

1901

1961

KRAKENOWO

OUR TOWN IN LITHUANIA

THE STORY OF A WORLD THAT HAS PASSED

Reminiscences collected to celebrate the
Diamond Jubilee of the Krakenowo
Sick Benefit and Benevolent Society



אנשי אחי עזר ד'קר קינאווע

KRAKENOWO

OUR TOWN IN LITHUANIA

THE STORY OF A WORLD THAT HAS PASSED

First Published in 1961

by the Krakenowo Sick Benefit and Benevolent Society
to celebrate their Diamond Jubilee.

Reprinted 2017

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Title: Krakenowo the story of a world that has passed
originally compiled by the Krakenowo Sick Benefit and Benevolent Society in Johannesburg in
1961.(NB In English and Yiddish) ;
booklet now all translated into English and reprinted in English;
new booklet compiled by David Solly Sandler ;
articles translated into English by Bella Golubchik.

ISBN: 9780994619242 (paperback)

Subjects: Krakenowo Sick Benefit and Benevolent Society.
Jews--Lithuania--Krekenava--History.
Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)--Lithuania--Krekenava.
Jews--South Africa--History
South Africa--Emigration and immigration.

Other Creators/Contributors:
Sandler, David Solly, compiler
Golubchik, Bella, translator.
Krakenowo Sick Benefit and Benevolent Society, author.

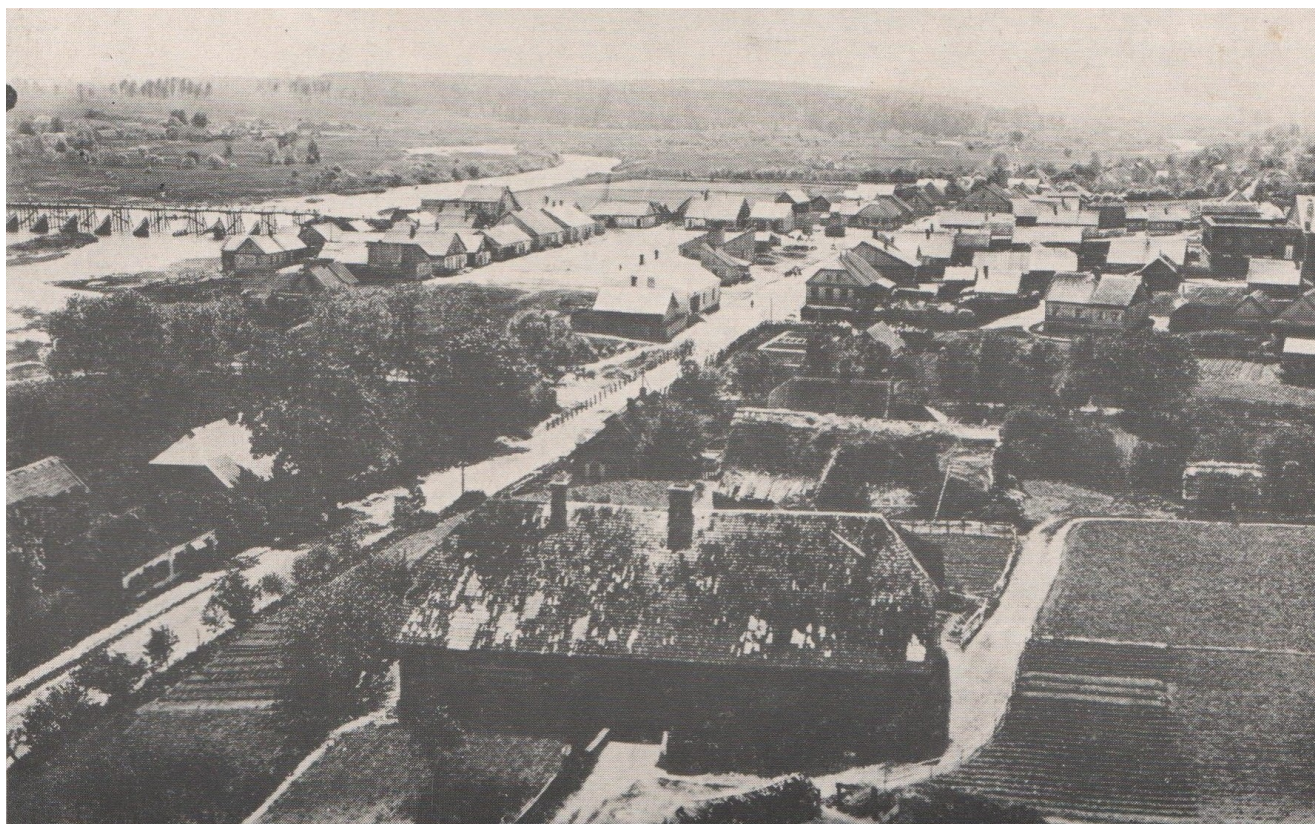
Photo on Cover: Krakenowo as it looked before World War One

