

Who am I?

Dear Family,

Who am I? Where do I come from? Where do my ancestors come from? Were their lives anything like mine? These are questions that I have asked myself, and they seem to be exceptionally common, nearly universal questions. Recently I embarked on a unique journey to answer these questions, and it was transformative. I am writing to you to share with you what I learned about our roots.

You all probably know my mom is Marla Kletter, but she was named Marilyn Morris when she was born in Watertown, NY. Her mother was our beloved Grandma Em, née Emmeline Rothschild when she was born in Watertown as well. Grandma Em's mother was Bubby Rose, and she lived in Watertown too, but she wasn't born there. Her family, where she was born and what life was like there was the subject of my roots adventure. Below is a picture of Bubby Rose.



Wedding of my parents, Miles Kletter and Marilyn Morris June 14, 1969. Pictured from left, Harriet Morris, Hugh Beryl Morris, Emmeline Morris, Marilyn Kletter (Morris), Miles Kletter, Carole Kletter and (circled) Bubby Rose.

I was very fortunate to have my sister Joni Kletter share this journey with me. Before our trip, Joni received some documents from our relative Cheryl Sofer about our Great-Grandmother Bubby Rose. Cheryl Sofer's father was Israel Noah Alpert, an older brother of Bubby Rose. The document was a ship manifest from the SS Cherson which sailed from Libau, Lithuania and arrived at Ellis Island in New York City on November 25, 1907 – on board were many passengers from “Russia” including Bubby Rose. Bubby Rose's American name was Rose Alpert, but that was just a part of who she was and it wasn't the name she was given by her parents. According to this ship manifest, her name was Ruchlia Alperowitz when she arrived in NY in the winter of 1907. The ship manifest said that Ruchlia Alperowitz was 8 years old then, and that she was travelling with her step-mother, Lea Alperowitz. They identified themselves as Russian citizens of the Hebrew race and their last permanent residence was listed as “Krasna, Wilna”. Here is that ship manifest [you can zoom in to see the details more clearly].

https://www.ancestry.com/s x

https://www.ancestry.com/search/?name=Ruchlia_Alperowitz#?imgid=NYT715_1059-0496

New York, Passenger Lists, 1820-1957 for Ruchlia Alperowitz

Save v

11 LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE UNITED STATES

Required by the regulations of the Secretary of Commerce and Labor of the United States, under Act of Congress approved February 20, 1907, to be delivered

S. S. *Cherson* sailing from *Libau*, November 25, 1907

No. or List	NAME IN FULL	Age	Sex	Calling or Occupation	Birth	Nationality	Race or People	Last Permanent Residence	The name and complete address of nearest relative or friend in country whence also came	Final Destination
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Family Name	Given Name	Yrs. Res.			Ref.	Write		Country	City or Town	State
1	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Chaim</i>	25	M	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
2	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	20	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
3	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	18	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
4	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	16	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
5	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	14	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
6	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	12	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
7	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	10	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
8	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	8	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
9	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	6	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
10	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	4	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
11	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	2	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
12	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	1	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
13	<i>Wanow</i>	<i>Leah</i>	1	F	Yankee	Yankee	Russian	<i>Wolyn</i>	<i>Libman</i>	<i>Libman</i>
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I learned from Stephen Goldstein, another relative, that Bubby Rose's father was Abraham Joseph Alperowitz born

Belarus). Abraham Alperowitz lived with his wife Hannah Reichlin and their children in the Borovka Farm part of Kurenets in 1878. At that time there were many, many Alperowitzs living in Kurenets, and the town was mostly inhabited by Jews. After his first wife died Abraham married Leah Mindin and moved to Plissa (close to present day Hlybokye, Belarus), near his new wife's parents.

From other ship manifests we learned that Israel Noah Alperowitz born April 18, 1883 (son of Abraham Joseph Alperowitz) came to the US through Ellis Island on the SS Kroonland on May 11, 1904 and that Abraham later came to Ellis Island on the SS Celtic on July 20, 1907.

