

# The Jews of Mariampole and Vicinity: Four Generations of History

## PREFACE

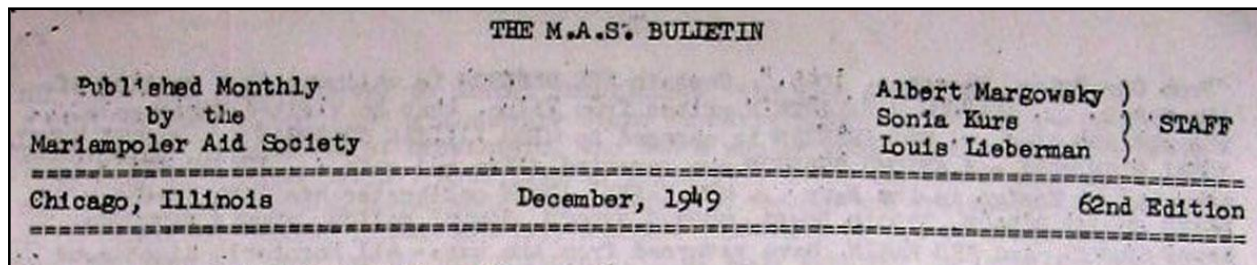


“Sunnie”  
Elaine  
(née Travis)  
Gordon  
“Digging up  
History”

In 2001 I began writing a family history for my children, grandchildren and future generations. The first chapter contained an account of my paternal grandparents. They had lived in Mariampole, a town 30 miles southwest of Kovno in Lithuania. My father was born there in 1899. He immigrated to the United States in 1922 to join his two older brothers in Chicago. In time, all except one of the ten siblings had settled there.

While I was looking for sources of information on Mariampole, I found a chapter on the Mariampoler Aid Society in Sid Sorkin’s book, *Bridges to an American City: A Guide to Chicago’s Landsmanshaften 1870 to 1890*. I contacted Sorkin and was told that he had used copies of the Mariampoler Aid Society (M.A.S.) Bulletins as the basis for his chapter about the society and that he had subsequently donated these

bulletins to the Chicago History Museum.



Hearing about the bulletins brought back memories. During my childhood in Chicago my parents received monthly bulletins with a letterhead saying Mariampoler Aid Society (M.A.S.). The bulletins consisted of either two or four legal-sized pages folded neatly in a first-class, hand-addressed envelope. As a teenager, I recall reading some of these bulletin entries, especially those that talked about my parents or myself. For example, the bulletin praised my mother’s artistic decorations prepared for the Mariampoler Aid Society reunion in 1956 and acknowledged my father’s contributions to the society to help needy *landslyte* (townspeople) — the few who had survived the Nazi tragedy and were living in desperate conditions, often in displaced persons camps.

My parents, like other Mariampoler parents, reported their children’s accomplishments to the bulletin editor, who publicized the information. Re-reading the bulletins, I found an item lauding my Torah reading and speech delivery on the occasion of my *Bas Mitzvah* on Feb. 15, 1946 at South Side Hebrew Congregation, a Conservative Jewish synagogue in South Shore, Chicago.

The M.A.S. bulletins also documented my work-study trip to Israel as a college student during the summer of 1951. The State of Israel had been established only three years earlier, making this an exciting time to be there and be part of what was going on. Bulletins mentioned subsequent life events — my B.S. from Columbia University and M.A. in occupational therapy education from New York University. Another bulletin mentioned the pulley device I invented to motivate my rehabilitation patients, an apparatus I named “The Colored Light and Shadow Player.” Its description was published in the January 1958 *Physical Therapy Review*.

Unfortunately, by the time I earned a doctorate in clinical psychology, my parents had died and the bulletins were no longer being published, cutting off this channel of print communication among the Mariampoler community.

The recollections of the immigrants in the bulletins inspired me to write “Everyday Life of Jews in Mariampole and Vicinity.” So on two occasions I arranged with the Chicago History Museum’s research librarian to gather the uncatalogued bulletins. I then I traveled to Chicago from my home in Seattle to reproduce as many of the materials as time permitted. I also met with David Passman, a Mariampole descendant and the last editor of the bulletins, who owned additional materials from Chicago’s Mariampoler Aid Society, including the annual Mariampoler Aid Society yearbooks. With David’s permission, I copied the relevant sections.

David referred to information about myself in the bulletins, and said with wry humor. “Let me be the last to congratulate you on your *Bas Mitzvah* (the Jewish religious rite of passage at age 13).”

Historians dote on primary sources for their research. I considered the bulletins containing the Mariampoler immigrants’ remembrances a primary source for the social history of life in Mariampole. As far as I could determine, no one else used the bulletins for this purpose. I read them with the enthusiasm of reading a good novel.

But like a good novel, the bulletins contained tragedy as well as triumph. I was pained to read the accounts that contained the vivid descriptions of the drunken Nazis who buried the Mariampoler Jews alive. In my chapter, “Everyday Life of Jews in Mariampole, Lithuania,” I chose to omit the evils of the Holocaust, in part because of my discomfort with the topic and also because historical scholars have written many accounts of these events.

As I read, I noticed that the immigrants’ remembrances were filled with Yiddish words. I recalled the language from my preschool years before we had a car radio, when my Mariampoler father sang Yiddish folk songs while driving. With the help of my elementary German, I was able to decipher many of the Yiddish words. However, I discovered that YIVO, a society for research on the Yiddish language, had determined a standard transliteration for Yiddish. Although some native Yiddish speakers objected to the YIVO because they preferred the Germanic transliteration used in the bulletins, I decided to use YIVO in

order to retain a scholarly presentation. I constructed a glossary with the YIVO spellings and used this in my chapter, “Everyday Life of Jews in Mariampole, Lithuania.”

In the course of my research, I learned of Mariampoler descendants who contributed significantly to society, and I decided to make these contributions known. So I gathered as much information as I could and presented it in the chapter, “Noteworthy Jewish Descendants of Mariampole and Vicinity.”

Information for the biographies was taken from the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, *Wikipedia*, and books on Jewish topics, as well as from the Mariampoler bulletins and individual Mariampoler descendants. Since I have no way of knowing if I have identified all of such noteworthy individuals, this chapter is necessarily a work in progress.

The bulletins also provided a rich source of information about the Mariampoler Aid Society and its activities. This material was of interest to my friend, social worker Joan V. Burnett, who reviewed the excerpts from the bulletin relating to the work of the society and did a preliminary classification using a framework based upon organizational theory. She then narrowed her focus to bulletins from the 1940s and 1950s, a period during which the Mariampoler Aid Society was forced to adapt its goals and activities to a tragically changed world. The results of her study are presented in the chapter, “The Work of the Mariampoler Aid Society after the Holocaust.”

I hope that this social history of Mariampole and its descendants will help others to appreciate the lives of their Jewish ancestors from Mariampole and similar communities in Lithuania, and that the chapters will shed light on the challenges faced by these people — both in Mariampole and in the countries to which they emigrated. I also hope the contributions to society made by those who survived will be as uplifting to others as they have been to me.

The chapters, “The Jews of Mariampole and Vicinity: Four Generations of History,” can be a vehicle of communication for people searching for their roots. They are also intended to encourage other family historians to share their discoveries and support one another as they pursue the stories of their ancestors. A reader who wishes to add a biography of a noteworthy descendant should send the information to Sunnie Gordon, 7111 Linden Ave. N., #404, Seattle, WA 98103 or e-mail it to [sunnieg@u.washington.edu](mailto:sunnieg@u.washington.edu). I can also be reached by phone, 206-783-1200. I will include new information I receive in the next edition of these chapters.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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