

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE ROLNIKS IN LITHUANIA

So who were these Rollnicks, Joseph and his uncle Wolf, newly arrived in South Africa in the mid-1890's? They were from Lithuania, but what was the family? Can we trace their origins back to some first Rollnick?

First, what does the name mean? But even before that, was it Rollnick (as the British and South African branches spell it), or Rolnick (as most spelled it in the USA), or Rolnik (as it appears in the transliterated Lithuanian records), or רולניק (as in the Yiddish)? All four are valid, but for this chapter, we will use Rolnik, and in later chapters, add the "c" and even the extra "l", as the context demands.

The Dictionary of American Family Names, Oxford University Press, gives

"rolnick: Jewish (Ashkenazic), Czech and Slovak (Rolník), and eastern German: occupational name from Polish and Belorussian rolnik, Czech rolník 'land worker', 'agricultural laborer'".

But the meaning is really a little more specific. When Napoleon came to Russia, he organized a survey of occupations<sup>1</sup>. Those owning or working the land were put into three classes or "rolls". The Rolniks were on the roll of those who neither owned large estates nor worked for others on their estates, and so were small independent farmers, the Gospodarz Rolniks<sup>2</sup> (landowning farmers), shortened to Rolniks.

On December 9, 1804, Czar Alexander I, issued the "Vysochaishe utverzhdennoe Polozhenie. - O ustroistve Evreev" ["Imperial Statute Concerning the Organization of Jews"], of which a partial translation of Article 32 reads: "Every Jew must have or adopt an inherited last name, or nickname, which should be used in all official acts and records without change." Our first Rolnik must have taken his occupation as a surname. We can assume then that he was an independent, small, landowning farmer. Some of his descendants held to the occupation of the founder. Thus, family tradition has it that his grandson, Wolf Rollnick (my own grandfather), kept a dairy in Taurage, Lithuania before he emigrated to South Africa. Confirming this, he is listed as an "agriculturalist" on the Shipping Manifest for the family's voyage to the Cape, and when he settled in Wynberg, the family again ran a (small) dairy. His father

<sup>1</sup> [https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Poland\\_Civil\\_Registration\\_Vital\\_Records](https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Poland_Civil_Registration_Vital_Records) Civil registration of births, marriages, deaths, and sometimes of marriage intentions was initiated according to the Code of Napoleon in the territory of the Duchy of Warsaw on May 1st, 1808.

<sup>2</sup> <http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/POLAND-ROOTS/1999-01/0915907934>

Yosel, living in Upyna, Lithuania, is listed in 1878 as owning 0.35 hectares. That's a piece of ground one-third the size of a rugby field, certainly enough to farm<sup>3</sup>. And his grandson, Chaim Rolnik, denotes himself as a farm laborer on his voyage to Baltimore in 1909. Can we count also Bubbles Brunow, a granddaughter of Wynberg's Wolf Rollnick, who had a wine farm in Stellenbosch, and what of her daughter, Sydney, who came to Israel as a chalutz and worked on a kibbutz?

## A Little Background

The Jews of Lithuania are a part of the family of Ashkenazi Jews, those who lived in the countries that would become Imperial Russia, and largely descended from 11th century German Jews. Jews began to move into Lithuania during the sixteenth century as the number of the Ashkenazi Jews began to recover after the depredations of the Crusades, and of the Black Death of 1347-8 CE. Massacres of Jews accompanied this epidemic, stemming from the belief that the Jews had brought it. Modern genetic techniques allow us to estimate the size of the population that was present after such a bottleneck<sup>4</sup>. The genes that cause certain hereditary diseases specific to the Ashkenazi Jews<sup>5</sup> have been identified and their positions on the human chromosomes precisely determined. One can work out how many generations have passed since the mutation that gave rise to the first case of the disease. Also, from the proportion of the current Ashkenazi population that carries the disease, one can estimate the size of the population when that first mutation arose. On this basis, the Ashkenazi Jews seem to have originated from a group of people, some 15,000 in number, living in about 1500 CE in the areas that became Imperial Russia. Increasing at some 40% per generation thereafter, they became the six million Jews living in that region by 1900. Of these some 250,000 lived then in Lithuania, descended from less than a thousand at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Dov Levin (*Pinkas Hakehilot, Lita* (in Hebrew), p 126), before WW1 some 30 to 40 Jewish families lived in Upyna as small traders or agriculturalists. These had milk cows, fruit trees and market gardens. At that time, the total population of Upyna was some 450 persons, of whom more than 60% were Jews. Parts of Dov Levin's book are available in translation: [http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas\\_lita/pinkas\\_lita.html](http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/pinkas_lita/pinkas_lita.html). Encyclopaedia of Jewish Communities. Lithuania. Translation of *Pinkas ha-kehilot. Lita: entsiklopedyah shel ha-yishuvim ha-Yehudiyim le-min hivasdam ve-'ad le-ahar Sho'at Milhemet ha-'Olam ha-Sheniyah*. Edited by: Dov Levin & Josef Rosin. Published by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem 1996.

<sup>4</sup> For details, one can consult papers by Risch and his colleagues and by Montgomery Slatkin in the *American Journal of Human Genetics*, 2003 and 2004, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Tay-Sachs disease, Gaucher disease and a neurological disease, Familial Idiopathic Torsion Dystonia, have all been used in such analyses.

Among these few lived the ancestors of Leyba Rolnik, the first Rolnik in the Lithuanian records.