As many of you may know, my mom and dad had a calling of sorts to build memorials for Jews murdered by the Nazis in Belarus. My parents visited Belarus in approximately 2000, and at that time they learned of the great work being done by Diana and Michael Lazarus along with leaders of the local Jewish community in honoring the dead and preserving the memory of the victims of the Shoah through the Belarus Holocaust Memorial Project. My parents decided to partner with them, and together their family foundations put up memorials at sites throughout Belarus where Jews were massacred. My sister Joni joined my parents on many trips to Belarus, and after my father passed away, I joined my sister in supporting the work of the Belarus Holocaust Memorial Project. To date, 112 memorials have been erected, and our objective is to put up a memorial at every site where Jews were murdered by the Nazis in Belarus. Sadly there are more than 500 such sites in Belarus alone. More information about the Belarus Holocaust Memorial Project is available on our website www.belarusmemorials.com

It wasn't until after my parents had been to Belarus approximately 12 times, Joni had been 8 times and I had been 4, that we learned definitively that Bubby Rose and her father Abraham Joseph Alperowitz, my Great-Great-Grandfather, were from Kurenets.

In late July 2018 I kissed my wife and sons goodbye and began my adventure by flying from my home in the San Francisco Bay Area to NYC. There, after a few days of visiting with my mom and sisters, and nieces and nephew and brothers-in-law and NY friends, Joni and I set out for Eastern Europe. We flew from NYC to Warsaw, changed planes and then flew on to Minsk, Belarus (10 hours ahead of San Francisco). After one night in Minsk, early the next morning we met our guide, Julianna Mikolutsкая, who drove us to Kurenets. Juliana works for Yuri Dorn, who is head of the Jewish Heritage Research Group in Belarus.

Driving to Kurenets is a little bit like going back in time. Most of the houses in the Belarussian countryside today do not have running water, they have wells or water storage tanks and outhouses. They are usually one story with a loft attic, sloped roofs and a short fences around small yards. People often have little gardens, some of them have chickens or a horse in the yard. On roads connecting the smaller cities, people sit on the side of the road selling mushrooms or berries they foraged in the forest. There is A LOT of forest in Belarus.

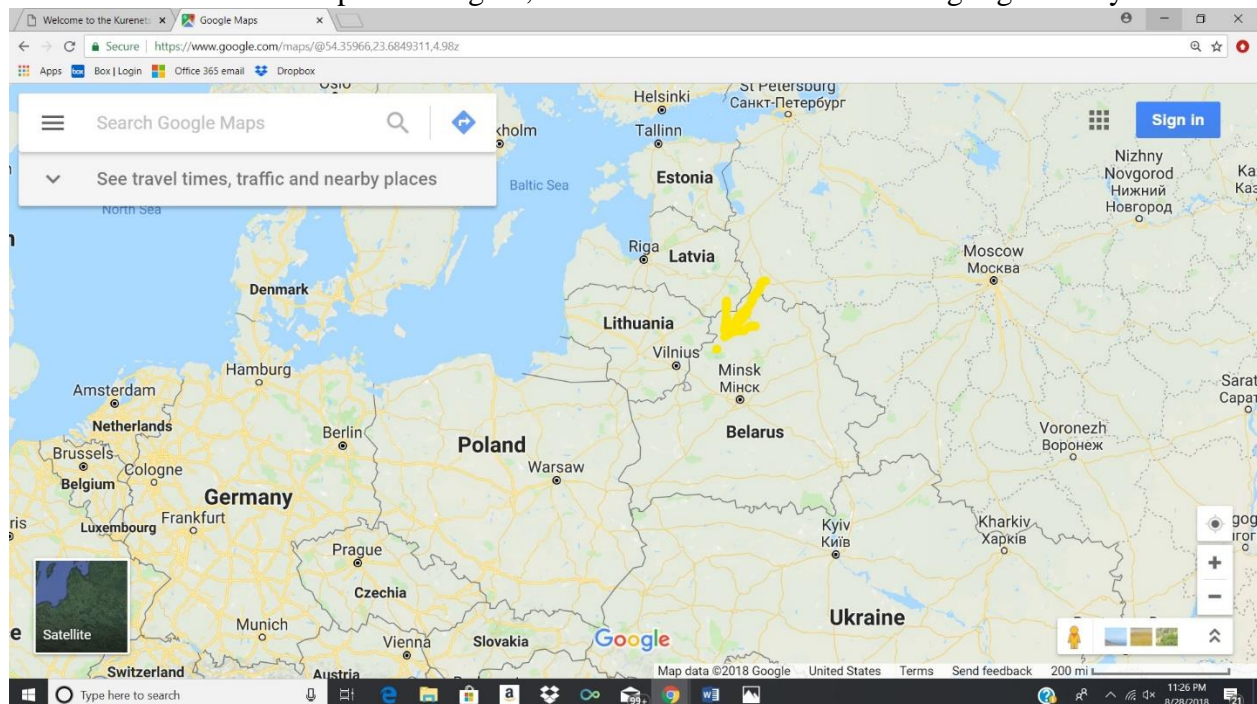
Belarus today is a communist dictatorship, with many people living near and working on communal farms or in the dairy product industry. Over the last few hundred years, Kurenets was at various times located in Poland, Lithuania, and Russia/Soviet Union. Here is a timeline of which

