrants to Argentina. The Argentinian administration stayed completely away from the previous subsidy procedure, and it intends to fully finance the new settlers, so that they would not need a subsidy and they would be able to repay in time to the administration the expenses incurred on their behalf. The administration estimates that with two thousand and five hundred pesos in cash a new family would be able to settle in Argentina; however, once it became clear that a family cannot be financed with that sum, the administration increased that amount. But, the Argentinian administration, wishing to prevent the new immigrants from complaining and saying “why did you uproot us from our country and tempted us with vain promises” and so on, decided to demand from them that they come to Argentina at their own expense and that they should not take from the representative any money for travel expenses, and when they arrive to their desired haven the expenses will be reimbursed to them together with the amount that will be given to them in concept of financing.

The article continues with more details about the kind of travel documents that can be used to emigrate. If they want to keep their Russian citizenship, they can obtain a passport, in which case the fee is four times higher than an exit document, which would not allow them to go back to Russia. Naturally, the article records, the administration would prefer the use of a passport, to minimize the possibility of complaints. It goes on to say that Mr. Katzovitch exercises his best judgment to choose the candidates for the trip, to avoid mistakes made by the previous representative, Mr. Feinberg. The main mistake in that respect was that Mr. Feinberg preferred to

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<sup>11</sup> Mścibów, Belarus, a few kilometres to the West of Baranovich, near the Polish border.



choose large families, to increase the number of working hands. Mr. Katzovitch, on the contrary, prefers families with up to 4 active members.

This article is interesting at several levels. It is written in very literary Hebrew, as befits the name of the periodical. Indeed, Hamelitz means “the one who speaks poetically”.<sup>12</sup> This style was generally adhered to by Hebrew writers before the establishment of the state of Israel. One of the few documents that I have from my father’s childhood is a notebook of his Hebrew lessons in Médanos, where not only there was attention paid to style but also to calligraphy, a double devotion he kept throughout his entire life (Figure 22). A second important feature of this article is the appearance of Noah Katzovitch himself, who accompanied my family on their trip. He was stationed near Baranovich for a few months just a couple of years before the trip. I remember my father mentioning this person, and it is probable that he was a friend of the family. Moreover, the article clearly speaks of a change of philosophy in the recruitment of settlers. These were four young brothers, which perfectly fitted the new criteria. Finally, even in this sympathetic interview, it emerges that there had been lots of problems with the JCA Paris administration. Other articles are much more critical of the supposedly deceptive techniques used to attract immigrants and of the indifference of the Argentinian authorities. This was no paradise, as it will become evident below.

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<sup>12</sup> Two examples: (1) What I translated as “the Argentinian administration stayed completely away” is a prosaic adaptation from the original, in which the author is essentially quoting from Isaiah 33:15 “he ... that shaketh his hands from holding bribes”. (2) My translation “their desired haven” is in exact correspondence with the author’s original wording, which is taken from Psalms 107 (108):30 “he brings them to their desired haven”. Recall that this is an article on a very down-to-earth topic!

# הוא פחה

אני גדלה אהבת לאבי! כל היום צלצל האזן ארז  
אח לפני נפחתנו. תמיד יתנה רק, כי יהיו דעו וזרת  
אז יהיה פה האזן האזן. האזן אהב אתם לזמן יהיו חכמים לטובות.  
הוא זכיר, לזמן ופלו ביישם. הביאנו לזמן את לחם הכבוד וה  
יבדו וחסור.

אנכי יודע את כל זאת; אנכי יודע כי האזן רכין לפלו וחסור  
העצמו, אם אק יזכר לזמן את כל זרכינו. אנכי אלה את האזן  
אכדדו זרתק פהלתו אלה צדור לחנק, אכדדו פה אחר  
כן, כאשר יזקן וחלוט, אנכי אפיה צדור לחנק.  
אתה הנני עדה קטן לזמן אלה לצדור לאבי, לא אלה זר  
לזמן כל דבר ולזמן, אק את רצונו אהב לקבלו אהב לזמן  
אלו.

כבר את אהב את אהב, אהב וזרכין יודע.

כן חכמי טעם-אז, אק ככל תשוב אל.