Contact for book
David Solly Sandler <sedsand@iinet.net.au>

CONTENTS

		Page	Original Page
Foreword		4	3
The Krakenowo I Remember	Joseph Milne	5	7
Memories of Krakenowo – as my mother told me-	Dora Leah Sowden	11	13
The Clubhouse (1)	Lazar Grazutis	14	16
Krakenowo, 1914-1919	I.B. Stein	16	17
Program for 1961 Diamond Jubilee Celebration		21	21
Tish'a Be"Av 1914 (a letter) (1)	Joe Resnick	22	22
I Married a Krakenowo	Anita Milne	23	23
My Shtetl : Krakenowo (1)	Y Gell	26	26
A few words about my Shtetl (1)	A Shaban	28	27
1920 to 1930 – The Beginning of the End	Percy Zelikow	29	29
In Memoriam		32	32
Details about the massacre of the Krakenowo Jewish Community (1)	Motel Pogur – Rhodesia	33	33
A day in Krakenowo after the Second World War (1)	Ida Pogur	35	35
History of the Society		37	37

Note (1) Article was previously in Yiddish and is now translated into English by Bella Golubchik



Krakenowo - a general view of the town before World War II

FOREWORD

On the occasion of its Diamond Jubilee, the Krakenowo Society felt that it would be appropriate to have a record on paper of available information and knowledge of our forlorn old town, and if possible, one which would trace its story.

It was quite surprising how many people had photographs, information and other material referring to the community in the little Lithuanian town.

Some of these are first hand memories. Others are recollections gathered from relatives and friends. All together make a picture which is perhaps unique and is certainly valuable as a personal memento and as a historical record.

The Jewish community of Krakenowo was massacred by the Nazis. By September 1941, there were no Jews left in the town. One or two who escaped are still living in Lithuania but not in Krakenowo, one such family of survivors are settled in Rhodesia. Even the appearance of the place has changed radically.

The townspeople of Krakenowo are spread all over the world. Many of them live in South Africa, where "pioneers" and their descendants number about 400 today.

The U.S.A. has a Krakenowo society similar to ours here. There are some Jews from Krakenowo also in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, England, Israel, Rhodesia and Cuba.

Many of the Jews of Krakenowo have become distinguished in commerce, industry, mining and culture in various parts of the world.

The reminiscences in this brochure are therefore the only record, perhaps the last possible record of Jewish life in this typical East European town.

It was no easy matter to get together this material and to try and assemble a souvenir worthy of the long and commendable working not only of a society but of a community. I know you will appreciate the difficult task encountered in the compilation of the valuable material contained in this Brochure, and I therefore ask you to accept in good spirit any expressions or statements with which you may not agree, omissions, or errors in the spelling of names and places.

On behalf of the society, I should like to thank all the contributors of articles and photographs, and all those others who have helped financially to make this celebration a success.

Special thanks must go to the advertisers without whose assistance this publication would not have been possible.

My cordial gratitude goes also to Mrs. Dora Sowden for her help in proofreading the articles.

Sydney Seeff Hon. Treasurer 1961

THE KRAKENOWO I REMEMBER *by Joseph Milne*

I was born in Krakenowo, and so was my mother, and my grandfather and his grandfather before him. Krakenowo was a village within the county of Ponevez, which in its turn was in the province of Kovno, known as Kovner Guberne. All I write about and remember occurred between the years 1900-1913, but my grandfather told me that nothing had changed for hundreds of years.

As a youngster, I regarded Krakenowo as a country on its own – to me Krakenowo was not a village at all, as we were a community who managed our affairs very well indeed. I imagined that, when the road left Krakenowo, it had reached the end of the horizon. We had no train, and, indeed, many Krakenowians had never seen a train; in fact, we did not require a train at all.

