

## Chapter Ten Minkivtsi

In the center of Minkivtsi there were clusters of people who seemed to have nothing in particular to do. Several of them were at the little store and one older man approached us, asking Alex who we were and what we wanted. He volunteered to take us to the “Jewish street” which turned out to be less than a block away. He showed us several large houses owned by Jews before the war. Many of these houses were painted an interesting shade of blue. The facade is cement, or some similar material, and the blue is a light blue but with a very slight purplish tint to it. We hadn’t seen this color anywhere else and wondered if it was peculiar to this village. Later, we saw this color all over this area of Ukraine.

The man told us about people named Bronfman, Feldstein and Cooperman and other Jewish names we can’t remember. We asked if he remembered anybody named Broitman, Bekelman or Maschtalier.



“Jewish houses.” This one belonged to the Bronfman family. Note the “Minkivtsi” blue. It is more apparent on the photograph below.



Another “Jewish” house



Our escort didn't know any of our family names but he volunteered to take us to a former school teacher, Helen Mashtykash, who he thought might be able to help us. She lives in a house only two or three houses from where we were standing but he insisted on walking there with us.

The woman was in her yard when we approached. Alex spoke with her awhile, translating as he went. She said she remembered many Jewish people but no one with the names we mentioned. She directed us to a building that used to be a Jewish school. On the way we passed a field that used to be the site of four more Jewish homes. Apparently, a Nazi officer took up residence in the house on the corner during the war and ordered these four houses destroyed as they were in his backyard.

Joan outside Helen Mashtykash's house in Minkivtsi.



The school was a block from the teacher's house. The man walked us there. While we were looking at the school, Helen came running up to us to tell us she remembered a woman named Bekelman who had red hair. This was Yankel's daughter from his second marriage. We were thrilled, to say the least. She took us to meet an old woman who lived in the house next to hers. She told us this woman was the Bekelman woman's friend. They went to school together. On the way there, she remembered the Bekelman woman's name was Luba.



The Jewish school.

Another photograph of the Jewish school



Helen went into her neighbor's house and returned with Adela Vishovska who told us she remembered Luba Bekelman very well. They had been friends. We think Luba must have been born about 1915 which would make Adela about 85 years old. She told us Yankel had been a jeweler. Then she started reciting, "Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Daleth." She said Luba taught her the Hebrew alphabet and she still remembered it. Then she dropped a bombshell. She told us Luba had emigrated to Israel and that there is a woman in town who still writes to her. You know where we went next.

Adela gave us directions and the old man led the way. We couldn't thank Helen and Adela enough. We truly never expected to find anyone who knew anything about our ancestors. And now we were about to meet someone who still writes to one of them. We could barely control our excitement.



The old man who led us around Minkivtsi, Helen Mashtykash and Adela Vishnovska



Nina Orchevetna

We walked up the road, uphill, for about a block and cut through a pathway between two houses until we came to a fence. Alex opened the gate and went inside. We still hadn't gotten over our sensitivity toward invading anyone's private property but Alex was in the

lead and we had come to trust his judgment. And, as usual, there was no problem about barging right in. We asked to see Nina Orchevetna, the woman who writes to Luba Bekelman. Nina seemed excited to meet us and immediately invited us into her house to see photographs she had of Luba.

Nina's house is painted what we came to think of as Minkivtsi blue. She has four rooms. Two of them seem to be bedrooms. Each room opens into another.



The first room has two beds made up to look like daybeds or couches. The beds are set perpendicular to each other against the walls. The two other walls in this room each have only a doorway leading to another room. The beds are covered with oriental style rugs and each has a round bolster in the center with a piece of lace cloth covering it.

Another view of the same room. You can see the wall coverings very well in these photographs. The walls, themselves, seem to be painted plaster. All the rooms are painted the same light blue color.





The next room, also a bedroom, has two beds, parallel to each other, also covered with oriental style rugs, jutting into the center of the room. This room also has a cabinet, a stand for an old TV, a telephone table and an ancient telephone, a small wooden table covered with an oilcloth and four chairs. The light bulb hung from the center of the ceiling without any adornment. The wall behind

the beds had an oriental style rug on it.

Two views of the “nicest” room, the third room. It is the most fancy room in the house, but appeared to have no function. We did not see places to sit or to invite guests. There were tables with photographs and places with a few decorator pieces like vases, a mirror and something that resembled a dressing table.



The fourth room is the kitchen, but you would not recognize it as anything like the kitchens in America. There is no sink, of course, and no stove or refrigerator. There are

small cabinets and shelves where canned foods and dishes are kept. Unfortunately, we don't have a photograph of this room.

There is a small entryway where Nina and her husband Petrov take off their shoes before entering the main part of the house. Alex asked Nina if we should take off our shoes and she assured us it wasn't necessary. Joan commented that this was good because she had a hole in her sock. Alex couldn't believe that an American would have a hole in her sock.

Nina told us Luba and she were good friends. Luba was a telephone operator before the war. She worked at the post office where she delivered messages, telegrams. Nina was her supervisor. Luba was very poor and Nina tried to help her. She let Luba baby sit her children while Nina worked. During the war, Nina's family hid Luba. They dressed her in peasant clothing and, together, they delivered food to the people in the village. Luba's brother was killed during the war.