Country Kurenets was in at various points in history from kehilalinks at this location:
<https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/kurenets/kurenets.html>

- Today: Kurenets, Belarus
- 1323 - 1790s: Part of the Polish Lithuanian Kingdom
- 1790s - 1915: Part of Russian Empire
- 1921 - 1939: Part of Poland
- 1939 - 1941: Annexed by the Soviets
- 1941 - 1944: Under Nazi Occupation
- 1944 - 1990s: Part of Soviet Union

Since at least the mid-17th Century, Jews had been living in Kurenets. In 1867, out of a total population in the village of 1955 people, 1325 were Jews (over 2/3 Jewish). Before the turn of the 20th century, this was shtetle like so many other shtetles in the pale of settlement, where there were farmers, tailors, traders, milkmen and shopkeepers. Kurenets was somewhat unique from other shtetls in that it more Hasidic. One Kurenets son married the daughter of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 1850, and Shneirsons related to the Lubavitcher Rebbe had a pharmacy there. Kurenets had three shuls before the war, two Hasidic and one Mitnagim. There were many torah scholars in the town, and many Zionists, including a Hashomer Hatzier group and others. There was also a Gimlut Chesed – Interest Free Loan Society.

Today Kurenets is called Kuraniec in Belarussian, and it is a small village in the Vileyka district of the Minsk Oblast [Western Belarus], about 107 Kilometers from Minsk and about 137 km from Vilnius gps Latitude 53°41', Longitude 31°52'. It took us about an hour and half to drive there from Minsk. Here is a map of the region, with the location of Kurenets highlighted in yellow:



Kurenets doesn't look all that different from the way it probably looked when Bubby Rose and the Alperowitzs of Kurenets lived there. Here are some pictures of the village:



This sign says Kuraniec in Bellarussian.



Here's a picture of joni and I in the central square in Kurenets. The square stone to the right in this picture with no plaque is from a former shul in Kurenets.



Our guide Juliana told us that houses formerly owned by Jews in this region typically had three windows facing the street.





Some of the most poignant aspects of our trip to Kurenets were the visiting a house owned by some relatives, the Jewish Cemetery and the Holocaust Memorials.

Before our trip, Joni and I began corresponding with some of the other descendants of the “Alps of Kurenets”. One of them is an amazing woman named Eilat Gordin Levitan. Eilat lives in Israel and she did a DNA comparison with Cheryl Sofer which proved that Eilat and Cheryl are related. Eilat has compiled a wonderful and enormous collection of photos, stories and information about the Jews of Kurenets before, during and after the holocaust. Here is a link to one of her websites:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/kurenets/kurenets.html>

Family House

Although Eilat lives in Israel, she bought a house in Kurenets that was owned by her grandparents before the German invasion. During the German occupation of Western Belarus, this house served as both a place for Jewish partisans fighting the Germans to meet, and a location for hiding Jews. It is located about 50 yards from the central market square of Kurenets.

Here are a couple of pictures of that house which is presently unoccupied but was and is owned by our relatives:



Here is a present day picture of the street our relatives lived on:



About 100 yards to the left is a huge crop field.