## The Rolniks of Telsiai (Telz), home of the earliest recorded Lithuanian Rolniks.

### Telsiai, Lithuania

Alternate names: Telsiai [Lith], Telsi [Rus], Telzh [Yid], Telsze [Pol], Telsche [Ger], Telsi [Latv], Telsė, Teltsch, Telshe, Telschi, Telsh, Telschie, Telsių, Telz

Region: Kovno

- [JGFF Town Search](#) (307 Matches)
- [Yizkor Books](#) (3):
  - [Be'er Telz \(Lita\): matasvet zikaron le-kehila kedosha](#) (Tel Aviv, 1984)
  - [Litz Pool. 11](#) (New York, 1951)
  - [Mitz'Amakim](#) (New York, 1959)
- [KehilahLinks](#)
  - <http://kehilahlinks.jewishgen.org/telz/telz.html>
- [JOWBR: Jewish Cemetery](#)

	Town	District	Province	Country
Before WWI (c. 1900):	Telsi	Telsi	Kovno	Russian Empire
Between the wars (c. 1930):	Telsiai	Telsiai		Lithuania
After WWII (c. 1950):	Telsiai			Soviet Union
Today (c. 2000):	Telsiai			Lithuania

Jewish Population in 1900: 3,088

Notes: Russian: Телсѣи, Yiddish: תלז.  
Former *igvezd* capital, in NW Lithuania. 99 miles NW of Kaunas (Kovno), 42 miles W of Šiauliai (Shavl).

Telsiai, Lithuania:  $55^{\circ}59' N, 22^{\circ}15' E$  Nearby Jewish Communities:

In the first census of Lithuania brought out after the adoption of surnames we have the document that follows. It is from the 1816 census for the town of Telsiai (Telz, as it was called in Yiddish).

Revision List Telsiai/Kaunus  
LVIA/515/25/405 Aug 17 1816 Pages 72 and 218

Surname	Name	Father	Relationship	Sex age Age	Year left reason	Comments
ROLNIK	Leib	Movsha	Head of household	M 51 56		
ROLNIK	Rita		Wife	F 51		
ROLNIK	losel	Leib	Son	M 20 25		
ROLNIK	Raikha		Daughter-in-law	F 23		Wife of losel
ROLNIK	Rokhel	losel	Granddaughter	F 7		
ROLNIK	Aizik	Leib	Son	M 12	1812 Runaway	
SMOLIN	Sholom	Leizer		M	1815 Died	
SMOLIN	Vulf	Sholom		M	1815 Died	Son of Sholom ben Leizer
SMOLIN	Marek	Sholom		M 15	1812 Runaway	Son of Sholom ben Leizer
RUDMAN	Gershon	David		M 38	1814 Runaway	

What we have here is the Founding Document of the House of Leib/Leyba Rolnik.

We see that on the 17th of August 1816, there were ten people registered as living in Leyba and Rita Rolnik's house in the town of Telsiai, which is in the Uyezd (a secondary-level of administrative division, equivalent to "district") of Telsiai in the Gubernia (primary level administrative division, equivalent to province) of Kaunas (Kovno). I write "registered" and not "living" since Aizyk Rolnik had "run away", and Rita's father and brother, Leizer and Sholom had died. Gershon Rudman had also run away. (He was probably a Rolnik who had changed his name, perhaps to avoid conscription. A real Gershon Rolnik, son of David appears in a later census listing, as does Aizik Rolnik, so we know these are family members).

Leyba is recorded as born in 1760. He is our earliest Rolnik. His first son Yosel, Yosel's wife Raikhel and their daughter Roche are also in the household.

These wonderful census lists are the databases which have provided much of the material for this chapter, treasures found by the dedicated workers of JewishGen<sup>6</sup>. In the next census, made on the 25th April 1834, the six Rolniks listed above are still living at home, and have been joined by two more sons, Itsik and Girsh and their wives and children. Josel has sons and grandchildren, while Aizyk has now returned and is living at home with wife and children. In all, there are now 30 people registered in the household, two being Rita's nephew Marek, now with his wife.

These 40 records, referring to 33 distinct individuals, are a substantial part of the 233 citations of "Rolnik" in the JewishGen's Lithuania database (as of October 2013). I have carefully analysed all those citations and find that they refer to close to one hundred individuals. These 100 people are the Rolniks of Lithuania, as found so far by the diligent searchers of JewishGen.

We can at once see how rare is the surname Rolnik. There are over 1,300,000 citations in the JewishGen's Lithuanian database. Just 233, that is, one and three-quarters of a percent of one percent of these are Rolniks. Of the approximately 15,000 Jewish families (mostly Lithuanian) that emigrated to South Africa, only two have the name Rolnick or Rollnick, one and a third per cent of one percent. Of the two million Jewish immigrants who entered the USA in the fifty years prior to 1924 (when immigration was greatly cut down), only 203 appear in the Ellis Island records as Rolniks, Rolnicks or Rollnicks, about one percent of one percent. And of these, those that I could identify as coming from Lithuania were rarer still, 22 of the 203, with the great majority of the Ellis Island Rolniks, no less than 86, coming from Belarus, 31 from Minsk alone.

Of the 250 or so of the documented Lithuanian Rolniks, I have been able to identify positively about 90 as being direct descendants of Leyba Rolnik, or else as having married into the family. Among the 250 was a group of a dozen individuals who did not live in Lithuania proper but in the town Rozhanka (now in Belarus), presumably linked to the more plentiful Belarus Rolniks.