Luba married Simon in about 1932. He also worked at the post office. Their son Yura, was born in 1934. He was a teacher and went to live in Chernovitz. He had two daughters, Anitchka and another daughter whose name Nina couldn't remember. Simon was drafted into the Soviet Army, went to war, never to return. They never heard from him again and it is assumed he perished. Yura is also dead. But as close as we can tell, his death is not war related.

After the war, Luba remarried, to Abraham Markovitch. They had a son Boris in 1947. Boris is a teacher of music. Nina proudly told us he completed his studies at the musical high school. Boris married Rose in Kamenetz Podolski where they had three sons. They divorced and she went to live in Germany with the boys. Luba and Abraham moved to Mogilov Podolski. Later, Boris and his second wife Luda, and Luba emigrated to Israel. Nina still writes to Luba there. She gave us Luba's address and phone number. We will, of course, try to contact them. She is known as Luba Mak.

Nina went through her photographs and found the ones we have shown here. We asked if she would allow us to take them home, to photocopy them and then return them. She agreed without hesitation. We were amazed at her generosity.



1957 – Luba Bekelman, second woman on the left, with a white scarf.  
Nina Orcheretna, fourth woman from the left, also with a white scarf.



Nina with Rose and Boris Bekelman

Seated, left to right: Abraham Markowitz, (Luba's second husband), Yura's daughter, (Nina couldn't remember her name), Luba Bekelman Mak  
Standing: Anitchka (Yura's daughter), Yura Bekelman (Luba's son)





The car was parked down the hill, quite far from Nina and Petrov's house. Alex decided it would be too far for us to walk to go back to the car so he left to get it. He told us he would park in the pathway leading up to Nina's house. This left us alone with Nina. She was being so nice but we had no way to communicate with her. She spoke only Ukrainian and we spoke only English. Joan noticed a religious calendar on her table and began to read the Cyrillic names of the months. Nina corrected her pronunciation. She kept trying to tell us about the photographs and about Luba but we were unable to understand a word until Alex came back to rescue us.

Nina and Petrov invited us for lunch. We were reluctant to accept because they had so little but Alex assured us their feelings would be hurt if we did not accept. So we did. They went outside to their "summer kitchen" while we sat on a bench in the yard and enjoyed the fresh air. Alex picked apples from their tree and he and Joan ate them while we waited. They are small, green and sour, like Granny Smith apples, only more so, and very delicious.

We asked to see the "summer kitchen." Alex explained that most people have a shack near their house where they cook on a propane stove for as long as the weather will allow. Petrov has a stack of sugar beets lying on the ground behind their house. The beets are used to make samahone, homemade vodka with honey added. Everyone makes their own. We asked to taste the vegetable. It looks like a large parsnip and tastes like slightly sweet parsnips.

When lunch was ready we were led back to the bedroom with the table and TV. The table had been moved out from the wall and set with five places. Petrov and Nina brought in sliced light brown bread, fried cubed potatoes, homemade, sour, Jewish style pickles, cubes of cold pork with the congealed fat left on, homemade raspberry juice and samahone. We noticed that they weren't eating. We think they were concerned that there wouldn't be enough food so we ate sparingly, insisting through Alex that they also eat. We tasted everything including the samahone. They were amused when Joan reported that she was getting tipsy after consuming only about half an inch of their vodka. Of course, we complemented their food. We were very moved by their generosity and kindness. They even invited us to stay in their house overnight but we were relieved to be able to tell them we had a hotel room waiting for us in Krasilov.

Petrov insisted that Joan take some samahone home with her because she had enjoyed it so much. He gave her a small bottle with a label for CALIFIG 'California Syrup of Figs' With Senna.' Everything store bought is saved for re-use, especially bottles and tins.



Bobby asked if she could use their bathroom. Nina said sure and escorted her to their wooden outhouse. There is a board on the floor with a hole in it leading down to a three foot pit. Bobby says the boards were wet as though someone had “missed.” After using the “facilities,” Nina motioned for Bobby to follow her. She has a small pot in her hand. She led Bobby to a large cauldron of rainwater and proceeded to dip the small pot into the cauldron and pour water over Bobby’s hands from the small pot. There were many large pots in the yard to catch rainwater. Bobby later told us they had a “Turkish Standing” with a small shelf containing torn bits of paper that could be used in place of toilet paper. We had been carrying tissue packets for just such an emergency and she was glad to have hers.

As we were preparing to leave, Nina asked if we knew Bella Finkel. She said Bella used to send them packages of food and clothes but the Soviets learned of this and made them send the packages back with a note that these items were not needed. Bella’s mother Chaia (Ida) Milstein was the daughter of our great grandmother Fannie Bekelman Milstein Maschtalier/Brautman.

We could not thank Nina and Petrov enough. They are proud people and we felt we would insult them by offering to give them any money. We left some hryvnas under one plate and decided to send them a gift when we returned their photographs.

We were overwhelmed by the kindness of the people we had met and were astounded to meet people who knew any of our relatives. This was completely unexpected. We’ve read stories on the Internet where visitors to ancestral towns met relatives or people who know their relatives, but we never expected it would happen to us. We both felt that, this day alone, made the entire trip worthwhile.