

# The Lerer Family: The Mavericks of Uzventis

by Rose Lerer Cohen

Recently, I attended a presentation by Edmund de Waal, the renowned British ceramicist and author of *The Hare with the Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance*. The author shared his emotional journey when researching and writing his memoir; a journey abundant with deep emotion in the context of creativity. The memoir encompasses the vast history of the Ephrussi dynasty, which spans Odessa, Vienna and Paris. De Waal's meeting with his uncle in Japan, where he heard of the family history for the first time, was the catalyst for his memoir. He described this meeting and the events that followed, as a provocation.

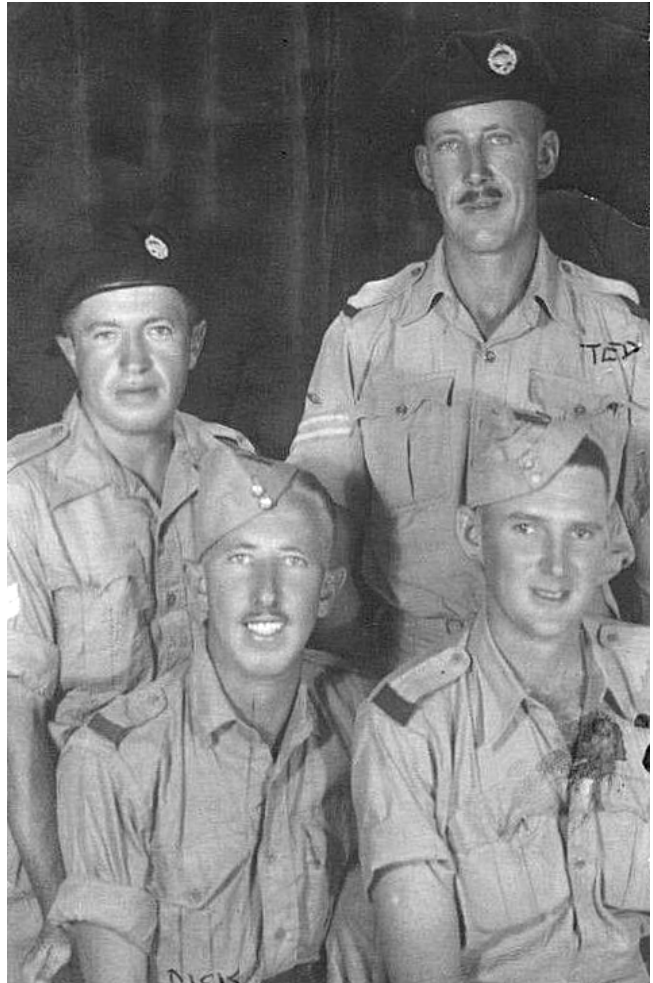
Synonyms for the word provocation are incitement, needling, goading and baiting. Pondering de Waal's words, it seems that my story also began with a provocation as I gazed at my father's tombstone at his first *yahrzeit* in 1991. Part of the tombstone reads, "*Here Lies, Arye Leib son of Reize and Binyamin Lerer. Born Uzventis, Lithuania, in 1909. Immigrated to Israel 1988.*" At the side of the tombstone we engraved, "*In memory of his parents, brothers and sisters murdered in the Shoah.*" My thoughts continued, "*I am Rose named for Reize, my father's mother. Binyamin, my brother (Bernard) is named for his father. I was three months pregnant with our son Ari when my father died. We named him for my father Arye Leib.*" My personal story begins at this juncture. This is the story of a family living in pre-war Lithuania.

I asked myself, "Who were these people who were murdered in the Shoah?" In part I had my answer, they are the people whose pictures were on our sideboard in our breakfast room in Cape Town, South Africa, together with whom we daily ate our meals. We knew my grandparents, but there were others whose names we never knew or never dared to ask, lest we pour more salt on an already blistering wound.

I began to research the town of Uzventis, its history and its people. I have visited Lithuania at least 25 times since I embarked on my research, visiting Uzventis and researching the archives. My work has extended beyond Uzventis, and today my research is on the Shoah in Lithuania, with a focus on plunder.