If you are a Rolnik descendant and your Rolnik ancestor came from

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<sup>6</sup> JewishGen, a non-profit organization affiliated with the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, was founded in 1987 as a bulletin board with only 150 users who were interested in Jewish genealogy. Primarily driven by volunteers, there are over 700 volunteers throughout the world who actively contribute to our ever growing collection of databases, resources and search tools. Currently, JewishGen holds more than 14 million records, and provides a myriad of resources and search tools designed to assist those researching their Jewish ancestry.

Lithuania, you might well be a true descendant of Leyba of Telsiai<sup>7</sup> and your Tree goes back before 1760, to the birth of Movsha, Leyba’s father.

The four sons of Leyba will later themselves be founders of a line of descendants, as we shall see in the following chapters, and as is depicted on the frontispiece. Many of Aizyk’s progeny are from the branch that went from Lithuania to Annapolis and Baltimore or to South Africa. Some of Gersh’s family took part in the migration to the USA. One member went to Palestine, while the others stayed in Lithuania and were caught up in the Holocaust, only some few surviving. One of Itsyk’s line went first to Latvia and then to the UK.

We saw in the Introduction, and we shall discuss in the final chapter of this book, that DNA testing revealed that there were (at least) two tribes of Rolniks in Lithuania. One tribe I have called the Northern (Telsiai) Rolniks. This was originally centered around Telsiai and we have just seen the Founding Document of that tribe. The other tribe, the Central Rolniks was settled in the Raseiniai (Raseyn) region. The earliest record that I have found for them is the following, which is, I suppose, the Founding Document of the Central Rolniks:

Tax and Voters Lists					
Name	Father Age	Comments Record	Day Month Year	Town Uyezd Guberniya	Archive/Fond/Inventory/File Record # Page #
ROLNIK, Orel	Leyba	From Shavlinsk society; in 1849 in Tsitovni town he will rent out his house  Taxpayers	23 Dec 1848	Siluva Raseinai Kaunas	KRA/I-49/1/2181  54/57

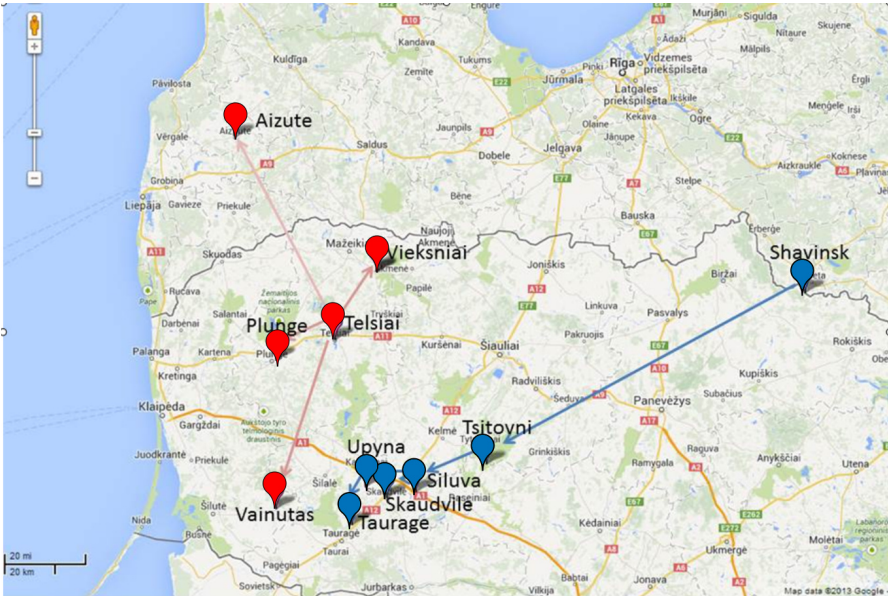
This is a less impressive document than the one I found for the Northern tribe, but it contains some important information. The Central Rolniks seem to have come from Shavlinsk (probably Shavinsk, today Suvainiškis), and lived in Tsitovni (modern Tytuvėnai) before moving south-west to Siluva and the Raseiniai (Raseyn) region.

The descendants of Yosel Rolnik, another son of Leyba Rolnik from the Raseiniai region, mostly emigrated from Lithuania to Chicago and to Baltimore in the USA. Two went to South Africa, another to Germany and then to the USA and Australia. For their tree, see the front material.

<sup>7</sup> As we will see in the final chapter, DNA testing shows that the Lithuanian Rolniks consist of two unrelated tribes. Each had a founder named Leyba and each Leyba had a son named Yosel.

## The Rolniks disperse throughout Northwestern Lithuania

We saw in the opening chapter that Joe Rollnick was a restless traveler. Perhaps this is a Rolnik characteristic, and, indeed, the history of the Rolniks in Lithuania after 1834 is one of dispersion throughout the little towns that surround the mother city of Telsiai and amongst those in the Raseiniai region.



*In red: The Northern Rolniks. In blue: The Central Rolniks.*

The reason for this seems to be threefold. Clearly, in the case of the Northern Rolniks, the house in Telsiai was getting over-crowded. After all, they had been living in it with the increasing family for some forty years, and presumably Telsiai itself did not have enough opportunities for making a living.

