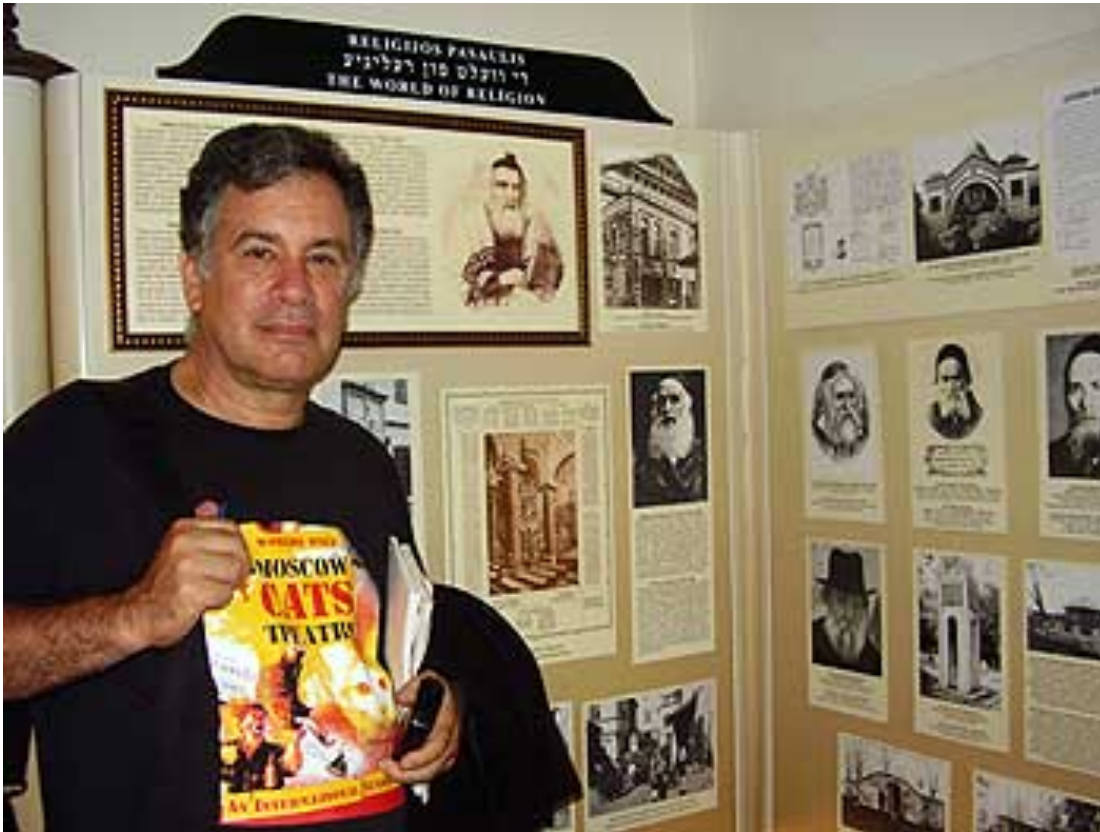


A Few Things Are Illuminated: A Wild and Crazy Roots Trip to the Old Country

Walter Ruby
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Walter Ruby with lineup of great Lithuanian rabbis in Jewish Museum in Vilnius (formerly Vilna). Rabbi Spektor is pictured in the panel opposite Ruby in the middle. (Photo courtesy of Walter Ruby)

My journey into my family's tangled roots began with the resolution of a mystery that was locked in the New York Municipal Archives for 65 years—that my grandfather, Walter Ruby, committed suicide in 1939 instead of dying of a heart attack as my father always believed.

Later, I learned that my great-great-great grandfather was none other than Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor (1817–1896), the most prominent rabbi in the Russian Empire during his heyday and a symbol of a kind of unabashed fealty to *yiddishkeit* (Judaism or "Jewishness") that has

both inspired and repelled his American Jewish descendants during the century since his death.