Uzventis is situated in southwestern Lithuania in the Samotiga or Zemaitija region on the banks of the Venta River. It is approximately 50 kilometers southwest of the district capital of Siauliai and approximately 15 kilometers from Kelme. The meaning of the name Uzventis is "beyond the river Venta."

Because I live in Jerusalem, my first port of call was the archives at Yad Vashem. In 1991, when I embarked on my research, the archives were not digitized; access was difficult; and the holdings of the archives were not as vast as they are today, the result of international sharing of archival material. The Pages of Testimony, which today are a vital



Author's father, Arye Leib Lerer (left), with fellow members of the British 7th Armoured Division who fought in North Africa during World War II and acquired the nickname "Desert Rats."

tool in reuniting families, was almost impossible to access then.

At the Yad Vashem Archives, I located testimony given by a survivor of the town of Uzventis, Rachel Katzav nee Davidow. The archivist gave me Rachel's contact details, and I arranged to meet her in her home in Bnei Brak. I rang the doorbell holding my box of chocolates and flowers; the door opened and I heard an exclamation "Malca." I replied, "I told you my name is Rose." She replied, "But you look like Malca (I soon learned that Malca was my father's sister) and the names of the other siblings are Tzila, Paya and Hirsch." Malca, I later discovered, was one of the faces in the photograph that dined with us each night. Rachel was not aware of another sibling Abel, who immigrated to South Africa in 1924.

My father, Arye Leib Lereris, was born in Uzventis in



*Reize and Malca Lereraite, the author's grandmother and aunt, both Holocaust victims.*

1909. At the age of nine, he left his parents' home to study at the Tels yeshiva. He studied there for ten years and, in 1929 at the age of 19, immigrated to South Africa to join his brother Abel/Abe. My father's *chavruta/havruta* was Rabbi Chaim Shmuel Lopian. (Chavruta/havruta is from the Aramaic: חֲבָרְוּתָא. The literal translation is "friendship" or "companionship," but it refers to the traditional rabbinic approach to Talmudic study in which a pair of students analyze, discuss, and debate a shared text.) Rabbi Lopian also left the yeshiva in Telz before the outbreak of the war and became one of the leading rabbis at the yeshiva in Gateshead, Manchester, UK. When my father left the yeshiva in 1929, he gave Rabbi Lopian a picture that reads, "*To my dearest friend, Reb Chaim Shmuel Lopian, from me, Leib Lerer, Torah Reading Korach, 1929.*" Rabbi Lopian gave me this picture when I visited him in his home in Matesdorf, Jerusalem, in 1993; at that time, I was collecting as much information as I could gather about my father and his family. During that visit, Rabbi Lopian said wonderful things about my father and praised his ability to learn Talmud.

In the wake of World War II, just a decade after his immigration to South Africa, my father volunteered and enlisted in the army. He joined the Desert Rats, Armored Di-

vision, and fought as a South African soldier as part of the British Forces against General Erwin Rommel in the Western Desert. He is mentioned in dispatches and was awarded the Military Medal. He took a leading part in rescuing 26 men and one officer who had been taken prisoner by the Germans. He also single-handedly took four German guards prisoner. One of his fellow soldiers, whom I contacted in my quest to learn more about my father, told me that he was an excellent and modest soldier, well versed in the Jewish religion. Although he spoke no German, he was proficient in Yiddish, which enabled him to understand German and made him valuable to the unit.

I first visited Uzventis in May 1991, with my then 14-year-old daughter, when Lithuania was on the brink of independence from the Soviet Union. We walked the streets among broken statues of Stalin and saw tanks that surrounded the television station in Vilnius. Gasoline and food were in short supply, but the mood was one of elation and national pride. We were hosted for ten days in Kaunas at the home of the Staskevicius family, who regard themselves as my relatives. We traveled the length and breadth of Lithuania with Raimondas Staskevicius, a son of the family, as our driver—and we waited hours in line for gasoline. Lithuania had almost no foreign visitors at that time.

I met Aunt Paya, my father's sister, during this visit. Paulina Therese Lereraite converted to Christianity in 1926 because Urbanas (last name unknown) had stolen her heart and she hoped to marry him. In the end, however, he did not marry her. Paulina converted together with another Jewish girl, Sarah Olsvangaite, and Sara did marry the man with whom she had fallen in love. One of Sara's daughters is Elzbieta Staskevicius who hosted us in Kaunas.

