

In Memory of Benzi Kahana z"l (1944-2019)

by

Ilan Ganot and Raymond Ravinsky

On the 6th day of the month of Av 5781 (the 15th of July in 2021) we shall commemorate the second Yahrzeit since the passing away of Ben-Zion (Benzi) Kahana z"l on the 7th of August 2019. Seventy-eight years earlier, on the 10th of Av 5701 (3rd August 1941), Jewish life in the small shtetl of Mazheik (Mazeikiai in Lithuanian) in northern Lithuania came to a brutal end.

Benzi Kahana was one of the three co-founders and webmasters of the Mazheik Memorial Website (MMWS), all descendants of natives of the Jewish Mazheik community.

It all began in the early 2000's, when I started researching the roots of my father Moshe Iting z"l (1918- 2004) in his childhood town of Mazheik. He left his home and family in 1936, never to return and see his parents again, who were brutally murdered in August 1941, together with most of the Jewish citizens of the town.

During my research I got acquainted with Raymond Ravinsky via the LitvakSIG (Lithuanian Jewry Special Interest Group, affiliated with JewishGen), after his return from a roots trip to Lithuania in 2002. Shulamit, Raymond's mother, was also a native of Mazheik, immigrating to South Africa in the 1920's.

Trying to obtain additional information about my father's hometown, I wrote a letter to the Mazeikiai Historical Museum, but never got an answer.

Then, one day in the summer of 2003, I was surprised by a phone call from a total stranger, introducing himself as Benzi Kahana, descendant of the Aharonovitz family from Mazheik. Benzi told me: "I have just returned from a Roots tour in Eastern Europe, including Mazeikiai. While visiting the local historical museum, the museum curator told me about you [Ilan], showing me your letter to the museum a couple of years ago, asking for details about your father's home in Mazeikiai".



Benzi at the memorial to the Holocaust victims in near the death pits in Mazeikiai



Benzi by the sign to Tirkšliai
(The Jewish cemetery and mass murder site are located beside the road between Mazeikiai and Tirkšliai)

Benzi was kind enough to go and visit this address, take photos of the contemporary house where my father's wooden house once stood, as well as take photos of the still existing wooden house next to it. Benzi sent me the photos, and when I showed them to my father, he was very excited to see the wooden house, which he identified as the house of his neighbor, Zorach Peckel the butcher (later on we found out that Zorach Peckel was the uncle of Shalom Eilati, our fellow compatriot, and contributor to the Mazheik Memorial Website).



Zorach Peckel's wooden house

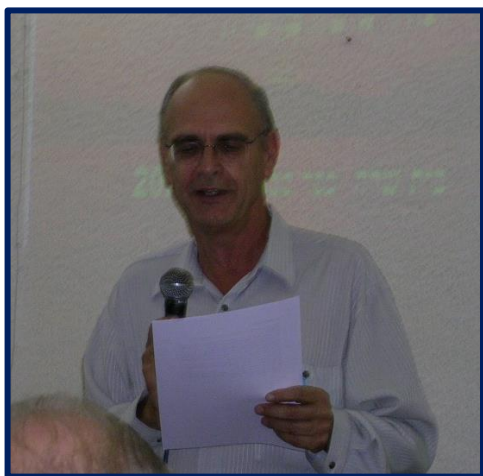


Contemporary house, where my father's wooden house stood

Several weeks later, in an email message to Raymond and Benzi, I wrote: "As far as I know there is no site on the Internet about the Jewish community of Mazeikiai. Almost every one of us has some relevant material: documents, pictures, stories. Why don't we pool our efforts and materials and establish a website about the Jewish community of Mazeikiai, where all this invaluable information could be stored and be available to others, as well?"

Benzi's and Raymond's reactions to my suggestion were very enthusiastic; BUT, we couldn't have imagined the amount of work that would be involved with it. (Had we known in the beginning – maybe we wouldn't have begun it at all???)

Over a year after the idea of the memorial website arose, and after many days of hard work, the MMWS was finally established. In November 2004, during the Aharoni/Aharonovitz family reunion at Beit Sarah in Kfar-Saba (which Benzi initiated and organized), we formally launched the website.



Benzi addressing the Aharoni family reunion



Benzi and Shalom Eilati

It has been about a decade and a half since we got started. Benzi was a motivating force behind the website, making ties with additional descendants of Jewish Mazeikiai, providing additional information and material, and encouraging Raymond and me to improve and expand the website more and more.

Many times, when I tried calling Benzi by phone, or writing to him by email or WhatsApp, I found out that he was travelling again and again with his beloved wife Michal to many countries around the globe. Yes, he indeed knew how to live well.

Benzi was also the motivating force behind establishing a new memorial plaque in 2011, in memory of the Jewish community of Mazheik, in the Forest of Martyrs near Jerusalem, after the original plaque, in the depth of the forest, hadn't survived. A group of descendants, including Benzi, his cousins Barbara and Leorah, as well as others, visited the site in June 2012, paying respect to the Martyrs of Mazheik.



And then... all of a sudden, one day in the summer of 2019, I received a shocking message from Leorah Kroyanker, Benzi's cousin, with the following obituary:



Neither Raymond nor I were aware of Benzi's illness that led to his sudden passing away. It was really heart-breaking to realize that Benzi was not among us anymore.

When I added the above obituary to this article, I noticed something that I wasn't aware of before: August 9th, the day when Benzi was brought to his final rest, was THE SAME DAY when, 78 years earlier, the women and children of the Jewish community of Mazheik were brutally killed and thrown into the death pits. Among them were members of Benzi's family, as well as mine and many others' families. Just six days earlier, on August 3rd 1941, the men of the Jewish community of Mazheik found their evil fate.

During recent years, the condition of the Mazheik Memorial Website deteriorated, requiring maintenance and repair. Benzi urged us to locate a volunteer, having the capabilities to perform such tasks. Unfortunately, it was only after Benzi's death that we located such a volunteer. One of the first additions to the website that we asked him to make, was posting the following obituary on the homepage:

The webmasters of the *Mazheik Memorial Website* are deeply sorrowful following the passing away of our dear friend and partner Ben-Zion (Benzi) Kahana z"l at the age of 75 years.

Benzi (1944 - 2019) was co-founder and dedicated co-webmaster of the *Mazheik Memorial Website*. He made significant contributions to the development and maintenance of the website, taking part in conserving and commemorating the community of our ancestors.

On behalf of all descendants of the Mazheik Shtetl, we offer our sincere condolences to the mourning family.



Last photograph of Benzi
(source: Facebook post of his son
Doron Kahana)

In several days from now we shall mark the second year since Benzi's passing away.
We, the remaining webmasters of the MMWS, miss him very much.

May Benzi's soul rest in peace

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July 2021