Kurenets Jewish Cemetery

We went to the Jewish cemetery in Kurenets which was an emotional journey. There are many “Alps of Kurenets” buried in the cemetery. Unfortunately, the cemetery is quite overgrown with tall weeds and saplings, and there is some trash and a small portion of the wall has fallen in. I am attempting to organize a clean-up and repair of the cemetery. At present we are waiting for permission from the local authorities to proceed with the clean-up plan. Here are some pictures of the Kurenets Jewish Cemetery:



This is a memorial to 54 Jews who were murdered by the Nazis on October 14, 1941 which is located inside the Jewish cemetery in Kurenets.



Joni and I at the entrance to the Kurenets Jewish Cemetery:



The Holocaust

The story of what happened to the Jews of Kurenets is tragic and violent and shocking and sad, unfortunately it is similar to what happened to the Jews in cities and towns of Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary and the whole of continental Europe. Literally thousands of other shtetls shared the same awful fate.

The Germans arrived in the Vileyka district in June 1941. The day the Germans first arrived in Kurenets two Jewish young men were taken to a neighboring town and killed. New rules were put in place forbidding Jews from travelling anywhere without permission, Jews could not walk on the sidewalk, Jews could not be paid for their labor, Jews could not talk to or communicate with Christians and other prohibitions. Everyone in the town had to turn over all weapons to the Germans. A Jewish committee was set up to communicate between the Jews and the Germans. Jews who broke the rules could be executed immediately. Jews had to give gold and money to the Germans. A ghetto was established in the neighboring town of Vileyka. Some Jews who were skilled at trades such as carpentry, brickwork and painting were taken to Vileyka and other towns and cities to work. Later the Gestapo came to Kurenets and tortured Rabbi Moshe Aron Feldman in the town square by breaking both his arms and both his legs. The Germans would not let anyone approach or care for Rabbi Feldman and he died there. Twelve other Jews were killed with him. The police in Kurenets assisted the Germans in their assassination of the Jews.

On Simchat Torah (October 14) 1941 another 54 Jews were murdered by the Nazis in Kurenets but the worst was yet to come. Some people saw that there was no hope and fled to the East or to live in the forest, others joined partisan brigades fighting the Nazis (including the Bielski brothers group that lived for two years in the nearby Naliboki forest). Some survived the war in this way. Most did not have the skill or will to live in the forest, or flee East, or refused to leave younger or older family or community members behind. The last surviving Jews in the neighboring shtetle of Vileyka were massacred on Rosh Hashonah 1942. In September 1942, Jews from other areas had fled to Kurenets, or been forcibly moved there by the Germans.

The slaughter of the Jews in Kurenets occurred on Sept 9, 1942. Between 3 and 4 am large German trucks and a lot of cars began arriving in the central square. German soldiers encircled the whole village, and began rounding up the Jews, going from house to house with flashlights. Non-Jews were told they must identify the Jews and turn over all Jews in their houses or they would be shot. As businesses began to open that morning, the Jewish workers and owners were all rounded up and all marched to the market square in the center of town. According to eye witnesses, there was a lot of shouting, shots and screams. Some refused to go willingly, and they were either forcibly moved or shot in the spot. Houses of some Jews were set on fire. There was a morning minyan that day, and some men were shot while in shul.

The remaining Jews then living in Kurenets were put in a large shed. More than half of them were children and the elderly. The shed was then set on fire by the Kurenets fire department. Those who tried to escape were shot. 1050 Jews were murdered that day. Approximately 55 were Alperowitzs.

In 1997 a memorial was erected to the 1050 Jews slaughtered in Kurenets on September 9, 1942 at the site of their murder. Here is a photo of that memorial:



Closing

So, what have I learned? I am Cary Kletter, a Jew descended from the Alperowitzs (“Alps”) of Kurenets. My ancestors were Jews eking out a living in a shtetle in the Pale of Settlement, a beautiful, forested, farming locale that at times under Polish, Lithuanian and Russian control. For the most part, the Jews living there were practicing Judaism and supporters of the Zionistic ideal. Bubby Rose and her immediate family emigrated to NY before WWII, other Alps of Kurenets were unfortunately victims of the Shoah. Nearly all of those killed were not soldiers fighting the Germans, they were innocent, peaceful people, just trying to live their lives. The ability to celebrate the Jewish holidays, raise our children as Jews and perpetuate Jewish traditions is a blessing we are all fortunate to have. Wishing you all a sweet Rosh Hashonah 5779, may it be a year of good health, happiness, nachas and a bissel mazel!

