



CHOL: Community History On-Line: Newsletter #29: August 2026

Written by Barry Mann – Pioneer in Community Web Presence, who made sites for towns in Lithuania from 1999, and Witbank in 2002 and 2007



My name is Barry Mann, I was born in South Africa in 1945. I grew up in Witbank, Transvaal. I moved to the United States in 1971.

I became interested in genealogy in 1997 when I discovered a second cousin who survived the Second World War, who still lived in Kaunas Lithuania. I visited him many times. I have been to Lithuania at least 12 times in my life and have spent a total of more than one and a half years there. I joined JewishGen, the Jewish Genealogical Society.

My current wife is Lithuanian. We have both been married before and she still has an apartment in Kaunas Lithuania. We know two very prominent archivists in Lithuania very well. Galina Baranova of the Lithuania Historical Archive in Vilnius, now retired and Vitalija Gircyte of the Kaunas Regional State Archives (KRA) in Lithuania. The majority of South African Jews are from Lithuania. These past 25 years or so, we have helped many, many South African Jews with their Lithuanian family tree research.

JewishGen had a project of 'Kehilalinks', documenting a community on the internet. JewishGen facilitated web pages commemorating the places where Jews have lived. This provided the opportunity for anyone with an interest in a place to create web pages about that community. Formerly called 'ShtetLinks' these sites were first about shtetlach in Eastern Europe that had once flourished and were decimated during the Shoah.

A site for my father's birthplace Zeimelis

As I had done a lot of research on for my father's hometown of Zeimelis in Lithuania. I was interested in making a web presence. Fortunately, I had some know-how, During the 1960s, for a year or two, I was a computer programmer for IBM in Johannesburg.

I started creating my first community website in 1999. I used these four web page languages. **JavaScript**, invented by Brendan Eich at Netscape, **HTML**, **Microsoft FrontPage** and **ExpressionWeb**.

When I started, JewishGen and other web hosting companies had to restrict image resolution sizes and website capacity. Internet speed was very slow. Bigger images took a long, long time to

download. There were no online databases. Researchers had to use and pay for data that was shipped to them on magnetic floppy disks. Over the time I was involved, removable computer storage evolved from 3.5-inch magnetic floppy disks to optical CDs and later thumb-nail sized flash drives.

My first Kehilalinks website for Zeimelis Jewish Community began in 1999. It opens with a picture of a large crowd in the village square in 1928, probably on February 16th celebrating the day of Lithuanian independence in 1918.



The site contains maps of the area and the history of the community as well as lists of births, Hebrew school students, of taxpayers, citizens and also mass murder victims of August 1941.

There is an extensive section on the Jewish cemetery. From August 14th, 1999, my guide Regina Kopilevich from Vilnius, her helper and I, spent four days in Zeimelis. We documented all the tombstones. Regina is very good at reading Hebrew inscriptions on tombstones. We used shaving cream and charcoal to enhance the letters on some of the 249 tombstones. Regina also read some of the letters, by feel, with her fingers, like someone reading Braille. 121 stones were sadly unreadable, because the inscriptions were too faint or had disappeared due to extreme weathering. I took photographs of most of the tombstones that Regina could read. Click to see it [HERE](#).

My second web directory was also about the **Zeimelis** Jewish Community and hosted by Kehilalinks. It started in 2005, when technology had improved slightly. Most of the content of this website was provided by my colleague and fellow researcher Anatolij Chayesh. Our goal for this Zeimelis 2 website was to display articles, lists, documents and photos, mostly from Anatolij's research. Since Anatolij's native language is Russian, this web site hosts many of his original works in Russian. [HERE](#).



My third site about the Zeimelis

Jewish Community, was begun in 2007. Learning how to create web pages took time. Because JewishGen restricted image resolution sizes and website sizes. I started paying for and using a private website hosting service to host most of my websites, besides JewishGen. After a few years, my private website hosting service also placed a limit on the size of my website, so I started using a second private website hosting service. This more modern site

provided me with virtually unlimited hosting space and data transfer. Hence, I have three Zeimelis, sites. Now I have most of them hosted and merged on one company's server. You can see the third site [HERE](#).

I stated my goals for my websites like this:

Today is 10 June 2007. It has been ten years since I began researching my own family's genealogy and the Jewish communities of various towns. I have accumulated a lot of information these past ten years, most of which is already displayed on the internet on my web directories. I still have more than ten gigabytes of information which I would like to make available on the internet. The information I have is in the form of texts, lists, tables and images of documents and photos. Different languages that you will find on this web site include English, Hebrew, Lithuanian, Russian and Yiddish.

Most of the information will be displayed in the form of images of either documents or photos. Images will be displayed in separate folders in the form of thumbnails and slides. You will be able to browse through all the images in any folder like a slide show at your own pace and download any image in its original full resolution. I will include a description of the contents of each image folder.