Figure 22: A page from my Dad's Hebrew notebook at a tender age. He promises to always take care of his beloved father

In the memorial book SZ (pp 657-663) there is an article by F. Stein-Tzirulnik on baranovichers in Argentina. I quote:

In 1902 came Mordechai Razovsky and the brothers Epstein, these ones with the help of the JCA. The brothers Epstein were the first who stood against the JCA and founded an independent colony not far from the town of Médanos, an event that in those years had a strong repercussion even beyond the boundaries of Argentina.

It is worth mentioning another episode. The 20<sup>th</sup> of September of 1910, when in Rome the church was separated from the state, the Italians of Médanos arranged a demonstration and marched under their flag. Also, other nationalities, among them the Jews, participated with their flags. And in honour of our flag, they played the Hatikvah.

In 1912 arrived in Argentina the well-known community organizer Chaikl Epstein with his sister Fradl. They demonstrated here a lively activity in the founding of many Jewish institutions. Together with Yakov Joselevitch and Mordechai Razkovsky they founded a Bikur Cholim, a Chevra Kedisha, the association Ezra attached to the Jewish Hospital, and the Zionist Federation, where our landsman Yakov Joselevitch was its first president.

Because of the mention of Chaikl Epstein in 1912, which seems to contradict the earlier arrival in 1902, I decided to check the immigration records at the Museo de la Inmigración, thinking that perhaps a mistake had been made in the article. To my surprise, however, I found the records reproduced below, together with the records of the earlier entry (Figure 23).

Apellido	Nombre	Edad	Estado Civil	Nacionalidad	Lugar de Nacimiento	Profesión	Fecha de Arribo	Barco	Puerto
EPSTEIN	SALOMON	25	S	RUSA	DESCONOCIDO	SIN PROFESION	1902/09/17	AMIRAL BAUDIN	HAVRE
EPSTEIN	CHAIM	23	S	RUSA	DESCONOCIDO	SIN PROFESION	1902/09/17	AMIRAL BAUDIN	HAVRE
EPSTEIN	MENDEL	22	S	RUSA	DESCONOCIDO	SIN PROFESION	1902/09/17	AMIRAL BAUDIN	HAVRE
EPSTEIN	BEER	19	S	RUSA	DESCONOCIDO	SIN PROFESION	1902/09/17	AMIRAL BAUDIN	HAVRE
Se obtuvieron 4 resultados - Mostrando de 1 a 4									
EPSTEIN	CHRAKEL	28	S	DESCONOCIDA	DESCONOCIDO	DESCONOCIDA	1912/10/02	BUENOS AIRES	HAMBURGO
EPSTEIN	FRIEDA	20	S	DESCONOCIDA	DESCONOCIDO	DESCONOCIDA	1912/10/02	BUENOS AIRES	HAMBURGO

Figure 23: Entry records at the Buenos Aires harbour

Clearly the spelling Chrakel is a clerk’s error for Chaikl. Why would the diminutive for Chaim be used? Why would the age be incompatible (younger by 4 years) with that in the previous entry? Why would both people have a younger sister call Frieda? Also, by 1912 Berl would have been 29, which would have made Fradl 9 years younger, somewhat in contradiction with the remembrance of Berl and Frieda together in a children’s library. Our Chaikl was a well-known community organizer. My only way to reconcile the data is the following hypothesis. On arrival



at Moisés Ville, Chaikl underwent a cultural shock. He was no farmer (neither were the other three brothers) and he immediately decided to go back to Russia. According to the article in Hamelitz, this would be possible if he had arranged for an official Russian passport. Moreover, it is possible that the brothers did not want to leave their father alone with the younger sister. It is not known whether the mother was still alive. Once back in Baranovich, Chaikl resumed his cultural activities, particularly his beloved amateur theatre. He then stayed in Baranovich until 1912 (which could be the date of death of his father) and went back to Argentina taking Fradl along. Chaikl had to lie about his first name and his age so that he would appear to be a different immigrant. We know that Fradl died shortly after of cancer.