Somewhere between these two discoveries, genealogical research became an obsession for me as it has for many of my fellow baby boomers. My roots journey has provided me with startling insights into the psychological makeup of family members who died many decades before my birth as well as fascinating new perspectives on my own character and inner struggles. Yet I also found my family's back pages to be representative of the wider sweep of Jewish life in the 19th and 20th centuries, revealing classic intergenerational conflicts over Jewish observance and assimilation, as well as German Jewish–Russian Jewish animosities that have played out in thousands of Jewish families who made their way from the Old World to the New.

I began researching my family history together with my brother Dan and sister Joanne in order to write a modest account of the lives of our beloved parents, Stanley and Helga Ruby, shortly after they passed away in October 2004 and April 2005, respectively. Soon, however, I found myself embarked on a captivating and often profoundly spiritual journey that led from the musty downtown Manhattan archives to the more user-friendly Gottesman Library at Yeshiva University, home of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, named in my ancestor's honor.

Finally, this summer I headed back to the former Soviet Union, the homeland of both branches of my father's family. Together with my fiancé Tatyana, I traveled on steamy trains and buses from the raucous river town of Rostov-on-Don in southern Russia to Belarus, the neo-Soviet throwback nation where my own family and much of American Jewry originated, and on to the beautiful but haunted cities of Vilnius (formerly Vilna) and Kaunas (formerly Kovno) in Lithuania, where Rabbi Spektor once held spiritual sway.

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Walter Ruby (left) and his fiancé Tatyana Rapaport (right) with Asia Gutterman (center), their guide in Kaunas. (Photo courtesy of Walter

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The odyssey really got started with the revelation of the suicide of my grandfather and namesake, Walter Ruby (1893–1949), a dynamic and charismatic self-made businessman who rose from poverty in East Harlem to grand success in the liquor business in the wake of the repeal of Prohibition (as my father used to say, the family didn't ask too many questions about how he made his money before 1933). At his height, Walter Ruby had a plush office in the newly opened Rockefeller Center, and according to family lore, invented the rum and coke, introducing the drink to the American market with a publicity stunt involving the release of a flock of parrots over Times Square.

Yet Walter Ruby suffered serious business reverses in his last two years before being found dead in his office in July 1939 just before my father Stanley's 15th birthday. There were rumors in the family at that time that he might have killed himself, but my father always believed what his mother told him—that Walter had suffered a massive heart attack. So it was with shaking hands that, a year or so after my father's death, I went to the Municipal Archives and requested my grandfather's death records. The certificate was produced and listed as the cause of death "acute corrosive gastritis, pending chemical examination." Attached to that form was another—a Medical Examiners' Supplementary Report issued a few days later listing the "means of injury" as "cyanide poisoning."

No one who is alive today has a clear idea why such a magnetic and highly successful individual would have taken his own life. The most plausible theory may be that Walter Ruby was unable to cope

emotionally with his professional setbacks, that his self-image as a benefactor who generously supported family and friends less fortunate than he was, could not tolerate the reality that he had been reduced to more humble circumstances. And what does this revelation about an identically named grandfather I never met mean to me so many years after the fact? I'm still wrestling with that one.

The revelation of my grandfather's suicide was only the first of a number of revelations that shook me as I proceeded with my roots search. Another "Alex Haley" moment came shortly before Tanya and I left on our trip, as I sat in the Gottesman Library perusing an obscure 1961 biography of Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor, known as the Gaon of Kovno. Spektor was both a brilliant *decisor* of *halacha* (interpreter of Jewish law) and a politically astute community leader who negotiated with high officials of the Czarist regime on behalf of beleaguered Russian Jewry amid government-sponsored pogroms during the 1880's, even as he simultaneously sent coded messages to Jewish leaders in Western Europe asking them to orchestrate international pressure to get the Czar to cease and desist.