The village revolved around our revered Rabbi, who was then Rabbi Chaskin. Our Beth Hamedrash and our Shul were the largest and most beautiful buildings in the village, and we also had a smaller Shul called the Klauz. Of course we had a Chazan and two Shammosim, as well as a Kazonner Rov, which meant that he had been appointed by the Government as being responsible for the Congregation, and had to report whether the services held in the Synagogue were carried on in such a manner as not to be detrimental in any way to the policies of the Government. Our Scribe, known as Reb Hirschel, the Sefer, was well-known throughout Lithuania, and even as far afield as the large cities of Russia. I actually saw Reb Hirschel, the Sefer, preparing the parchment for the Sifrei Torahs, and I also saw him writing the Torahs. His handwriting was very beautiful indeed, and his Torahs were famed and in great demand. There are a few Torahs inscribed by him in South Africa, and one I know of is in the Sydenham-Highlands North Synagogue, donated by Krakenowo Landsleit. Then we had a Mohel, Abraham Lazar, who had also been appointed by the Government as Registrar of Births and Deaths, to issue passports and to keep a record of men eligible for military service. In our village, there was a Schochet to slaughter our cattle and poultry in the ritual manner, but apart from these duties, he assisted in the teaching of the poorer children at the Talmud Torah.

The Russian Government maintained a Police Station in the village, with an officer in charge, whose title was "The Pristav", and any matter which required higher authority than his was referred to Ponevez, from where he received his orders. Serving

under the Pristav were two ranks of Police, namely Zandar (a mounted policeman to patrol the neighbourhood) and of equal rank a Uradnik (a corporal to patrol the village on foot). Serving under these men, were several constables, called Sotniks. All the police carried revolvers, and wore curved swords. Our Jewish people feared the police very much, but also relied upon their protection at certain times, especially on marketing days. On such days many peasants came in to the village to trade, and a great deal of drunkenness ensued from their purchases of Vodka from the Government Monopol (bottle store).

Now I would like to describe how the houses were constructed in Krakenowo: they were built of timber logs, with moss laid between the logs for protection against heat and cold, and then over laid with smooth planks of wood to give a straight effect. The roofs were made of shingles. The houses had double windows, in order to give protection against the extreme cold, and the inner windows would be removed during the summer. Each window had a shutter with a bar to bolt it from the inside. Only Jews lived in the centre of the village, while the non-Jews lived on the outskirts. The non-Jews had gardens in front of their homes, but they lived in little farm-type houses, none of which could compare with the Jewish homes. Some of the poorer Jews, who could not afford to live in the centre of the village in the main streets, had very small houses with thatched roofs, in small side-streets. Because the roofs were made of shingles and of thatch there was always a danger of fire. Many villages in Lithuania were almost completely destroyed by fire, and after such disasters Balabatim would be sent from village to village to collect money to assist with the rebuilding of the destroyed place.

Various Societies functioned in Krakenowo to serve the interests and needs of our community. Amongst them was the "Hachnosses Kallah", to enable the poorer girls to marry, we had a "Gemillas Chesed", for the purpose of granting loans to persons in need, or requiring assistance in business. A fund existed called "Pidion Shuvuim", to provide the means of bailing out a person who had been arrested, or to assist the family of an arrested man. This fund assisted men who had attempted to avoid Russian military service, and who had been caught escaping, arrested, and forced to walk back to the village on foot as a punishment. The police would walk such men from village to village, and while they were in our village we would assist them by replacing their

worn out and tattered articles of clothing, worn to shreds in the long enforced march, and by providing them with food for the journey. For the purpose of caring for and visiting of the sick, the "Bikkur Cholim" existed. These were but a few of our various Societies, established for the welfare of the community.

We had a Talmud Torah for the teaching of children whose parents could not afford to pay for their tuition. For this purpose the village had a special School-house, and employed teachers who taught the children Ivri, Chumash and Tanach. Most of the children who attended the Talmud Torah eventually learned one trade or another. Of course, we had our Chevra Kadisha, whose voluntary officials gave of their services devotedly and unsparingly. The Chevra Tillim, a Society for the reciting of Psalms, was rather an important Society, because when a baby was born, the members would visit the "kimpetoren" (the woman who had given birth), and bring her printed "Shir Hamales" (fifteen chapters of the Psalms of David). These Psalms were printed in Hebrew, and used to be hung on the walls of the room where the mother lay with the newly-born child. The members of the Chevra Tillim also used to recite Psalms when a person was seriously ill. When a death occurred, members of the Society would sit, throughout the night, reciting Psalms as well as at the funeral in our Cemetery, which was located on the other side of the River Nevyazha, running through Krakenowo. Then too, there was a "Chevra Mishneh" in the Beth Hamedrash, the members of this Society gathered around long tables each night to learn Mishneh, taught by one or other of the learned Balabatim. For those already more advanced in learning, there were the two Societies, "Ein Yakov" and "Chevra Gemorrah". And their members would also gather each night to learn a "Blat Gemorrah". It will be clearly seen from what I have written that our community was very well cared for both as regards its welfare and its spiritual life. Krakenowo had a well-organised Community, whose motto might well have been "all for one, and one for all". As in every community, we too had our richer and our poorer people, but I do not remember, that it ever happened that a Krakenower lacked for a Challah on the Sabbath, or Matzohs on the Passover. The richer Balabatim were very charitable, and our Rabbi and the Gabboim were entrusted to assist the needy from the communal funds, without disclosing names. I recall, on many occasions, my grandmother rising very early in the morning to take some milk to people in need, or perhaps a chicken to a kimpetoren. If a Krakenower found himself in financial difficulties, our people did not hesitate: the

baker, the butcher and the housewives would voluntarily bring him supplies without having to be asked. If a Krakenower lost his money, he did not have to lose his courage – assistance was soon at hand.