For the Central Rolniks, the drive towards dispersion was probably mainly economic. From 1858, in the more southern town of Taurig (Yiddish for Taurage), commerce had begun to increase. The Tilsit-Tavrigh-St.Petersburg highway had been completed and the railway from St.Petersburg to Warsaw connected to Tavrigh by a branch from Kovno (1864). Trade with Germany was developing greatly. Large quantities of agricultural products passed through to Germany via the Tavrigh customs office, which also handled imported industrial products. Thus in 1855, 9,000,000 Rubles of imported goods from Germany, and 3,000,000 Rubles of agricultural products were recorded as having been transferred. Vast quantities were also smuggled in both directions across the border to Tilsit in Germany, and Rolniks were, from oral family

history, engaged in this smuggling trade.<sup>8</sup>

The shtetls that the Central Rolniks lived in, Upyna<sup>9</sup>, Skaudvile, Namaksciai (Namoksht), Siluva, and Taurage, were all close together, with not more than ten to twenty miles separating any two of them. They were in the Raseiniai District. All of these towns (and also the towns where the Northern Rolniks settled) are in the Zamut region of Lithuania<sup>10</sup>.

But there is a third reason for their wanderings... in many cases they went to find a mate. I have made a figure (page 39) that depicts five cases, three taken from the Marriages and Divorces lists of the Lithuanian JewishGen site, showing how some couples travelled from one shtetl to another to find a life partner, not in every case successfully.

My grandfather, Wolf Rolnik, went the 56 Km from Upyna to Taurage to find his bride, Chaya Gurvich, and they set up their first

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<sup>8</sup> Here is a fascinating story about what can be learnt from a critical examination of an archival list. <http://data.jewishgen.org/wconnectwc.dll?jg-jgsys-sigsview-153375-Sam%20Aaron-122;3>

“We recently received from our translator a list of 63 names which was described as an “1862 list of Real Estate Owners from Taurage”, but with a question mark. There were however a number of curious features about this list.

The first related to the remarks in the “Comments” column: they all dealt only with the age of the person concerned, and referred back to an entry for that person in an 1858 Revision List. But strangely, the Revision List to which reference was made was that of Taurage in only the first 31 cases, but after that, there were 15 consecutive references to the 1858 Gaure Revision List, 10 consecutive references to the 1858 Dauglaukis Revision List, and 7 to the 1858 Pajuris Revision List. These three villages were all small communities close to Taurage,

Secondly, some of the persons listed were as young as 5, 7, 14 or 15: they surely could not already have been Real Estate Owners. Furthermore, three of the Gaure names mentioned were described as “deserters from 1856”, and it is unlikely that they also would have been recorded as real estate owners in Taurage in 1858.

What then was this list, if it was not a list of Real Estate Owners? An early guess was that it might have been a Residents List, i.e., a list of persons living in Taurage in 1862, some of whom had been registered in either Guare, Dauglaukis or Pajuris in 1858. But this did not square with the inclusion of three deserters, or young children without their parents. Moreover, if the list of names was sorted according to the Registration Numbers, one found four or five persons with the same registration number, but with no apparent connection: different family names, different ages, different previous Revision Lists. And the numbers were not in an unbroken sequential list; there were large gaps.

This seemed therefore to have been part of a larger list, but not a Resident’s list. It seemed that what we had here was possibly no more than a list made by some official checking off the names on one list against earlier Revisions Lists.

We then decided to ask Vitalija Gircyte, Chief Archivist at the Kaunas Regional Archives, for her thoughts on the subject. As a very experienced researcher, she was able to come up with an answer. She explained that this list in fact comes from a file of the Raseiniai district court of 1862, and after looking into the court file (a bulky document), she was able to provide the following further detail.



home in her home town. It was there that their children were born and from there that they emigrated to South Africa.

His brother-in-law to be, Hirsch Ter (later Silberstein) had travelled in the opposite direction ten years before, to marry Chana (Johanna) Rolnik and in this case, the couple stayed in Upyna until they emigrated to Germany. Itsyk-Abel very sensibly travelled from Vieksniai 74 Km to find his bride, whose father Mendel Levi owned a fine store in Plunge. The store kept Itsyk-Abel and his wife and children living comfortably until first the Russians and then the Nazis came. (I discuss their fate in the Chapter on the Rolniks of Plunge). Meer's long journey, 174 Km from Upyna to Darsuniskis, to find his Leya didn't lead to a happy marriage. These were Congo Joe's parents. They lived a wandering life, Joseph being born close to the border with Germany, near Tilsit (now Sovetsk), while his younger brother Itsyk Leib was born in Babtai, close

