

From the Ends of the Earth

by Ben-Tsiyon Klibansky

Lithuanian Jewry suffered more than any other Jewish community in Europe, and was almost entirely wiped out by the Nazis and the Lithuanians. Therefore, there is some special interest about a relatively large group of few thousand Lithuanian Jews who still managed to survive.

It was a week before the Nazi invasion. On June 14th, 1941 the Soviet regime began a widespread purification operation along the front with the Germans from former “Counter-Revolutionaries” – members in organizations whose goals didn’t meet with Soviet policy and large merchants whose activities were contrary to the basic principles of the centrist socialist economy. The Soviets pulled them from their homes with no warning and took them in cattle cars to forced labor camps or to far-flung work provinces. Many of those deported were taken to the south west region of Siberia, where malnourished, they were mandated to work. About a year later they were again required to migrate, this time to the arctic regions of the North Pole. One of the areas where they were settled was a remote half peninsula, Bikov-Mis, on the shores of the North Arctic Ocean. On this small island on the other end of the world, they were forced to aid the war effort of the Soviet Union under incredibly difficult living conditions.

Amongst the exiled to Bikov-Mis there were approximately 180 Lithuanian Jews. Most of them managed to survive the poor nutrition, the terrible illnesses and the cruel natural conditions in this place. It may be not too surprising, therefore, that some chose to write their memoirs about the place and “From the Ends of the Earth”, the memoirs of my mother, Gitta Langleben-Klibansky, devotes also a large portion to the wondrous survival of those Jews in Bikov-Mis.

Why did the survivors choose to tell their stories not just to their immediate families but also to a wider readership of their exile to a remote half peninsula on the northern edge of the world? The unique forces of nature – months of darkness during the winter with its deadly storms, the bright lights of the Aurora Borealis in all their splendor and glory, and the ebb and flow of the terrifying tide every few hours – are these what inspired their memories and aroused their imaginations? It seems that these occurrences were just the background and scenery of the real story: in a place where they were just inches from death they were partners to an unusual and unique creation that couldn’t compare to any other exile throughout Siberia: the formation of a Jewish community based on the structure of the traditional Jewish communities in Lithuania. This was far from being a given. Amongst the exiled in Bikov-Mis there were many Lithuanians. They didn’t establish similar “organizations” or show mutual responsibility as the one existed among the neighboring Jewish community.

Gitta's memoirs stand out two of the spiritual and religious pillars of this remote community: her father, who taught the children to read and write in Hebrew and compiled a unique calendar that enabled to keep and celebrate the Jewish holidays, and her mother-in-law, who worked tirelessly on the spiritual and social aspects of the community and organized regular prayer quorums in her small room. However, Gitta also chose to highlight the young people, who were the important cornerstones of the community and its next generation. They were the ones who had average and even good lives in the country of their birth, Lithuania, and were suddenly ripped from their lives and placed under extreme conditions with no advanced preparation. Most managed to withstand the difficulties, often life-threatening circumstances, and managed to survive the physical and spiritual challenges. Even with the never-ending fear and despair they remembered and held onto their upbringing, their heritage and their dream – the Land of Israel. This special story about their overcoming challenges Gitta chose to memorialize by writing this memoir.

As the editor of the book I presented in the appendix my research which was based on original documents from the NKVD, which show the deportation of my mother's family from the viewpoint of the Soviet regime. The combination of memories and historical analysis exposes the reader and the researcher to a unique and fascinating story which was minimized only by the horror of the Holocaust.