In the village, there was a "Kohlshe Bod" (a communal bath), and, of course, a Mikvah as well. Certain days in the week were set aside at the Bod for the use of women, but Friday was the special day set aside for men. On the allocated days our village crier called through the streets "Weiber, geit in Bod arain". On Fridays the crier had two duties to perform: at noon he would call, "Menner, gait in bod arein", and before evening he would call, "Yiddn, geit in Shul arain". As I remember, the bath was well patronised on Fridays. It was a hot steam bath, with many taps supplying hot and cold water, and shelves around the bath, upon which to sit or lie, and the higher one went, the hotter it became. When a person came to the bath, he purchased a "besem", a broom made of twigs, with which he used to beat and scrub himself, so as to remove the soil of the week. How good a Jew felt when he returned home from the Bod, cleansed and ready to go to Shul and greet the Sabbath!

Now I would like to explain how our village managed to pay for the Rov, the Chazan, the Shammas, the Schochet and for the Bod. There existed in our village a "Karobka", a monopoly over all income from kosher slaughter and over the Bod. Every two years, tenders were called for the Karobka, and the successful tenderer had to pay a certain amount of cash down as a deposit and furnish guarantees. The deposit was paid into the Treasury of the village as a guarantee that the tenderer would fulfil his contract, and the balance of the purchase prices had to be paid into the Treasury monthly, in accordance with the conditions of tender. His costs would be recouped from the sale of tickets issued by him for each and every killing, whether it be a chicken, a sheep or an ox, and the Schochet could not kill without having received the necessary ticket authorising him to do so. The ticket was valid for the date of its issue only. The Karobka money, plus the money which had been donated during the year from Aliyahs given in Shul, covered the salaries of our Communal Officials, and other communal expenditure. During the High Festivals, Aliyahs were sold to the highest bidders, and competition was keen for the honours, thus deriving considerable income. Every Jew in Krakenowo had his own seat in the Synagogue, handed down from generation to generation, so this yielded no source of revenue. There was a great deal of excitement whenever the



Hirshe Der Sefer - the scribe and the Sifrei Torah, with a "talmud" (pupil)

Karobka was put out to tender, and keen competition ensued. Sometimes tempers ran high and good friends became enemies, or enemies became friends, but a few weeks later, all was forgotten and forgiven, when things returned to normal. The same applied when tenders were called for the monopoly of the Bod, as there was a living to be made from being a "Bedder", the Lessee of the Bath. Such a system of communal financing may seem very outmoded now, when compared to our present-day customs in South Africa, but I feel it was most necessary and beneficial to have had the system of the Karobka in Krakenowo. It meant that the Rabbi received his salary regularly, without having to ask for contributions from the Balabatim, and he was therefore greatly respected.

The Rabbi was held in the highest esteem, and was beloved by all. He was the High Priest, and the Judge. Whenever a dispute arose, whether domestic or family affairs, or in commerce, people

never resorted to litigation, but asked the Rabbi to arbitrate. If the elders of the village became aware of a dispute, the Rabbi was notified, and the parties concerned were called before him for a Din Torah, his judgement being final. Of course our Rabbi was a greatly learned and just man, while the Rebbetzin, I remember, was a grandchild of the Kovner Gaon, and admirably upheld the dignity of the Rabbi's house. On the Festivals, the Balabatim would be invited to the Rabbi's home, which was a great honour, to be entertained and to listen to his Torah and Chochme. Then the Chazan would sing melodies from the evening prayers of the Sabbath or Yom Tov, and we all joined in. Everyone felt wonderful, because he was a member of the community of Krakenowo. I recall that, on Simchas Torah, all the many Torah scrolls we had in Krakenowo were brought to the Rabbi's home. Then a procession would be formed with the Rabbi at

its head, carrying a Torah, followed by the Balabatim, each carrying a Torah or a candle. The procession would wend its way through the streets, with songs of joy, to the Beth Hamedrash, where the Torah would be replaced in the Oren Kodesh. After evening prayer had been recited, the Torahs would be distributed again in the ceremony of the Hakoffesh.