## 7. Médanos

We do not know whether, in September 1902, the brothers had time to visit Buenos Aires. It is possible that they may have spent some time there in a temporary accommodation. The famous Hotel de Inmigrantes on the harbour had not been built yet, but an earlier version (known as the Rotondo) existed already in the Retiro area. At the very least, they had a glimpse of civilization before heading to a town much smaller and less sophisticated than Baranovich. Moisés Ville was over ten years old when they arrived. It comprised probably about 250 families, each allocated about 65 Hectares of land. The newly arrived group from Baranovich did not quite agree with the prevailing conditions and entered a prolonged conflict with the administration in Paris. Although the precise nature of the demands of the rebellious group is not known, they had two positive consequences. The first one is that the disgruntled group negotiated in 1906, with the intermediation of an investor named Stroeder, the establishment of a new colony in the town of Médanos, the “garlic capital of Argentina”, in the province of Buenos Aires, about 50 km from the city of Bahía Blanca, an important harbour and commercial centre. This was an important move since it signaled a new modality of Jewish settlement in the country.

The second positive outcome was that, despite having lost about 20 families, Moisés Ville benefitted from the move when the Paris administration finally agreed with some of the demands, including the increase of the land allocations to 150 Hectares per family and a reduction of the annual percentage owed to the JCA from 5 to 4 percent. Apparently, the Paris direction intentionally delayed the publication of these reforms until after the dissenters had finalized the signature of the documents with the Stroeder group. Cociovitch notes that, had the members of the group been advised of the decision in time, they would most probably have opted to stay on, rather than letting go of the hard work invested over 4 years of sweat and tears. At this point, I should mention a third positive outcome, namely, the eventual causation of my own birth.

The population of Médanos is today of approximately 6000 souls. The town was established in 1897 as the site of a new station of the General Roca branch of the Argentinian railway system, a kind of doppelganger Baranovich. When I visited it for the first and only time in 2005 there were perhaps two or three Jewish families still living there. At its apogee, the Jewish population counted with about 100 families. We visited the synagogue (now declared a national monument),

built in 1915, and the cemetery. In it I was hoping to find the tomb of my grandmother, who died there shortly after the birth of my father, but the state of the older tombstones was such that we could not read the inscriptions. Some of the residents could point at the plot where Berl's house once stood. Berl (diminutive of Beer) was the youngest of the Epstein brothers, and the last to leave the colony. He had engaged in local politics as a representative of the town. This visit was one of the most moving experiences in my occasional search for the irretrievable past of the family. We visited the elementary school where we were received with the warm hospitality that one can find in Argentina as soon as one leaves the limits of the capital city. I could imagine my dad as a six-year-old running to school on those very streets wearing his leather boots. But even this thought is fraught with doubts since I know so little about the Epstein sojourn in Médanos.

My father, Noé Epstein, as the first-born, was named for his grandfather Noah. He was born on February 26, 1910. Since Ashkenazi Jews would not normally use the name of a living ancestor to name their children, I assume that Noah had died by then. He was still alive, though, in 1903. This information I gathered from the excellent biography of my late brother Silvio by the Israeli historian David Lavi, who found a mention in Hamelitz of a donation he made to the survivors of the Kishinev pogrom that year. The brothers had already left by then, but a younger sister, Frieda, or Fradl, had been left behind. It is not known exactly how old she was, nor whether the mother was still alive.

My father's mother was Malka Goldstein. I was named after her, not just because my first name starts with the same letter, but also because my Hebrew name is Elimelech, the closest equivalent to Malka. She died after my father's birth, during a second delivery, of eclampsia. Searching the immigration records of Argentina, I found that on May 30, 1905, a woman by that name arrived aboard a ship named Potaro, originating from London. The entry shows her age as 28, her nationality as Russian, and her civil status as married. Since the record above this is that of a man on the same ship, aged 30, also married, we must suspect that she is his wife and, therefore, not my grandmother.

The Médanos period, passing through Bahía Blanca and culminating with the move to Buenos Aires, needs much more investigation. Fortunately, there are official archives with registries of births and deaths, property sales, and the like, that can be used to trace the historical details. My intention here has been to do my best to retrieve whatever could be retrieved from the earlier Russian period.