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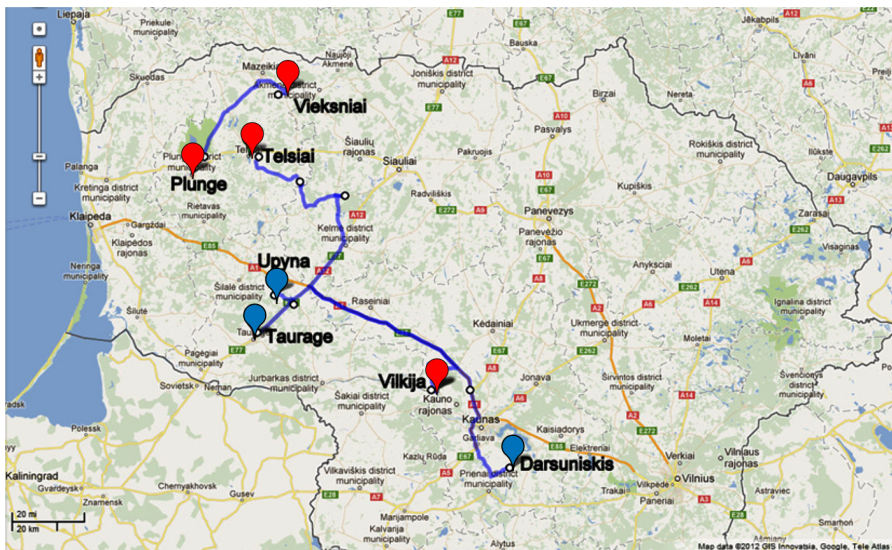
The matter in court concerned the killing in May, 1858 of six border guards by smugglers, and the confiscation of the goods and weapons from the smugglers. The list seems to have been made in the course of police investigation as part of an attempt to locate possible suspects. The official title of the list is - "List of the members of Taurage community with the names Iosel, Itsko, Shimel or Shimkhe, and Meyer". (We hadn't noticed that these were the only given names reflected in the list). Vitalija concluded that the smugglers being sought by the police must have been known to them only by their age and by their given names, as surnames were not yet stable, or not used in everyday life, and that the police were acting on the supposition that the suspects must have come from either Taurage itself, or one of the three small neighbouring villages. They therefore worked through the four Revision Lists for 1858 to make up a list of persons with those given names." JewishGen

<sup>9</sup> As we saw in Footnote 2 many Jews in Upyna were agriculturalists. In nearby Vainutas it is recorded that, indeed, most were, owning large fields and even working these with machinery. (Dov Levin, *loc.cit.*)

<sup>10</sup> From: Zamut and her Jews by Herman Frank

<http://ellisland.jewishgen.org/yizkor/lita2/Lit057.html> :

"In the swampy and forested region around the southwest hills near the Baltic Sea, there has lived, since time immemorial, a very ancient and pugnacious people – the Lithuanians. Early in its beginnings the Lithuanians had divided into two tribes. One of these took the lower areas of the large, half-empty region. [This tribe] was called *Zemaitis* and the land *Zemaitia* [Lithuanian: lower land] in opposition to the tribe that took the *Aukstaitia* or the higher part of the land. The river Nievis, which runs from north to south and joins the Nemunas above Kovne, became the border between these two large tribes. On its left, lower shore were settled the *Zemaitis* or (in the German-Polish form of expression) the *Zamuter* [inhabitants of Zamut], and on the right shore, in the area that extends east to Vilne and south to Kovne – the Lithuanians. The entire region where the first of these tribes lived for hundreds of years, came to be known as Zamut or (in Russian) Zhmud. The town of Shavl [Šiauliai] was the geographic center of Zamut – of the strange, peculiar province of the ancient Lithuanian-Polish state. Zamut extended over an area of hundreds of square miles, within the boundaries of three counties (Shavl, Telzsh and Rosieni [Šiauliai, Telšiai, Raseiniai]) of what was later Kovne *guberniya* [Russian: province]".



to Kedainiai, more than 100 Km to the East. We saw that the couple divorced a year or so after, in Kedainiai. Finally, the long journey of a young Leiba (grandson of the founder Leyba) from his home town of Telsiai to find his Ita Zlata, nearly two hundred Km away in Vilkija, led to their marriage in Kaunas, where their daughter Freda Basha was born, ten months later. How did the Rolniks find mates from so far away? A successful matchmaker would have travelled, doing his business, even further.

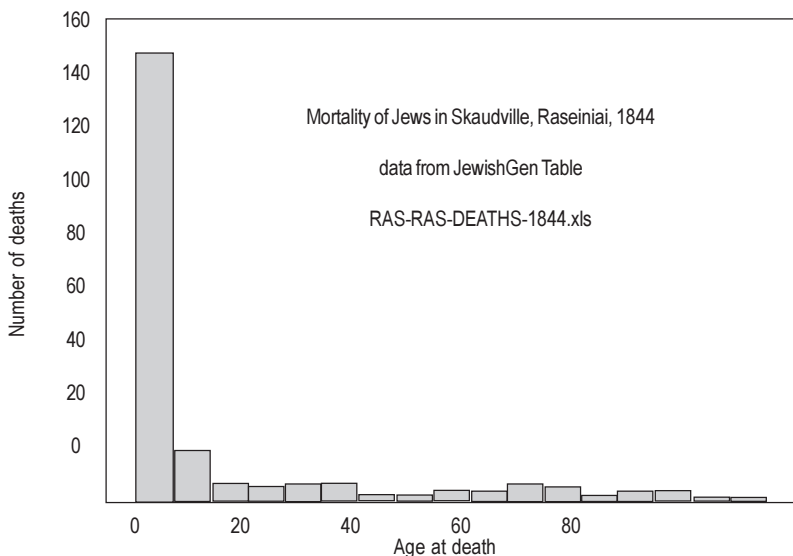
## Shtetl Life.

I have not been able to find out explicitly the actual occupation of any of the Rolniks, except for Abel Benstel, the son of Eliash, listed in 1886 as a watchmaker, and Aizyk Rolnik, the son of Haim, listed in 1915 as a barber aged 16. However, in the shtetl of Skaudvile, in the centre of our circle, there were in 1847, 204 Jews in all<sup>11</sup>, including 9 peddlers, 8 tailors, 7 tavern owners (and a wine maker and another in the beverage trade), as many as 6 cabmen, 6 who were millers or bakers, 5 day laborers, 2 teachers and an assortment of tradesmen, comprising a brick layer, a carpenter, a glazier, a shoemaker and a kosher slaughterer. In addition there were 9 “small proprietors”, these were probably small farmers<sup>12</sup>. The list looks like what one sees pictured in films like “Fiddler on the Roof”, everyone happily working away and singing at their work... or was the reality rather different?