But the life of the community was centred at all times round the Beth Hamedrash. Every boy could read any Maftir when he was about nine years of age. He was taught the "trop" (ritual melodies), and began to learn Chumash when he started attending Cheder. It was therefore unnecessary for a boy to receive special training for his Barmitzvah. Marriages were solemnised under the Chupah, outside the Synagogue, in the Shul Haif (ground outside the Shul). I remember that the Chosen used to wear a "kittel" (sashed white robe), and the "klezmorim" (music players) walked with all the machatonim from the Chosen's home to the Shul, and there, under the sky, the Rov and the Chazan would perform the Chupah ceremony.

Most of the wedding took place on a Friday, and after that, if the parents of the Kallah could afford it, there were seven days of rejoicing (simcha) in accordance with our law. Of course everyone in the village would send a present, mostly lekach and tort, with occasional gift of money or other valuables. Saturday night usually saw a dance in celebration of the marriage, when the musicians were paid for by the Kallah's parent up to a certain hour, but after that time the dancer paid the musicians themselves, so that they could continue dancing. There were many young people who availed themselves of the opportunity, and gladly paid for the music for dancing, as there was no occasion other than a wedding at which a Krakenower boy and girl could dance.

To our village of Krakenowo came a constant stream of Magiddim (preachers) and Meshullochim (collectors) from various Yeshivas. Sometimes there would be as many as three or four a week in our village. Those who preached in the middle of the week received a collection made for them, and for the cause they represented. Of course, an important visiting Rabbi was given the honour of making his Droshe in Shul Saturday afternoon, when the whole village would turn out to hear it.

On Sunday morning, accompanied by two Krakenowians, this Rabbi would call on the Balabatim for their yearly subscription to his Yeshiva, or for some charitable institution of Lithuania. Krakenowo Balabatim were used to these Magiddim and Meshullochim, and always donated as liberall as they could.

Then there was a continuous flow of poor people streaming daily into our village to ask for donations, and if Krakenowians had given everyone that asked a donation, they would have gone hungry themselves, so they devised a system whereby nobody was turned away empty-handed. The Balabatim used to buy metal pieces with the stamp of Krakenowo imprinted upon them and for every koppeke they received four such metal pieces. When the "ormelite" (poor people) came for donations, they would receive a metal coin, which, before leaving the village, they would cash in at the rate of four to the koppeke. Certain poor people, with large families, preferred donations of bread, and carried a bag for this purpose. Of course, Sabbath Challah was highly sought after.

Apart from the "ormelite", the Magiddim and the Meshullochim, there was another type of person who visited our village, the "Katarinshik" (Organ-Grinder), who played at every shop and house, asking for donations. All the Katarinshickers were Jews. I do not recall a single one being a non-Jew. They travelled in pairs, a man to play the organ, and his wife or daughter to collect the money, and of course this act was never complete without a monkey or a bird.

Reverting back to the Shul - in the Beth Hamedrash, there was a "Lezankah", a long oven, very low, at the back of the Bimah, to warm up the Synagogue, and many men would gather round on winter evenings to discuss local or world politics. Legends would be told around the Lezankah, or village news repeated - this Chevra Lezankah was their radio and their television!

If a learned man, or one who had dedicated his life to the Community, died, his body would be brought into the Beth Hamedrash as a mark of honour and respect, from where it would be taken to some specially reserved place in the Cemetery. At the top of the Cemetery were the graves of Rabbonim, who had once been Rabbis of our village. Their grave were covered by a

especially erected roofed structure, like a small house, as a token of the esteem and respect in which they had been held. When people were ill or in trouble, they or their families would come to pray at the house containing the graves of the Tzadikim, and ask for restoration to health, or deliverance from difficulties, begging the departed Rabbi to intercede with the Lord on their behalf.

Worshipping in the Synagogue on Rosh Hashonah or on Yom Kippur in our village, listening to the Rabbi and the Chazan, was something one could never forget - everyone turned out to attend Synagogue during the festivals and from the women's gallery one would hear wailing and sobbing. For those women who could not read the Hebrew word, there were special "zoggers", women who recited the words for them, which they would repeat, correctly on some occasions, and on others noticeably incorrectly. I remember one woman called Dobra, who intoned and recited the prayers so well, that all the other women used to gather round her and repeat her words, which she intoned with melody, and when she cried, all the women cried. This feeling and great kavannah with which we prayed in the Krakenowo Beth Hamedrash had such an effect on my childhood and later life that, when I attended different Yeshivas in other towns and prayed in their Botei Medroshim, I felt that there was never quite the same warmth and sincerity that had existed in Krakenowo.