As a child, I often heard from my father that we were descended from a mysterious figure he called "the Kovno Rav." Yet as my siblings and I put the family history together, we realized we did not understand exactly how Spektor was related to my great-grandfather, Joseph



Ohel of Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor and his son Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Rabinowitz in Kaunas. (Photo courtesy of Walter Ruby)



Messages left by devout visitors on the graves of Rabbi Spektor and his son in their *ohel* in Kaunas appealing to them for divine intervention. (Photo courtesy of Walter Ruby)

Rabinowitz (Walter Ruby's father), who emigrated to New York in 1875. Suddenly, in the book on Rabbi Spektor, written by a New York rabbi named Efraim Shimoff, I found a short passage explaining that after the death of Spektor's oldest son, Rabbi Chaim Rabinovich (1834–1874), the Gaon of Kovno "took care of his grandson, Joseph Rabinowitz, studying with him until he became proficient in Talmud and Jewish Codes." Eureka! Not only did that passage establish that Joseph Rabinowitz (the Americanized version of Rabinovich), was the grandson of Spektor, it also made me the Kovno Gaon's great-great-great grandson.

The text also provided context to a conflict my father had often spoken about between the deeply pious Rabinowitz and his youngest son, Walter Ruby, who not only shortened his family name from Rabinowitz to Ruby but also took pleasure in eating lobster and celebrating Christmas. Walter Ruby used to say that his father, Joseph, who spent his days learning Talmud while his wife, Lena, struggled to run a corner grocery store in East Harlem and raise nine children, was good for only one thing—getting Lena pregnant every year. Now I understood that Joseph must have been powerfully impacted by the experience of studying with his *tzaddik*-like (righteous, as in a spiritual master) grandfather just before his emigration, and therefore devoted his life to an Old World tradition of lifelong Judaic learning that his



View over Kaunas (formerly Kovno), Lithuania. (Photo courtesy of Walter Ruby)
<https://www.worldpress.org/Europe/3049.cfm>

Americanized son found a betrayal of his father's core responsibility to adequately support his family.

Another moment of revelation awaited me in Rostov-on-Don, where in the 1870's and 1880's, Shalom-Aron and Sophie Tulbowitz, my great-great grandparents on the other side of my father's family, are said to have run a tavern. In Rostov, Yevgeni Gimodudinov, the first-rate genealogist employed by the city's revitalized Jewish community, unearthed two documents recording the birth of a son, Gavriel, to the Tulbowitzes in 1878 and the death of their 3-year-old son Isaac the following year. The document referred to the family as *mecshane* (a social rank that can be translated as townspeople) of Rechitsa, a small town in what is today southeastern Belarus, about 500 miles from Rostov.

Not only did that attribution solve the mystery as to where the family had lived before moving to Rostov, it also offered a plausible motive for their decision to leave for America in the early 1890's. Gimodudinov informed us that in 1887, the Russian government announced the creation of a new military province of the Don, to be under the control of the virulently anti-Semitic Don Cossacks. At first, it appeared likely that all Jews would be forced to leave Rostov as a result of this edict, but in 1891, the government, leery of destroying Rostov's economic vitality, announced that Jews registered as residents of Rostov would be allowed to stay. Yet while the Tulbowitzes had been in the city for at least 15 years, they were likely still listed as being residents of Rechitsa. Also, according to family lore, the Tulbowitzes' daughter Rose (1874–1949) was kidnapped by Cossacks as a small child and had to be ransomed. So it seems probable that the ascendancy of the Cossacks would have led the Tulbowitzes to regretfully pull up roots, with the entire family moving to Albany, New York.

I now knew that both sides of my father's family hailed from Belarus, as Rabbi Spektor was born and grew to prominence in tiny *shtetlach* (Jewish towns) that are today located near the border of Belarus and Poland. Tanya and I spent a day traveling through those towns and villages, a penultimate Chagall dreamscape with goats, cows, and storks on roofs. Only the Jews, massacred by the Nazis almost to a person, were missing. In overgrown Jewish cemeteries in small market towns like Rabbi Spektor's birthplace of Ros, only a few



The ruined house of Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor in Kaunas. (Photo courtesy of Walter Ruby)

forlorn stones stuck out of the rich black earth amid high grass and thorn bushes, as a disappearing testament to a lost civilization.