<sup>11</sup> In 1897, the town's population was over 70% Jewish (See Dov Levin, *loc. cit.*).

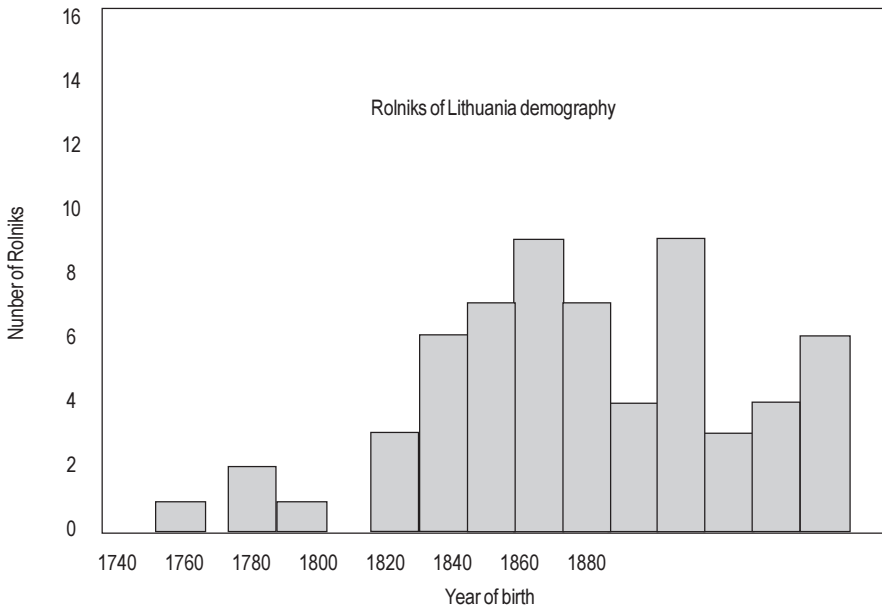
<sup>12</sup> Dov Levin, *loc. cit.*

The figure below shows the age at death for the 233 people who died in the Raseiniai district during 1847. We see a very high infant mortality, one quarter of the deaths being children in their first year of life, with half of those dying being below two years old. This is what one finds today in the poorest underdeveloped countries. The actual infant mortality, defined as deaths in the first year of life per 1,000 births, computes out for Raseiniai as 236 per 1000. Today, Angola's rate (the world's worst) is 195 per 1000, with many other African countries in the range 90 to 130 per 1000. Even as recently as 1950, Yugoslavia's infant mortality rate was 150 per 1000, so Raseiniai's rate in 1847 would not have been out of the ordinary.



Indeed, at first glance, the Rolniks were not expanding rapidly. Numerous (but by no means all) citations in the All Lithuanian Database for Rolniks give that individual's date of birth. One can use those data to draw a diagram showing how the population expanded over the years from 1760 (when Leyba was born) until more recent times. The graph on the next page shows the number of people born (and surviving to be recorded later) in each decade.

Apart from a probably aberrant peak in the decade 1880-90 (augmented by an unusual finding of some marriage files), the population seems to have peaked with the first generation after Leyba, in the 1820-30's. These were the Rolniks who had moved to the shtetls in the Raseiniai district. But where were their children? How come the population was not expanding exponentially? The explanation is that the Lithuanian records show only those persons who were actually living in Lithuania over the period for which records are available. (The period



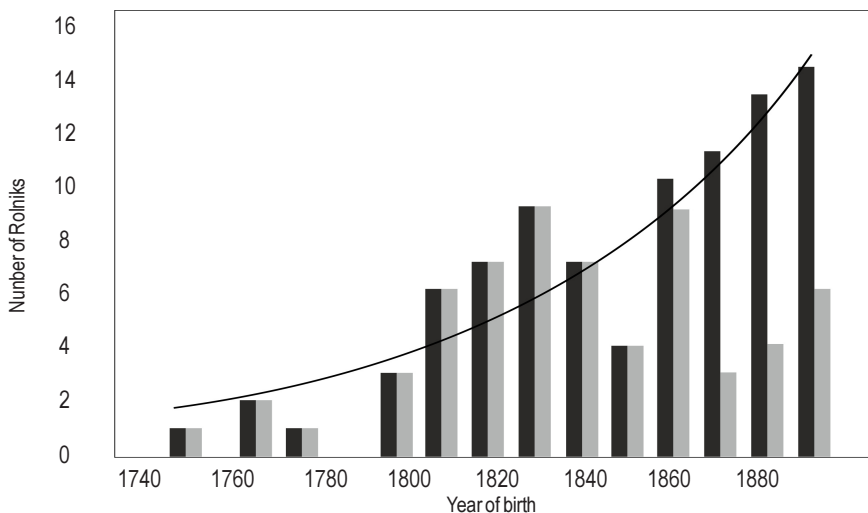
includes Lithuania during the World Wars, together with a few Holocaust survivor records and a few burials in post-war Lithuania). So where were the descendants of the second generation of Rolniks?