Whenever people of the village received bad news of Pogroms, they would gather in the Synagogue to pray with heavy hearts, and ask the Almighty to have mercy upon their fellow-Jews, and bring comfort to those who had been bereaved. The wailing and the sobbing from the women's gallery was of such sadness that it still remains distinctly in my memory. Immediately after the special prayers, a collection was made in order to send help to those of our brothers and sisters who were far away, and who had suffered at the hands of the Russian Cossacks, and by attacks of hooligans organised by the Russian Government itself. These Pogroms put fear into the hearts of our people, and caused them to seek ways and means of emigrating to America or to Africa. Some of them received assistance by way of a "billet" (ticket) to America, and some borrowed money to send their children or their

husband away, leaving the rest of the family behind, the loan being repaid as soon as money was earned in the new country and sent home. There were many good tidings at that time in Krakenowo when relative sent tickets for their families to join them, as when a Krakenower boy remembered a Krakenower girl and sent a ticket for her to come and join him as his wife. When that happened, the whole village buzzed with the good news; many girls envied her, and mothers would send photographs of their daughters to landsleit in the new country, hoping that they too would experience similar luck.

The preparations made to journey from Krakenowo to America or Africa were elaborate. A Krakenower who had perhaps never seen a train, had now to journey to a "treife" land, so far away; sending a husband or a son or a daughter to the new country was like sending them to the unknown. They felt they might never see their loved ones again. The mother of the house would bake "suchar-kes" (rusks) for the journey, as it used to take many, many days to come from Krakenowo to the nearest sea-port in Germany. There was really no scope for a young person or for a family in Krakenowo, or really any future whatsoever, and it was hard to eke out a living if one were not in business, as Krakenowo could absorb no further traders, or even artisans. The news we used to receive from those who had left our village was very encouraging. Wives would receive dollars or pounds shortly after their husbands had arrived in America or Africa, and very regularly thereafter; a mother or a wife would come to the Post Office with an American or an African Draft, feeling herself on top of the world, while less fortunate people schemed and planned to leave Krakenowo.

However, not everyone was able to leave Krakenowo through the usual channels, as young men over the age of sixteen were unable to obtain the necessary Exit Visas, permitting them to leave Lithuania for a foreign country, because of compulsory military service. Certain Agents were able to arrange for men to cross the border from Lithuania into Germany and many emigrants from Lithuania to America and Africa availed themselves of these channels. Those leaving Krakenowo in this manner had to journey firstly to Ponevez, where the Agent concerned was contacted and paid for his services, as well as for the ticket and all necessary documents. The Agent would then

instruct the emigrant to journey to a certain border village in Lithuania, usually Yurburg, near the German border, where he would hide in a forest until the signal was given to cross the border into Germany, and the first town he came to was Tilsit. Once in Tilsit, the representative of the Agent with whom negotiations had been made furnished the ticket to Hamburg for embarkation, together with a steamship ticket to Africa, via Southampton, or direct to America, and all other necessary documents. There was always risk, of course, attached to this means of leaving Lithuania, and if one were caught, it would have meant arrest and being marched on foot back to the village, as well as other punishment. For this reason, all tickets and documents were furnished by the Agents only when safe crossing of the border into Germany had been negotiated.

I always recall that, during the time spent in transit in Germany, we were never contacted, befriended or comforted by any Jewish Societies. German Jews dissociated themselves entirely from Lithuanian emigrants. In direct contrast, however, was the attitude of the English Jews towards us on arrival at Southampton, and during our stay in London. We were met at the boat by representatives of London Jewry, who treated us throughout our transit period with care and consideration, which went a long way to comfort us and give us courage for the unknown that lay ahead, as we were lonely and home-sick. We were taken to a hostel in London, called the Jewish Shelter, and shown great friendship, which, I am sure, every Jewish emigrant will remember with gratitude. On arrival in Cape Town, we were again greeted by representatives of the Jewish Board of Deputies, who assisted us through the Customs and Immigration Authorities. In those days every immigrant had to be in possession of £20 in cash, so that he would not become a burden on the State. He had to be in a good state of health, with especial reference to eyes, and he had to be able to read and write one language. The Jewish Board of Deputies had intervened with the Government and had been able to arrange that Yiddish be recognised as one of the qualifying languages. This naturally assisted most of the immigrants from Lithuania, who knew no other language. From that time on, the struggle for survival in a strange, new land with a strange new

language commenced. Krakenowo Landsleit emerged triumphantly, in the main, from this struggle.