As soon as we arrived in Vilnius, a ravishingly beautiful city similarly haunted with still-vivid memories of the killing of nearly all of the 100,000 Jews who lived here by the Nazis, our guide, Regina Kopilevich, informed us that a visitor from Montreal named Eli Wohlgemuth wanted to meet me. It turned out that Eli's great-great grandfather, Rabbi Yishai Wohlgemuth of Memel, (then the easternmost city in the German Empire and today the Lithuanian city of Klaipeda) had been a good friend of my ancestor, Rabbi Spektor of nearby Kovno. That was extraordinary enough, but I was more excited because the maiden name of my grandmother on my mother's side, Elli Ringel, a German Jew raised in the East Prussian city of Konigsberg (today the Russian city of Kaliningrad, a short distance from Memel), also happened to be Wohlgemuth.

After we compared notes, Eli, a world-class expert on the extended Wohlgemuth clan, expressed the belief that my great-grandfather, Julius Wohlgemuth, who was in the moving business in East Prussia, was likely closely related to *his* Rabbi Wohlgemuth. Eli also told me

that all of the East Prussian Wohlgemuths were descended from family members who left Belarus for the German Baltic coast during in the first two decades of the 19th Century.

My grandmother, Elli Ringel (1900–1981), who fled the Nazis from Berlin to America with my mother, Helga, was a charming woman with a wry sense of humor, but one of her less edifying qualities was a German Jewish aversion to *Ostjuden*, (i.e., Russian Jews). This was a prejudice about which she remained outspoken all her life, although she deigned to make an exception when my mother married my Russian-descended father. Yet, here was an exquisite irony; if Eli from Montreal was correct, the snobby "more German than the Germans" East Prussian Wohlgemuths were really *Ostjuden* themselves! All of my life I have blamed my myriad neuroses on the conflict bubbling within myself between my Prussian and Russian sides; between the repressed and authority-fearing side of my personality and the exuberant, romantic and rebellious side on the other. Now it appeared that I might have saved myself thousands of dollars in therapy costs, since the über-yekke (super German Jewish) Wohlgemuths turned out to be nothing more than self-hating *Ostjuden*.

The last strange thing to happen on the trip was that I somehow managed to get mugged in the center of Kaunas while viewing buildings associated with the life of Rabbi Spektor. It was an event so rare in Lithuania's normally somnolent second city that it made page 5 of the country's main daily newspaper. As our guide showed us a building that once housed an orphanage named in the great rabbi's honor, a middle-aged man collared me, wrestled my camera from my neck, and ran off. I gave chase and some local youths, hearing my cries, caught the robber and held him until the police arrived. They handed me back the camera, but somehow the memory chip had disappeared, and with it, all of the photos of our trip. Then two cops showed up and removed a loaded pistol from the assailant's jacket. Apparently, he had shouted, "I will shoot," in Lithuanian when he accosted me, but since I hadn't understood him, I foolishly gave chase.

Given that I was the first American in memory to be mugged in Lithuania on a Jewish roots trip, some local people semi-seriously suggested it might have been a supernatural occurrence. Perhaps the ghost of Rabbi Spektor was displeased that his descendant traveled by



Walter Ruby with Faina Bramtsovskaya, an 85-year-old survivor of the Vilna Ghetto who escaped to the forest to join Jewish partisans fighting the Nazis. (Photo courtesy of Walter Ruby)

bus from Vilnius to Kaunas on a Shabbat (Sabbath day; Saturday) with the intention of snapping photos of his *ohel* (mausoleum) in the Kaunas Jewish cemetery. Perhaps he therefore arranged for a mugger to steal my camera as a kind of warning to change my non-observant ways, but mercifully, arranged things so that my life would be spared.

I don't buy that theory because I learned from my readings at the Gottesman Library that Rabbi Spektor was a kindly man with a relatively tolerant approach to those who had slipped away from tradition. So perhaps my attacker was simply was one of those *dybbuks* (evil spirits) who were said to have haunted these parts a few centuries ago. Or perhaps he was just a timely reminder that there is plenty of *tohu v vohu* (chaos) in the natural order of things, and no rational explanation suffices for an inexplicable happening.