I have tried to identify most of these descendants of the Lithuanian Rolniks after they dispersed across the globe. The next figure shows the data shown just previously, to which I have now added the birth year dates for the Rolnik descendants in the USA, South Africa and Germany for the first generation of emigrants. Again, this depicts persons born in each decade who survived to be recorded at some point later.

In the graph on the following page, the solid black bars include now the emigrants, while the grey-shaded are just copied from the previous figure, that is, those who remained in Lithuania. The Rolnik population, including now the emigrants, is indeed expanding exponentially, doubling every 44 years, as the upward-curving line indicates. The world's population has doubled every fifty years over the last one hundred years and our Rolniks were expanding at a comparable rate. But they had already left Lithuania, well before World War 1.

We can be pretty sure that a good proportion of our Rolniks did emigrate. In the period between the two World Wars, when Lithuania was an independent state with Kaunas as its capital, people wanting to travel between one town and another had to apply for, and carry, Internal Passports. Records of these are valuable information sources in the JewishGen database.

Only a single entry has been found for a Rolnik in this database, Aizyk Rolnik, the son of Haim, a barber aged 16, so this is 1 out of our



total Rolniks of 233 citations. In contrast, 5% of the Jewish population of Telsiai had applied for an Internal Passport, and 12.5% of the Kaunas Jews, and, to follow a name rather than a town, over 6% of the 17,304 people called Levin, and 6% of the 4,342 Goldbergs, in the JewishGen Lithuanian database. If only one Rolnik applied for an Internal Passport, in the twenty-odd years that Lithuania was an independent state, either the Rolniks were very stay-at-home people or else the reverse was true: they had emigrated and were not around to need an Internal Passport. Combined with what we learned from the population expansion data just above it would seem that, indeed, the Rolniks of Lithuania largely got up and left the country before World War 1.

Not only did they leave, but they mostly left early. The figure on page 43, taken from a fascinating paper by Leah Boustan<sup>13</sup>, shows how the immigration of Jews into the USA grew from small numbers in the early 1880's to a peak in about 1906. Most of the Rolniks that went to the USA or to South Africa arrived well before the end of the nineteenth century. In the succeeding figure, I show a similar data set for the emigrant Rolniks, taken from shipping manifests or census data, and superimpose these data on Leah Boustan's data that I showed first, that being for all the Jewish immigrants into the USA.

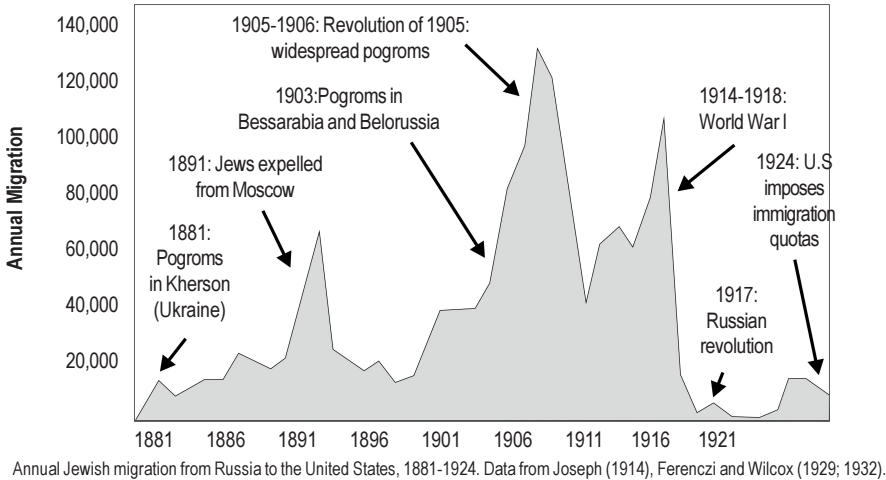
The Rolnik immigration data peak at 1892. The data for the general population peak a decade and a half later<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> "Were Jews Political Refugees or Economic Migrants? Assessing the Persecution Theory of Jewish Emigration, 1881-1914." in *The New Comparative Economic History: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey G. Williamson*, eds. Tim Hatton, Kevin O'Rourke and Alan Taylor (MIT, 2007): 267-290.

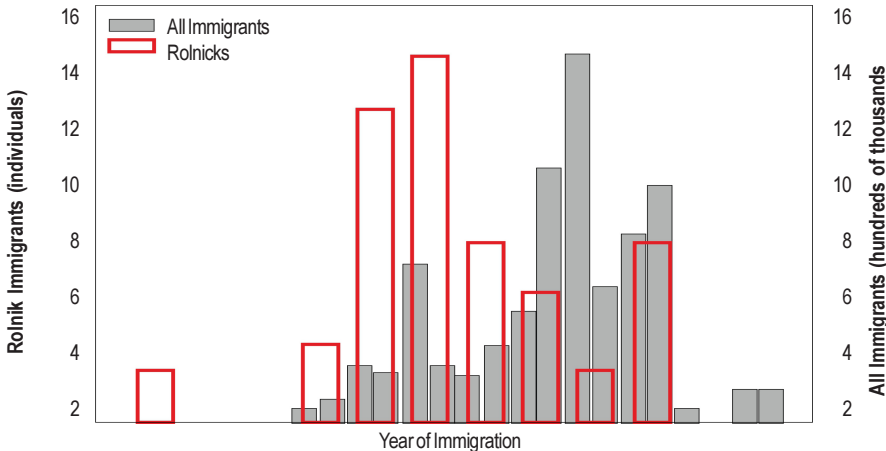
<sup>14</sup> The difference in the median year of immigration is significant at  $p < 0.001$ , using the Kaplan-Meier log rank comparison.

