

Shalom, the ancient synagogue of the Jews of Rhodes, built in 1577 and in constant use until 1944. Outside the front door is a plaque listing the 200 families of the community, familiar Sephardi names like Alalouf, Benveniste, Bitton, Pizante and Touriel. Inside, only the pebble-cobbled floor looks new, but the *bimah* and ark have been patched up, and an effort has been made to fill the room with decoration and furnishings, a shadow of its former glory.

On an old bench sits a large, grizzled, somewhat Zorba-like old gentleman in a baseball cap, who greets us with “shalom.” We ask if he speaks Hebrew.

“No,” he answers,

“Greek? Ladino?”

“No... English?”

“No... French?”

The conversation proceeds in very poor French with the odd phrase in a few more languages. We learn that his name is Samuel Modiano, and that he is the caretaker. He details the history of this community of refugees from the Expulsion of 1492, and how it became the center of commerce on this island of fishermen ruled by Crusader knights.

In a back room, Modiano shows us a collection of photographs of community life in the days before the war. There were 2,000 Jews in “La Juderia,” the Jewish quarter, when the Nazis rounded them up and shipped them to Auschwitz, days after Samuel’s bar mitzvah was celebrated; he was one of the 151 who survived. These days there are only a handful of Jews left — most immigrated to the United States — and no minyan on Shabbat, he sighs; just when descendents of Rhodian Jews come visiting from America, or on the High Holy Days.

Another two Israeli couples have entered and join our tour. “So, are you Jewish?” asks one of the late arrivals, trying to catch up.

Samuel slowly turns his left hand palm up and points to the tattooed number on his forearm as he pronounces one of his few English phrases: “Jewish, 100 percent guarantis.”

Avi Katz

Urban Legends

As my family legend goes, my grandfather’s grandfather was a lumberjack. He lived in a small Polish town called Ulanov where he chopped down trees, floated them down the

river, and sold them to Germans.

Throughout my life I had intoxicating visions of my great-great-grandpappy; every morning, after prayers, he would take off his *tefillin*, roll down his red-and-white checkered flannel sleeve, and lay an axe rakishly over his brawny shoulder. He would head for a field, fell a tree and roll it into the river. I could clearly see him straddling the log, trying to keep his balance as his legs got wet and cold, struggling to ride the currents to Germany.

Over the past few years my connection to Ulanov has been truncated: My grandfather, Willie Reich, two great uncles and — just last month — my mother’s cousin, all passed away in Israel. I’ve looked for Ulanov on a map, but couldn’t find it. My great uncle Bernard had said it skirted the Dejike River, but that too I couldn’t find. Since the last of that generation is gone, I thought any unasked questions of my past would forever remain unanswered.

Recently, however, at Shabbat services in Manhattan, I was invited to a family’s house for lunch. During the meal I asked another guest, a hoary octogenarian, where he was from. “From a Polish town you never heard of,” he said. I had a twinge in my stomach. “I’m from Ulanov.”

“I’m also from Ulanov, a *landsmann*,” I cried out, only to be met by the incredulous faces of the other lunch guests. “Well, my grandfather, actually.”

The old man said he knew my *zaide*. “Willie was a nice man. A mensch.”

Excited, and feeling lucky to have one final glimpse into my family history, I told him everything I knew about Ulanov and asked him if there was anything else he could add.

After the meal, the old man sat me down on the living room couch as if he had something of significance to tell me. “Listen son. The reason why you never found Ulanov on a map is because it’s located at the meeting point of three rivers and none of them are called Dejike. *Jike* is Polish for river. *De Jike* means ‘the river.’ Your great uncle Bernard probably recalled someone referring to one of the rivers as Dejike and thought that Dejike was its name.

“Second, Ulanov wasn’t a romantic place. The Talmud advises that people should get divorced at the head of three rivers. *Frum yidden* from all over southern Poland would come to Ulanov to get divorced. The town was filled with bitter strangers waiting their turn to give, or get, a *get*.

“Now, regarding your grandfather’s grandfather. I never met him. I never knew him. But I can tell you one thing with great certainty: your great-great-grandfather never touched an axe in his life. It was a Jewish business in Ulanov to pay the local goyim to chop down trees and sell them to the Germans. The Jews were just middlemen in the lumber business. No Jew in Ulanov ever touched an axe, or a tree for that matter, unless it was to hang an eruv.”

I stood up and left, wishing him Shabbat Shalom — and that he hadn’t told me the truth.
Robby Berman

Mutual Blessings

For most of the last decade, the synagogue that I *do* go to — like so many other English-speaking, non-Orthodox expats living in the southern part of Jerusalem — is Kol Haneshamah. It’s a lively, egalitarian, community-minded congregation, which conducts itself in Hebrew with a strong accent.

I’ve always known that the shul has a relationship with Magen, an assisted-living residence in the neighborhood for mentally handicapped adults. But my awareness never went much beyond observing that on Shabbat and holidays, services were attended by a motley and noisy bunch of clearly disabled Hebrew-speakers. With the passage of time, I found their presence less disruptive and more heartening, as their enthusiasm demonstrated that this was a highlight of their week: The rest of us should feel so good about Sabbath synagogue attendance. The Magen folk, of whom about a dozen seem to come regularly, are encouraged to participate in the services, opening the ark and the like, and at the Kiddush that follows prayers, they wolf down the challah often before more inhibited people, like myself, even get close to it.

Now, after having seen “Blessings: Roommates in Jerusalem,” Paula Weiman-Kelman’s film about Magen residents Shulamit and Ilana, I know that the challot we bless on Shabbat were baked at the hostel on Friday. No wonder the Magen crew tear at the braided loaves with such gusto: They made them.

Shulamit and Ilana, aged 74 and 65, respectively, have shared a room at Magen since 1978, the 45-minute documentary tells us. Both were born in Israel. Ilana suffered encephalitis at age 2 or 3. That’s where her cognitive development was arrested. A shoebox of photographs she picks through show a happy child with her par-