Sitting in Paulina's house that May and looking at her was like looking at my father; she had the same blue eyes and the same nose, yet there was a massive chasm of time and history that separated us. We conversed in Yiddish. She was happy to meet her brother's daughter, but she told me very little about the family. She could not tell me about the Shoah which she had spent hiding in a monastery in Cibiskis, outside Vilnius. Although she was a practicing Catholic, in the eyes of the Nazis and their Lithuanian helpers, she still was a Jew. She did know, however, that her whole family had been obliterated in the Shoah. Paulina survived the war in the monastery and after the war returned to Uzventis and lived the life of a Catholic. I visited Paulina again in 1992. At this point she was riddled with cancer and she died later that year. She is buried in the Catholic cemetery in Uzventis.

I had known about Aunt Paya and that she survived the war, but I had not known that she was Paulina Theresa and had converted to Christianity. During the period that the Soviet Union allowed its citizens to receive parcels from the West, my father sent parcels to his sister. I remember going with him on numerous occasions to Beinkenstatdt, the Jewish bookshop in Cape Town and

filling a box with many pairs of jeans, medication, chewing gum and women's clothes, sending these gifts with the assistance of the Joint Distribution Committee from South Africa, through Switzerland to the Soviet Union. Paulina told me that it was thanks to my father's gifts that she was able to live on a much higher standard than her neighbors.

On that visit in 1991, Paulina took me to the site of the house where my father was born, which no longer is standing and from there to the mass grave in the Pasilve Forest. Also during this visit, she introduced me to my second cousins, Leonas and Zeimi Cvikas. (Leonas and Zeimi are the sons of Elya Cvik, my father's first cousin. Elya's father and my grandmother were brother and sister.) Elya Cvik survived the war in hiding in Uzventis. I remain in constant contact with these cousins.

On March 23, 1939, Germany annexed the port city of Memel (Klaipeda), Lithuania. On August 23, 1939, Hitler and Stalin signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty, a non-aggression pact. On June 15, 1940, the Soviet army took control of Lithuania, and, after it was officially annexed in early August, the provisional Lithuanian Government was replaced by the Soviet People's Commission Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR)

On June 22, 1941, Operation Barbarossa, a surprise attack by Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union, set the Holocaust in Lithuania in motion. This watershed in history marks a quantum leap toward the Holocaust—the murder of the Jews of the Soviet Union and a new phase in Nazi policy—total extermination of all Jews. From mid-August to November of that year, about 80 percent of Lithuanian Jewry was exterminated, mostly in the small towns and shtetls. By the end of 1941, only 43,000 out of the 220,000–225,000 Jews who were in Lithuania at the start of the German occupation remained alive, and they were living in four ghettos: Vilnius, Kaunas (Kovno), Siauliai (Shavli), and Svencionys (Arad, 1980).

The murders in Uzventis were carried out by the Einsatzgruppen and their Lithuanian helpers on July 30 and December 8, 1941. Reizee nē Cvikas Lerer and her husband Benyamin Lerer, my grandparents, perished in the Pasilve Forest on July 30, 1941. Tzila Olswang nē Lereraite, my father's sister whom I discovered from archival material, was born in 1909. She may have been my father's twin, as he too was born in 1909. She married Yechiel Olswang, whose sister Sara had converted with Tzila's sister Paya (Paulina Theresa). Yechiel and Tzila had five children, all of whom were murdered in the Shoah. I have been told that Tzila was in hiding for six months together with her children. She was found and taken to the forest and murdered with other Jews who were hiding on December 8, 1941.

Malca Lereraite was born in 1912. She showed an interest in making *aliyah* (immigration) to Israel before the war, but remained in Lithuania. She was incarcerated in the Siauliai ghetto together with her husband, Nochumas Ginkas, and her their daughter, Miriam, born June 5, 1941, 17 days



*House in Uzventis, Lithuania,  
where author's father lived before 1929  
(Photographed in 1991)*

before Operation Barbarossa. I have no knowledge of how or where they perished.