Whatever. Despite the mugging, I returned home from my sojourn among my ancestors with a deep sense of fulfillment. I hadn't found answers to some of the questions I had come with, but I learned other things that added incomparably to my understanding of those who came before me. I have to acknowledge that the whole Jewish roots thing has become a kind of narcotic for me, but as someone who has sampled less edifying substances in my lifetime, I can testify that roots research is the most uplifting addiction I've yet succumbed to. □

SIDEBAR

For people who have long been inclined to make a trip to the former Soviet Union to search for their roots, but have hesitated because of fears that they may not be able to reach the towns and *shtetlach* of their ancestors or find the relevant archival documents, the time to go is now.

Unlike in years past, it is now possible to travel freely pretty much anywhere in the former Soviet republics that, together with Poland, constituted the Pale of Settlement that was home to most of European Jewry a century ago—Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Lithuania and parts of Russia. There is a superb network of historians, tour guides, genealogists, and archivists with extensive knowledge concerning Jewish life in their communities in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of these people can be engaged for quite reasonable prices, usually in the range of \$100-\$200 a day.

If you decide to make the trip, do as much advance research as possible. It is possible to find out a great deal about Jewish communities in all parts of the Pale on superb Internet sites like [JewishGen](#), where members can join S.I.G.'s (special interest groups) of people descended from the same town or region their own ancestors come from. The Web site of Miriam Weiner's [Routes to Roots Foundation](#) is also excellent.

In my opinion, the best New York-based travel agency for roots travel to the former Soviet Union is [Cinderella Travel](#). The agency, which has offices in Manhattan and Queens, is composed almost exclusively of Russian-born travel agents who know intimately the special challenges and rewards of travel to the former Soviet Union. I flew Aerosvit, the Ukrainian airline, to Kiev, taking advantage of competitive rates and a centralized location adjacent to all the far-flung places I would be visiting.

Prices around the former Soviet Union are rapidly reaching Western levels, and, in the case of Moscow, wildly exceeding them. Prices at restaurants in cities like Kiev, Rostov, Minsk, or Vilnius still tend to be

cheaper than their counterparts in New York, but an acceptable hotel in such places runs in the range of \$125-\$175 a night.

In order to find the best archivists and genealogists available in a certain town or region, it is best to contact the local Jewish community in advance. In Rostov, I contacted Rabbi Chaim Friedman, the Chabad-linked spiritual leader of Rostov Jewry, who not only put me into contact with archivist Yevgeni Gimodudinov but made sure Tanya and I had the chance to participate fully in the life of the community. A well-preserved 19th century city of over one million that serves as the unofficial capital of Russia's south, Rostov is booming these days with plenty of new construction, emblematic of a prosperity that has now spread from Moscow to major regional centers.

Playing an equally indispensable role in Belarus was Yuri Dorn, president of the Union of Religious Jewish Communities of Belarus. Yuri not only connected me with the relevant archivists and arranged our guided tour to the western part of the country, but answered my concerns about travel in Belarus, a country with a dicey reputation in the United States. While very far from a democracy, Belarus, a curious throwback to Soviet times, appeared to me during a very short visit to have avoided some extremes of wealth and poverty existing in Russia and Ukraine. At least for now, Jewish life in Belarus appears to be functioning relatively unhindered by dictator Alexander Lukashenka.

In neighboring Lithuania, which, in sharp contrast to Belarus, has joined the European Union and is trying to distance itself as much as possible from the country's former Russian overlords, we had two wonderful guides; Regina Kopilevich in the capital city of Vilnius and Asia Gutterman in Kaunas, the home base of Rabbi Spektor. These women shared with me all available information on the life of the great rabbi and his family and gave expression to a palpable passion for their beautiful cities.

In short, if you do your homework in advance and hire quality archivists and guides, it is possible to have a fascinating and deeply meaningful experience on a Jewish roots trip to the former Soviet Union. I cannot recommend the experience highly enough.