Next steps:

I have recently taken the 23&me DNA analysis, which indicates that I am 100% European and 95.4% Ashkenazi Jewish. I would like to share and compare my DNA with other descendants of the Alps of Kurenets to find relatives. Apparently Andi Zigelman and Eilat Gordin Levitan and other Alps descendants have done this on FTDNA and other sites.

I also plan to complete a restoration of the Jewish Cemetery in Kurenets.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the following people who helped me on this roots journey:

Eilat Gordin Levitan for her tremendous efforts to translate and compile the stories of the Jews of Vileyka and Kurenets.

Andi Zigelman for her assistance in tracing our “Alp” family roots.

Stephen Goldstein for his work tracking down information about our ancestors.

Joni Kletter for being an excellent travelling companion and all around great sister!

Cheryl Sofer for assisting us with finding important family documents and records.

Dmitry Shirochin for his archival research in Vilnius and other locations.

Juliana Mikolutsкая and Yuri Dorn of the Jewish Heritage Research Group in Belarus for assisting us with logistics, transportation, translation and support.

If you’ve read this far, perhaps this will interest you [from one of Eilat Gordin Levitan’s sites]...

Memories of Solomon, son of Orchik Alperovich

Jewish Life in Kurenets After the Holocaust

Written in English by Shlomo Alperovich

Edited by [Sandra Krisch](#)



**Shlomo Alperovich near the memorial for the
1050 Jewish people from Myadel street, Kurenets (2001)**

I was born in “shtetel” Kurenets (Belarus) in 1948, and I wish to share my own memories and stories that I heard and remember from Jewish natives about Jewish life in Kurenets and its surroundings.

After the liberation of Belarus (including Kurenets) in 1944, Jewish people started returning to the area. Kurenets was almost completely destroyed and burned by the retreating German Army. Only a few houses were left standing. Most of the surviving Jews immigrated to Palestine and the United States in the next few years.

My father, Alperovich Aaron Abramovich (Orchik son of Abram, grandson of Chaim Isar; born in 1896, died in 1974) returned home to Kurenets from Saransk (Mordovia), where he had been sent in 1939 (when the Soviets came to the area). He was sent there by decision of Stalin's court for 5 years of hard labor. When he returned he found neither home nor family. His wife Mirel and 3 of his children (Chaim Isar, another son, and a daughter) had been murdered.



Kurenets (1945)
Miron Meckler and Aaron Alperovich

From local residents and Jews who returned from the forest, he found out that his older son Yakov (Yankel) joined the partisans during the war. He was informed that he was recruited to Belpolk – a Red Army unit that was supposed to search and clean the Belarus forests of Nazi soldiers and local collaborators (*politizais*) who were now replacing the Jews and hiding there. Father finally found Yakov near Minsk. He was very skinny and very tired. He learned from him that Yankel's sister and brother, his daughter Lisa, and his son Shmuil survived, and that during the war they also joined the partisans' ranks.



In the Red Army

Above: Benjamin-Yosef Sosensky, Yakov Alperovich (from Kurenets).

Sitting: Levi Koton and Dov, son of Chykel (lives in Minsk)

Yankel Orchik's story is well known and told in many books. On Simchat Torah of 1941 his family was taken to be killed. His mother was able to escape with the younger children while they walked to the forest. Yankel and his brother Chaim Isar were taken with the other Jewish men. The men were put in groups of ten and killed, while many of the local population were watching. Just before it was Yankel's turn to be killed, he said that Yente (nee Dinerstein) Rodanski was let go by the Germans and was told to never marry a communist again (they had just killed her husband, Velvel Rodanski). Yankel realized that all are not equal, and he demanded to speak before he

was killed. The German officer let him talk. Yankel said in broken German “Before I am to be killed I would like to know if my sin is being a Jew or being a communist.” The officer answered, “Clearly, being a communist.” Yankel said, while turning to the local people, “They could all tell you that my father Orchik was sent to Siberia for being an enemy of the Soviet people; why would I then become a communist?” The officer liked what he [Yankel] said, and maybe it was the broken German that made him laugh—he told him to stand to the side. Yankel said that his sick brother should be let go first, and they let Chaim Isar go.

