

A Duet by Glenda Levitt

Some years ago, Abel and I were spending a week-end in Lithuania to attend a meeting. We stayed in a pleasant little hotel on the outskirts of the town of Plungyan.



Lithuania with Plungyan in red

On Friday, the first morning of our arrival, we sat down to breakfast in the dining room, empty except for one other couple. After a few moments, we realized that they were speaking English. Abel gave them a friendly good morning wave and they beckoned us over to join them for coffee. We were curious to know why there was another English-speaking couple in a town not well known for attracting tourists. He introduced himself as Ywo (pronounced Ivor) Zaluski and his wife, Lorna.

He asked if we had heard of the Oginski Palace. We told him that we were very aware of it and of the rich Oginski legacy in Plunge. We knew of the Oginski passion for music and that a member of the family had established a school of music in Plunge in the early 1900's. This highly regarded School of Music still exists today.

Ywo explained that he was a direct descendant of the original Polish Oginski and that one of his ancestors had bought the land in Plunge in the 1830's to build what we now know as the Oginski Palace. He told us that he had written a book called "The Oginski Gene". Although he could not find an interested publisher in England, to his surprise and delight, he was approached by publishers from Poland, Belarus and Lithuania to get permission to translate and then publish his book in the three countries.

The launching of the book in Lithuanian was taking place that Saturday evening at the Oginski Palace. He had travelled some years before to Poland to do research and had not only found descendants and a great deal of family history but he also found music composed by his great, great, great, great, great grandfather and beautiful works composed by that ancestor's daughter. Ywo, who is a pianist and a music teacher by profession, had produced a CD of him playing his family's compositions.

He asked what we were doing in Plunge and we explained our connection and that we were being fetched by Eugenijus, the son of Yaakov Bunka, to go and visit the mass graves in the forest and then to go to meet with our dear friend Yaakov or Yossel, the renowned folk artist.



The Kausenai forest

Ywo showed interest and we invited them to join us. He and Lorna readily accepted.

We mentioned that after a fire had damaged much of the town, an Oginski gave money to rebuild the

Synagogue that had been destroyed. He also gave the Jews a piece of land as a gift in order to build new homes. It is documented that when the Lithuanian government imposed heavy taxes on Jewish traders, making it almost impossible to earn a living, the count erected a support wall in the market place as a gift to the Jews. The support wall served as a backing to the booths and shops in the market place for the Jews to be able to conduct their business.

Ywo was fascinated as he had never heard of these stories. He described how in 1939 when he was an infant, his parents, very unhappy with the rise of Hitler, had fled Poland to live in England. He told us that there is a family story handed down from generation to generation that sometime in the past the Oginski family had received a rabbinical blessing. He knew nothing more but was immensely proud of that fact.

We arrived at the forest and Ywo found the experience emotionally overwhelming. He barely spoke as we passed the mass graves one after another, guarded by the extraordinary giant wooden sculptures, the work of Yossel and his friends. At the small memorial Abel lit a yahrzeit candle and I offered my candle to Ywo. He wordlessly accepted. Lit the candle, placed it at the foot of the memorial and then he lent against a tree and wept.



Glenda and Ywo with their shared candle

Later, driving back, Ywo said that this had been one of the most moving experiences of his life and that it had made a powerful impact on him as a person. He had always been aware that of the 3 connections with his past. The Polish, the Belarus and the Lithuanian but today he discovered a 4th dimension to who he is, his connection to the Jews.

After a delightful evening at the Oginski Palace at the ceremony to launch his book, Abel and I returned to the hotel for supper. A short while later Ywo and Lorna arrived and joined us. He remarked that we had each come to Plunge to honour the memory of our ancestors, but the Kausenai forest underlined painfully the terrible difference between the fate of his family and ours. We spent a last, warm and wonderful evening, enjoying each other's company, yet deeply aware of the vastly different backgrounds from which we had come and the strange connection that had woven a bond between us.



Oginski Palace

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I wrote " the Duet " during Covid. Soon after we, in Israel were warned about the Corona virus we were phoned and told to be in isolation for 2 weeks as we had been shopping in a supermarket where people had been diagnosed with the virus. I found the quiet and privacy an encouraging time to record the memorable events that we had experienced over many years. I have continued to write as I find tranquility in capturing memories and expressing myself with words on paper. I think the actual meeting with Ywo and Lorna took place about 14 or 15 years ago.

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