There are many Krakenower in South Africa, who are Communal Leaders, and who have contributed to the mining, financial and industrial life of this country, as well as to the arts and science. Sixty years ago, when the Krakenower began to emigrate to South Africa, they founded a Krakenowo Society, and made contributions to those who had remained behind in Lithuania, as well as to newcomers to South Africa requiring assistance to enable them to make a "parnasha" (a living), so that they in turn could assist their families at home, or eventually bring them out to this country. The Krakenowo Landsleit have a most wonderful, generous and charitable background, and when one meets a Lithuanian Jew, one invariably finds him to be a warm hearted and friendly man.

It is indeed sad to think that such a wonderful community of good people, who had no quarrel with the world, who shared with their fellow-men, have lost their little village, which now exists no more. It is a tragedy that those who remained behind should have been subjected to so much pain and suffering, and their loss is a grievous one, not only to Krakenowo Jews and Lithuanian Jews, but to Jewry as a whole. No Krakenower can forget his birth place, and will always feel sad when he thinks of the fate that befell our community in our beloved little village.

We Krakenowo Landsleit in South Africa must thank God that we were spared the catastrophe which befell our little village, and that He has spared us to establish ourselves to make homes for our children in this country. We have indeed been chosen to escape the disaster, because we could no longer find any purpose in remaining in Lithuania, when there was no future for us there. I record my memories of my little village, so that the memories of our birthplace and of its inhabitants will live on for generations to come. We pass this record on to our children, and we hope that they will in turn pass it on to their children so that they too will have pride in our birth place of Krakenowo.

MEMORIES OF KRAKENOWO - AS MY MOTHER TOLD ME

by Dora Leah Sowden

There is something of a cachet about being a "Krakenower".

Perhaps the reason is that, for its size, Krakenowo has produced a more than average number of conspicuous citizens.

Perhaps it is because Krakenowo was both typical of the small town in the East European Pales of Settlement, and also exceptional in its way.

It was not an important town, yet, being a market town, it was always full of life. It was not a great business centre, yet it has produced some remarkable business brains. It was not on any arterial route, yet lying between Keidan and Ponevez, it was never isolated. It did not produce a "Gaon", yet its Rabbis and learned men were known in other centres and remembered with respect.

What makes it even more remarkable is that it was so vivid and vital as to capture the imagination of those who know it only through the minds of others.

My friend, Anita Milne, for instance, regards herself as a "Krakenower", though she was born in this country. She knows so much about "our town" from her husband, Joseph Milne, that she has adopted it.

In my case, I'm actually Krakenower born – my passport says "Craconova". Yet how much I remember of it and how much of my memories are just things my mother told me I shall never know.

My mother brought me to South Africa as an infant. It is possible (she said) that my recollections go back to babyhood. It is much more likely, however, that even the earliest "memories" are only recollections of what she said.

Our little wooden house faced the market place. I remember my mother's saying that we often got hot buns from next door. Mr. Joseph Milne has confirmed that it stood next to a bakery.

We also got new laid eggs from next door. My mother used to say that the old lady, our neighbour, used to climb up a ladder to get them from the cackling hens in the loft.

That loft (my mother said) was high, but the houses in Krakenowo were low. On one occasion, when a Russian nobleman came to our house with a lady friend, he remarked on the lowness of the roof.

Why did a Russian nobleman call at our house? Because my mother was a dressmaker- "the little woman around the corner" to the gentry who had their estates round about.

She began dressmaking at an age when her feet could not yet reach the treadle of the machine. Her sisters (she was the youngest of five) were dressmakers before her.

The aristocrats brought rich material from Petrograd and Riga and even Moscow. They sometimes brought styles from Paris and Vienna (my mother said) - special models that my mother copied.

They came in silk lined carriages, with outriders and lackeys. They often came accompanied by men friends – officers or others who showed the marks of rank.

Sometimes, they sent a troika or a britska for my mother so that she could come to their estates. In winter it was a sleigh. Sometimes she stayed a couple of days to complete a rush order.

Most of my mother's customers were Polish nobility. Only a few were really Russian. They spoke French among themselves. The women played the piano. It became my mother's idea of a refined education to be able to talk French and play the piano.

Among those of whom my mother spoke often was an old "pritsta whose little dogs always lay on pastel-coloured cushions and whined when my mother touched their mistress.

There was also a "Grafina" who was a lady-in-waiting to the Tsarina and seldom came to her estate near Krakenowo – but come she did, and then there were grand parties at the "heif".

There was the "pristav's" wife, who wanted to be a fine lady and was not above questioning my mother on what she saw in the homes of her betters.

There were the beautiful French "housekeepers" of the local priest, who complained of boredom in the country – and were replaced from time to time.

All these things were, of course, before my time, but they have become woven into the fabric of my mind.