Yankel did not trust the Germans, and together with the sons of Pinia Alperovitz he escaped to the woods. They [the others] were killed. Yankel survived and later joined the partisans and saved many many Jews from Kurenets and Myadel and also his brother Shmuil.

In 1944 my mother, Botwinnik Evgeniya Samuilovna (Zelda daughter of Shmuil Botwinnik, born in 1920 in Rakov) came to Kurenets. After her release from the partisans she looked for her relatives. She found out that all of her family was killed in Rakov. She moved to Kurenets, following some of her Jewish friends from the partisans. And that is how two lonely people met each other and established a family. At first they lived in the house of Aaron's brother Hirsh, who was killed with his entire family (wife and two children). Here, in August of 1946, their first son, Abram, was born. At that time Arye Leibe (Lior's grandfather), the brother of Aaron [Orchik Alperovich] returned from evacuation to Russia; their two sisters, Hava and Feiga, also returned after being partisans during the war. They all married and started their own families. My father moved to a new house of his own, which he built with his own hands; he left the old house to his brother Leibe and sister Hava.

In July of 1948, in the new house, a new citizen of Kurenets was born – that was I. About my birth I will tell you the following story: My mother felt that she was about to give birth, so my father took her to the Vileyka's hospital, which was 8 km away, riding on a horse. However it was too early, and after one day in the hospital she asked to be taken home because she had a lot of work to do there. And so my father brought her back. A few days later he had to set the horse again to take mother to the hospital. This time she was left there for several days, while my father had to return home to take care of the housekeeping chores. A few days passed and then a fellow Kurenets resident by the name of Nikolay met my father and told him, “Vorchik, I've visited my wife in the hospital and saw your Zelda. You have a boy.” Father took a horse and went to meet us. Mother asked to go home right away, so father took off his jacket, put me inside, and brought me home. That is how my life in Kurenets began.



Alperovich family – Kurenets, 1959

At that time almost every Jewish family in Kurenets had a newborn. About 15 Jewish families remained in Kurenets after the war. On Saturdays and at Jewish holidays Jewish people gathered at the old Leizer Shulman house. There they had their prayers, and after the religious ceremony they were drinking *L'chaim*. We kids played outside the house and never forgot that Leizer had an apple orchard. We, all the Jewish kids, were raised together among the other gentile kids – together we went to the river and to the forest. Sometimes we had our fights. During the winter we would build snow forts and have snowball battles. Starting at the age of 7, every kid in Kurenets would attend school; there we met with new duties and challenges and made new friends.

In 1955-56, many Jewish Kurenetsers started moving to Poland in order to continue on their way to Israel. Since Kurenets was part of Poland before 1939, the Soviets let the old Polish citizens cross the border to Poland. The first family to take that step was my father's sister Hava and her husband Boris, with their 5 children. The oldest child was 7 years old and the youngest, Sholom, less than a year. I still remember his *brit milah* ceremony: all the Jews of Kurenets gathered together in the small room and then came the rabbi. All the Jews raised the money to pay for his services. That is how the last Jewish child was born in Kurenets, and that happened in 1955.



Surviving Jews from the area of Vileyka meet in Naarch'

Many families followed that path, moving directly to Poland or to the larger cities in order to arrange the needed papers and then move to Poland. So in 1958 only two Jewish families were left in Kurenets: Levin's and ours. But Jewish life didn't stand still. At every holiday the older children of my father would visit us with their children. Also we kept in touch with the Jews in nearby villages: Dolginovo (4 families), Lyuban (7 families) and Vileyka (about 15 families). The spiritual leader of the remaining Jews was Mironovich (Finkelshteyn-Tewel) the head of the Lyuban *sovhoz* [state farm].

In 1958 a new school director arrived in Kurenets – Catznelson. He lived in Kurenets till 1963. The head doctor of the Kurenets regional hospital was Dr. Nasis. He lived in Kurenets from 1960 till 1966. They both had children younger than school age.



Alperovich family in grandfather's house (1960)