In her penetrating analysis of the forces that impelled the emigration of the Jews from Russia and its pre-WW2 successor states, Boustan discounts the view that a major part of this force arose from the pogroms (although the data plot that I took from Boustan's paper does show peaks just about the time of such disasters). She shows that immigration data from the non-Jewish populations that she has studied almost superimpose on those of the Jewish migration (except for the 1891 peak following the bloodless expulsion of the Jews of Moscow). Her econometric analysis explains the rise and fall of migration rates as being

### Were Jews Political or Economic Migrants?



### Comparing Immigrations of Rolnicks and All Immigrants



determined by the push of the lack of employment opportunities in Russia and the pull of the available job market in the USA. When there is a slump in the USA with heavy unemployment, as in the period between 1907 and 1911, emigration from Russia falls markedly. But these changes do not account for the major shape of the curve, an almost exponential rise from 1880 through 1907. This, she posits, arises from the pull of the already present population. The first immigrants come, eventually make a living and are then able to send for their immediate relatives, who then themselves come, accumulate funds and send these to a wider circle.

We see this exactly in the Rolniks. I have many shipping records in which a brother or sister is listed as going to stay with an established sibling, who has often paid for the boat (and train) ticket. The Rolnik emigration peaked but then fell again for the simple reason that by 1900 there were few Rolniks left in Lithuania, apart from the family in Plunge (Plongyan). Perhaps those who left early did so because they were a small closely-interacting extended family. As we saw, many were living within twenty miles of one another in the Raseiniai district. We know that some of the family kept contact with cousins and second cousins after they emigrated, and must surely have done so while they were still in Lithuania. The news that things were better in the USA would have travelled fast between the Rolniks, and the success stories of the later groups of immigrants would have added reinforcement. In contrast, the family that had not moved south from Telsiai, those living to its West in Plunge, probably was not on this network<sup>15</sup>. In addition, Chana Rolnik of Plunge was a woman of exceptional business talent and had built up a well-established store, so they had no economic need to leave. They did not leave Lithuania until they were expelled by the Russians, or escaped or else were murdered by the Nazis.

Three of the children and almost all the grandchildren of Yosel Rolnik of Upyna left for Germany, the USA (Baltimore and Chicago) and South Africa. The remaining two of Yosel's sons, the Grand Old Man Ber Rolnik and his wife Dvora (parents of half a dozen Rolniks) and their sons, Abel and Ekel, were left behind, as was Congo Joe's father Meer. A daughter and two sons of Ekel of Namoksht (Nemaksčiai) came to Chicago. Two sons of Yehuda Rolnik of Skaudvile came to Chicago, one after escaping from Vienna. Moses Rolnik, the son of Tanchum of Vainutas, came with his wife and three young children, but left behind his parents and three siblings. Abraham, Jack and Dora Rolnik from

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<sup>15</sup> However, the connections of the Plunge Rolniks with the other Rolniks did extend as far as the other descendants of Girsh Rolnik, since Riva Gulak was noted as "Distant relative" in a Holocaust Testimony recorded by Miriam Rolnik, a survivor from the Plunge Rolniks. Miriam's grandfather was Riva's cousin.

Kelme came late, just before WW1, without their parents, and leaving behind no other family for which we have records.

It is these Rolniks, as Rolnicks or Rollnicks, Jacobsons or Silbersteins (nee Rolniks) and their descendants whose history we will follow in subsequent chapters.

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*The wedding of Pesia Rolnik and Moshe Blumberg in Siauliai, Lithuania on September 17th, 1937. (See page 61).*



“One day, while lengthening my silk dresses - glad that I had grown up during the winter - my mother said that soon I'll go to my aunt's wedding. ‘Since the groom is from Riga, the wedding will be halfway between Riga and Plunge - in Siauliai. And the Hupa (Hupa - Wedding in a religious ceremony) and the wedding feast will be at the hotel’.

Aunt [Pesia] was already dressed in a white wedding dress with veil, and I wore my silk dress with a large bow on my head....Together with another boy, who seemed to be a relative, we were to carry the long train of the bride's dress...and to make sure that the train did not drag on the ground. When the young couple stood under the canopy, we were to hand her back the train for her to hold. But I, from the unusual situation or from excitement, forgot about doing so, and we went along with the bride, making all seven circles.

The newlyweds were given a glass of wine to drink and the glass itself, with shouts of "Mazel Tov!", ...was thrown down. Relatives rushed to congratulate the newlyweds. Dad [Hirsh], apparently in excitement, embraced his sister with the hand that held the candle, and nearly set fire to her veils.

I was surprised to see that round the festive table the men, wearing hats, sat separately from the women....then I was asked to sing, and then dance. Mira sat with the older persons (she always liked to consider herself an adult...)"

From: Masha Rolnikaite, *Alone with Memory* [http://lit.lib.ru/r/rolnikajite\\_m\\_g/text\\_0100.shtml](http://lit.lib.ru/r/rolnikajite_m_g/text_0100.shtml)

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Masha is the young girl with the white bow. To her right her cousin Mordecai, and on his right, Masha's sister Miriam. Pesia's father (Itcik-Abel Rolnik) and her uncle (Govshei Sher) are the bearded gentlemen, fourth and fifth from the left, on the opposite side of the table.