I "remember" in this way blackbirds being shot down in the nearby woods to be baked in a pie for harvest

festivals on the great estates, and cawing desperately as they fall. My mother could never after stand the sight of an injured bird in our Johannesburg gardens.

I “remember” fires across the river making the whole sky glow, and people packing their belongings in case the fire should spread, and others running about shouting “Shrekt zich nit. Gewald, es brent!” I “remember” wide green meadows, tall pine trees, turkeys to which one said “Cholder-bolder”, May blossom (never identified anywhere), snow and slush and frozen lakes and deep wells.

My mother said we had a dog called “Yodka”- something frowned upon as “un-Jewish” and later given to a peasant – something for which my mother never forgave herself.

Market days (my mother said) brought the vendors of sprats, herrings, fruits and sweets.

Certainly, the delicious smell of sprats I recognised as a forgotten memory of childhood years later when I came across it in Vienna - and the herrings in Amsterdam.

Fair days reflected the mixed character of the population – the aftermath of wars and invasions.

The “Old Russians”, my mother called them were few. Most of them were officials.

The Poles were the cream of the gentry. They spent their time in the big cities and came to their huge estates only in the summer. The lesser folk among them were farmers. They were the ones who came to the fairs with produce and cattle.

The Litvaks, the native peasantry, sometimes grew rich but did not count socially. The poorer ones brought fowls and turkeys to the market.

The gipsies came to sell horses, sing, dance, play and tell fortunes. Their music still has a special fascination for me. My mother always loved to have her fortune told by gipsies – and I still go to them when they are about.

Jewish traders dealt in almost everything – baigel, cloth, flounders and toys. They had inns and beerhalls. They had small shops. The local chemist was a Jew too, I think. One spoke of him with special respect.

One day the square would be empty. Then suddenly, as it seemed, there were people, booths,

animals, carts – wondrous sights, wonderful sounds, delicious things to eat, to buy.

My mother used to buy whole pots of peas in the pod. Apples, sunflower and carob seeds, cucumbers and gooseberries.

Some Jews had their own smallholdings – orchards from which they brought their own fruit and vegetables. My grandfather at one time had an “allotment” of this kind (my mother said).

We Jews had a complete corporate life of our own which had nothing to do with the blackbird shooting and the harvest festivals on the surrounding estates. The market days and fairs and buying of produce from the estates and selling of large and small items to the peasants – all that was only part of this life.

There were the holy days. There was the time when one whitewashed the walls for Passover. There was the terrible moment when one opened the door for Elijah. There was the incoming of the Great White Fast.

Going to shul (said my mother) was not just routine. It was a progress. One prepared for it. Having a seder or celebrating a “simcha” was not just a party. The occasion shone with significance. The lighting of a Sabbath candle was a solemn moment. The Chanuka lamps were subjects for joy.

Thus, the tunes with which the Haggadah was intoned, the blessings made and the psalms sung have remained with me, not as conscious memories (because I was too young) but as something which when heard from a real “Krakenowo” (like Joseph Milne for instance) brings a radiance of spirit quite out of proportions to the event. Parents do not know how much they deny to their children when they deprive them of earliest impressions of sound and ceremony.

Our house had several rooms. The one in which my mother worked had a “lezanka”, a brick stove like a divan, heated in the cold weather and covered with blankets. One could sit or lie on it.

Even in mid winter (said my mother) my grandmother used to get up before dawn and go and sit on the “lezanka” and read “Tilim”.

My mother was never as devout as her own mother, or even her eldest sister, who wouldn't touch our doorknob with her bare hand (said my mother) because it may have been in contact with something “treif”.

One story I must end with – about this same sister. My mother was still a child herself when it happened, because there were nearly 20 years between her eldest sister and herself. That sister was already married and was living with her parents – as so many young marrieds did, if the bridegroom was a “scholar”.

For the young husband, the house was not “frum” enough (remember the doorknob), and there was friction.

One day, my grandmother heard of a “wonder” rabbi visiting the district. Though she did not belong to the Chassidim, she went with her daughter for advice. His immediate reply was: “Your daughter must leave the house at once”. She didn’t. She died within three months.

We were not above such superstitions, it seems, but of course they were only incidental to the pious and hard-working lives of our people.

Those who remember Krakenowo say that when the revolution spread and when my mother had left and the gentry in their carriages stopped coming, Krakenowo lost a lot of its romance. But that life my mother spoke of was on its way out in any case. Our departure must have been a miracle of timing – but my grandmother was left behind. She died as a war refugee in Stalingrad.

The little wooden house with the removable double windows to shut out the winter and let in the summer, already that was doomed too. My birth place was on its way into the eibigkeit.



Krakenowo as it looked before World War One