My father's brother Hirsch-Tzvi, sometimes known as Berelis, studied at the yeshiva in Kelme. He was unmarried. He was also head of the Komsomol (Communist Youth Union) in Uzventis prior to the Russian invasion. On my third visit to Uzventis in 1994 along with Saul Issroff, I was given a mugshot of Hirsch, by the town historian Mr Rimkus, taken because Hirsch had been a wanted man, a young communist during the period of Lithuanian independence, when communism was outlawed in Lithuania. Hirsch perished in the Shoah, some say in Zagare, other say in Kraza, with other Komsomol members and still others say in the Pasilve Forest in Uzventis.

On the same trip, we also visited a friend of Auntie Paulina/Paya who presented me with a box. In it, I found bar and bat mitzvah invitations for my siblings and me, a number of family photographs and other personal documents. When I first met Paulina, it seems that she knew me, but I did not know her. Did my father know of the conversion? I have no idea, as when Paulina converted my father had been living in South Africa from more than a decade.

Of the 99 Jews who lived in Uzventis on the eve of the outbreak of the Shoah, I know of only four, perhaps five, who survived. Some who survived were in Siauliai when the Uzventis Jews were rounded up and murdered. Also on that 1994 trip, Miriam Yavne, a survivor who has since died, gave me a list of the Jews murdered in Uzventis—which I subsequently donated to the Yad Vashem archives. According to the lists, there were two killings in Uzventis. The first list is of the inhabitants of the town who were incarcerated in the cellar of the distillery owned by Smilgiavicius. The second list is of the Jews who were in hiding but subsequently found and murdered.

In 1955, town residents plundered the large communal grave in the Pasilve Forest in Uzventis looking for gold and silver. The remains of those victims were moved to the cemetery in Vilnius where they are buried in a mass grave. In 1999, the children of the survivors of Uzventis erected a

monument, which stands next to the old monument.

This past July (2016), my son Ari and I traveled to Lithuania to participate in a memorial held in the Pasilve Forest, commemorating the 75th anniversary of the murder of the Jews of Uzventis and to share my research with him. I always am deeply moved when I visit the Pasilve Forest where my grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins were murdered. I expected Ari to be equally as moved, but he looked upon the place of mass murder as a forest with a plaque and could not grasp the gravity of the events that occurred there. On the other hand, our visit to the mass grave in Vilnius moved him greatly; the cemetery, a place of burial and a commemorative stone made the deaths and the loss tangible. The visit to Ponar, which followed the trip to the cemetery, also was hard for him to bear. He was wrought with grief; the sight of the pits signified the death and destruction and it permeated his flesh. The fact that neighbors murdered neighbors and friends turned their backs on friends remains unfathomable to him. At the gates of Ponar, Ari wrote the following:

*Within the pits of memory* בתוך בורות של זיכרון  
*Tears surge forth, the throat is choked* הדמעות צפות והגרונ חנוק  
*A bitter sense of triumph* תחושה מרה של ניצחון  
*Along with a feeling of loss and restraint* יחד עם תחושה של הפסד ואיפוק

*A nightmare that seems so real* הלום בלהות שנראה כה אמיתי  
*Emotions abound* הרגש חי ובוטט  
*See the pit, the gut cannot grasp* רואה את הקבר הבטן הוא אינו  
*Death shouts out* המוות מתוכו צועק

*The unfathomable past creates a bizarre future* העבר הנורא יצר עתיד מוזר  
*Mingling joy and sadness* ערבוב של שימחה ועצב  
*Occasionally familiar, mostly foreign* לפעמים הוא מוכר לרוב הוא זר  
*Laughter and tears set the pace* הצחוק והבכי קובעים את הקצב

Ari commented later in the day that, for him, the deep emotion of despair is filled with an ambivalent feeling of belonging.

I have visited Lithuania numerous times, but sharing my experiences and findings with Ari elevated my research to another level. As I watched my son walk down the streets of Uzventis and Plunge where his grandparents had lived prior to their immigration to South Africa and take photographs at the Telz yeshiva building where his grandfather, for whom he is named had studied for 10 years, the circle closed and I appreciate the provocation of 27 years ago.

### Bibliography

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Author, Rose Lerer Cohen, with her son, Ari Cohen, and the memorial in the Pasilve Forest (Photographed in 2017)

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