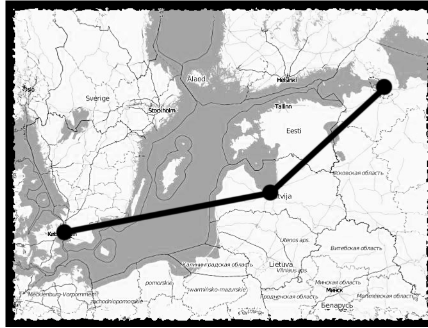

Forefathers & Friends

Riga & Copenhagen

A buzzing green-and-white airBaltic prop plane lifts off from St. Petersburg's Pulkovo Airport and heads southwest. A final stop behind the former Iron Curtain to complete the European portion of my Family Heritage Tour: my father's entire extended family—his dad was one of ten kids—hails from Riga and its surrounds.

Latvia's past as a Soviet Republic feels almost as erased as Prague's: an airport spotless and new, signage in Roman letters—I can *read* again!—and English widely spoken. In addition to the generally relaxed feel of a smaller center—Riga's metro area is under a million—there's also that intangible feeling of being back in honest-to-goodness *Europe* again. No surprise, that: Latvia has joined the EU and touts its capital as more of a Scandinavian city than a former East Bloc burg.

More low-season bargain hunting scores me yet another find, an elegant, three-star boutique hotel smack in Riga's medieval Old Town. Its ornate neoclassical façade belies an ultramodern interior. My en-suite bathroom sports designer fixtures; all-glass shower doors; and patterned one-inch black, gray, and white tiling that could have been lifted from an interior design brochure.

I *love* a nice bathroom. Too bad I'm only here a couple of nights.

The city, meanwhile, seems unusually lively. Crowds gather by the promenade fronting the Daugava River. Soon a parade starts up, complete with marching soldiers, flags, emissaries from other countries, and a fly-past of Latvian military jets and helicopters.

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What *is* this? And who knew Latvia had a *military*? I ask a youngish Australian couple standing next to me.

"It's Latvian Independence Day. We didn't know about it either," one of them says.

It's the country's ninetieth, to be exact, commemorating its post-World War I separation from the Russian Empire. Though a better term for it might be "re-Independence Day," since for over four of those decades the country was absorbed into the Soviet Union. Only in the last ten years has the country again emerged as a distinct entity on the world stage.

After dark the festivities heat up in the wintry chill: the bridges spanning the Daugava are brilliantly lit; the crowd cheers as a massive fireworks display springs up. Afterward, meandering back from a late dinner, I encounter a familiar swirl of white: the first snow of the season and my first on this trip. Circling the medieval churches and narrow streets, it transforms the place into a giant snow globe.

I rise early the next morning determined to learn more about my ancestors. The city is quiet after its Independence Day binge as I walk out of Old Town to the "new" part of the city—still more than a century old—to a stately brick structure that contains Riga's Jewish Museum. Before World War II this building was a Yiddish-language theatre, evidence that my forebears were not alone in making this a sizeable Jewish center.

The two old ladies running the place tell me it doesn't open for another hour: I had already looked online but found precious little on this spot aside from its address. No trouble: I now have an excuse to explore Riga's turn-of-the-century central core (and drop off a bit of laundry).

The city was once known as "little Paris," and it's a moniker that's not undeserved: the town is positively crawling with Art Nouveau buildings, much like Josefov in Prague. I wander Elisabetes iela and Alberta iela, two of the more prominent Art Nouveau streets, and imagine my forebears—some of whom struck it rich early in the twentieth century—residing in one of the elegant structures.

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Back at the museum, I learn about the Jews of Latvia: it's not as old a community as those in Poland or Lithuania, which lay within the Russian Empire's "Pale of Settlement" where Jews were permitted to reside in Tsarist times. But starting in the 1600s, a vibrant culture flourished in spite of ever-present prejudice and repression.

I don't expect to find anything specific about my family and instead wander the galleries with a visiting British fellow; upon learning my surname, however, he points me to a display case: in it lie a number of 1940s-era Soviet documents, including a death warrant for one "Jacova Judeikina"—one of my grandfather's brothers.

Ohmigosh. I've heard stories of my great-uncle's fate—a prominent businessman, he was among those targeted by the Soviets—but have never seen my surname in a museum. Especially not for something like this. On my way out, I chat with one of the old ladies and she nods; in broken English she tells me some of my kin residing in Israel have paid this place a visit before.

I want to take a trip to the outskirts of town, to Rumbula Forest, where in the winter of 1941 Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* carried out mass executions of Riga's Jews—including my great-aunt Rosa and her family. I'd heard stories about this at Holocaust commemorations and such; it may have seemed irrelevant and boring to me back then, but coming here ignites it with new purpose.

To my surprise, neither the museum staff nor anyone else has any idea how to get there; finally I decide on a taxi. It's only a few kilometers out of the city center, past battleship-gray Soviet-era apartment blocks and the odd industrial park.

The entrance to the memorial, at the edge of a pine forest, is a simple demi-arch latticework of iron with stones trapped inside, something of an impressionistic take on barbed wire. It's a cold day and snow from the previous night thinly coats the ground. The place is deserted.

We pull into the muddy parking area. I hop out and walk a little way up the snowy path to the memorial itself. It's made up of rough-hewn stones suggesting a graveyard, laid out in a pattern that from

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overhead forms a six-pointed star, the Hebrew Star of David. In the middle is a twelve-foot-high metal menorah, the seven-tipped Jewish candelabra, made out of iron tendrils resembling branches or roots penetrating the earth.

Every stone is marked with a name: families who were killed here. Since they're partly wet from the melting snow, it's hard to make out the inscriptions, and I search in vain for anyone familiar. Then, as I am about to leave, I spot them: my great-aunt and her family, their surnames carved into the rock.

I stand for many minutes, paralyzed by emotion. My family's airbrush scatter of adopted homelands—not to mention my own cycle of wandering—have trained me to expect no trace of my lineal past to linger. But here it is. This is my Ground Zero. The presence of these names cements my connection to this place across the decades and centuries.

As dusk falls I return to town and take a final spin around the cobbly streets, now tranquil after the previous evening's reverie. Although the curves and proportions of the buildings betray a faintly eastern sensibility, the place distantly reminds me of my hometown, Montréal: the gray of the stone, the trees, the river, the frigid climate. I can see why my grandparents, having left this land behind, chose to settle where they did. Coming here feels like I've completed a circle somehow left unfulfilled by their passing. I've now experienced it for myself, if only briefly, the land where my forefathers lived, worked, loved, and died.

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