My fourth internet directory, was also about the Jewish Community in a shtetl in Lithuania, **Lygumai** (Ligum). It was also hosted by Kehilalinks. I started this one also in 2002 working together with Yosif Rosin. Ligum is situated in the north-central part of Lithuania, on the left bank of the river Kruoja, about 27 km north-east of the district centre Shavel (Siauliai)

The first Jews settled in Ligum during the 18th century. Until the beginning of the 19th century there were more Jews in Ligum than in Shavel, and the Ligum Jewish cemetery served Shavel Jews as well. Ligum Jews made their living from small trade, crafts and peddling. After several decades, they became the majority in the town. At the beginning of the 19th century Ligum had several Jewish Institutions such as a Beth-Midrash (a prayer and teaching hall), and a *Kheder* for teaching younger children. In 1876 a big fire occurred in Ligum which burnt down 60 Jewish houses. In 1887 another big fire burnt down 64 Jewish houses, including the *Beth-Midrash* and the Synagogue.



Square in Lygumai (Taken 1997)

In the years before WW1 many of Ligum's Jews immigrated to America, England and South Africa and at the start of WW1 only 60 families remained. During the summer of 1915 all Ligum's Jews were expelled to the inner regions of Russia. After the war only 50 families returned to Ligum.

My fifth website: I had so much more material that I wanted to commit to the internet. I called this one 'Other Lithuanian towns'. On this site you will find nearly 500 photos from the South African Jewish Board of Deputies Archive's Lithuanian section, as well as records for Kaunas Jewish Cemetery from 1965 - 2006.

Two Witbank Jewish Community directories

At the same time as I was developing my Eastern European sites, I remembered with joy growing up Witbank, a once thriving community that was very much on the decline at the turn of the 21st century. I missed South Africa.



I first met Rabbi Silberhaft the minister for South African small Jewish communities at that time. He encouraged my endeavours. During the summer of 2002, I spent seven weeks researching for Witbank data in the archives at Beyachad Community Centre, Raedene, Johannesburg.

In August 2002, I started to make a web directory for the Witbank Jewish Community. I had collected a great deal of documents and information that I listed clearly on a site. This kept me busy for many months and years. There was so much material that I started a new Witbank directory site in 2007. This more modern site provided me with virtually unlimited hosting space and data transfer.

It was a real joy to me to re-live my memories of Witbank and to communicate with so many ex Witbankers. I advertised my Witbank site on JewishGen, SA-SIG, Litvak.Sig and by emailing the ex Witbankers that I had found. I was able to assemble a few hundred email addresses. Initially there was a very good response to my directories. People were very pleased that their history had been documented. For instance, Tony Shill wrote on my visitors' book:

I still have a lump in my throat - those were amazing times and seem so distant now, Thank you Barry for creating this – it is an incredible act of kindness that will take people back to a time when our world was truly so different. I will try to dig thru my "stuff" and see if I have anything to contribute. Alles van die Beste.



Here I am on the left with Witbankers, Charles Bernitz, Ruth Bernitz (Blum), David Blum, Rachel Simon (Barron), Jeffrey Mann (photo taken in London in 2003)

I also created a Witbank Jewish Community Facebook page. Witbank Jewish Community Facebook group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/witbank/>

I wanted it to be a sharing and news forum for current and former members of the Witbank Jewish Community. I envisioned it as a place to share news, find old contacts, share nostalgia and generally re-connect with the widely dispersed community via the Internet. Here members could add and share text comments, photos and video. But sadly, these days, people seldom visit or post there. Only a few ex Witbankers respond even to my annual greetings for Pesach, Jewish New Year and Hanukkah. The Facebook page now is mainly about condolences and wishing families a long life, as the older generation passes away.

It's over twenty years since I started with Witbank. Many members on my mailing list are no longer with us. But the memories and the pictures will I hope always be there, recorded on my Witbank web directories.

Go to the new Witbank site on <https://chol.website/communities.htm> to see what I have documented for Witbank on the CHOL website www.chol.website

You can write to me with any additions or amendments at mannbarry@gmail.com

And you can visit all my full web directory sites at www.barrymann.net/index.html

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**CHOL – Community History On-Line** is a forum set up in 2020, under the auspices of the Kaplan Centre at UCT and the South African Jewish Museum – bringing together all those working on / or interested in creating an online presence relating to the **History of Jewish Communities in Southern Africa**. see [www.chol.website](http://www.chol.website) contact [info@chol.website](mailto:info@chol.website).

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Check out: www.chol.website which now has on it:

- 62 [Communities](#)
- 67 [Memoirs](#)
- 197 original [Stories](#)
- 48 Videos of [Presentations](#)
- 29 [Newsletters](#)

Feel free to browse also the **resources** and **journal articles** on the CHOL website

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