

A JOURNEY TO MOTOL

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Boise, Idaho, USA February 2, 2012

It was a beautiful fall day in Belarus, with Rosh Hashanah rapidly approaching. I had been looking forward to a journey to the south of the country, during my three week visit to Belarus. What had brought me to Belarus was an international volunteer project related to food safety in agriculture and food manufacturing. On September 19, 2011, I departed Minsk with my guide Bella Velikovskaia, from the Jewish Heritage Research Group in Belarus (<http://www.jhrgbelarus.org/>), and driver Sasha, on a journey to connect with my past. My grandmother Freidl Czemerenski lived in Motol and Ivanovo (Yanova), Belarus, before immigrating to the United States in the early 1900's at the age of 15. Our trip would take us to Motol, Pinsk, and Ivanovo. This article is illustrated with many photos found on the Motol site.

For the past 15 years, I have been exploring my family roots in Lithuania and Belarus. One set of my grandparents emigrated from the villages of Motol and Yanova (near Pinsk) and from Ščučyn (or Stuchin, near Grodno) in what is now Belarus. My grandmother Freidl was born in Motol in 1894 to Arieħ Lieb ben Schlomo Czemerenski (b. 1876 d. 1946) and Yetta Jeutp bat Zelig Livish Sporovski (b. 1879 d. 1958). At one point, my grandmother's family relocated from Motol to Yanova, a short distance of 20 km. She, her siblings, and her parents immigrated to Chicago in the early 1900's, and changed their name to Goldstein. The siblings were Jennie (b. 1892), Ida Chaia (b. 1901), and Sam Schlomo (b. 1904). Arieħ Lieb's parents were Schlomo and Naomi Czemerenski. Yetta's parents were Zelig (b. 1821) and Michla Sporovski, from Yanova. The 1853 Belarus Revision list shows that Zelig had three brothers also from Yanova: Baruch, Leibko, and Abraham. His father is also listed as Leizor.

Motol is famous for its Czemerenski families, and is the birthplace of Chaim Weizmann (first President of Israel), whose mother was Rachel Leah Czemerenski.

According to family legend, my great grandfather Arie Leib was second cousin to Chaim Weizmann. It is speculated that the name Czemerenski originates from the nearby village Chemerin (east of Motol). People that lived there and worked for a large estate were given the Czemerenski name.

To reach Pinsk and Motol, we traveled from Minsk on Highway M1, a fast double lane toll road. Our vehicle was a 1991 Mercedes Benz sedan. We traveled through a beautiful country side of expansive green pastures, surrounded by forest land with birches and pine. Light clouds skirted across the sky, highlighting and shading the largely flat terrain. We passed a 10 meter high red statue of a bison, symbolic of the restoration of this animal to western Belarus forest reserves. On reaching Jahlevicy, after about 3 hours, we turned off M1 and headed southeast towards Pinsk. After 27 kilometers, we turned right and headed about another 25 kilometers south to Motol. We started driving through small villages and saw wooden horse carts with rubber tires driving down the small road. It felt like the clock had suddenly been turned back 75 years. The scenery was lush and panoramic. The villages had predominantly small wood houses, numerous vegetable and flower gardens, and stork nests on platforms above houses. Overhead, raptors slowly drifted in the warm fall air. Some fields were dotted with black and white cows. The countryside very much looked like what I am accustomed to in western Washington State, and bore an ironic semblance to Whatcom County, a modern family outpost. It was hard to believe I was on the way to the home of my grandmother, a place I had seen only on paper for the past 15 years of genealogical research.

The road went past Abrova and Tyskavicy. It turned to gravel about 5 kilometers past Abrova, and we traveled through the countryside of open fields for about 12 kilometers on this back road. We crossed the Yaselda River and then entered Motol. Our driver was worried during this drive about the gravel and washboard surface of the gravel segment of the road, but it was very passable and there was no damage to the car (It should be noted, however, that the best condition road and the fastest route is via Ivanovo.).

As we entered Motol, we crossed the river and pulled over to take a picture of the city name sign. We reached the main intersection of the road to Ivanovo, and turned right and headed to the town center to get bearings and to take a few photos.

The town center is only a small city block long, with a grocery store, school, café, other small businesses, and two WWII war monuments. There was a white war monument nearby and another monument of canon with a memorial plaque. The white monument was built on a piece of land where one of the Weizmann family homes originally stood (Chaim Weizmann- first President of Israel). Nearby there were many very old wooden homes. Several near the town center had an extra doorway that appeared to be boarded up. According to Bella, these were possibly Jewish homes that doubled as shops, with an extra door facing the street as the business entrance.

I had lunch with Bella at the town center café of cole slaw, white cabbage borscht, chicken, and black bread. Then it was off to the Motol Museum, where I spent an hour with the curator and Bella going over my genealogy and family from Motol. The curator was familiar with the Czemerenski family and knew the detailed history of the Weizmann family homes. She informed us that a group from some Swiss banks had visited Motol many years ago in an attempt to find surviving family members of Holocaust victims who had left behind their fortunes.

We walked through the museum, which has a collection of embroidered fabrics and an area of displays on the history, agriculture, and crafts of Motol. In the past, flax was a big crop in the area and was made into fabric through a long process, demonstrated through one of the displays. Logging and wood working was another large industry, and the Weitzman family was one example of Jews who successfully made a living selling logs. The museum has an extensive display of wood working tools, such as saws and hand planes. There were many old photos of these local industries. One exhibit had highly embroidered garments and jackets. The displays were in Russian, and it was not immediately apparent from the exhibits that Jewish life of Motol was addressed.

Along with the museum curator, we next toured the town to look at surviving houses of Jews, the Motol road sign with Hebrew lettering, the Chaim Weizmann home, and the cemetery. The Weizmann home was built by his grandfather and added on to as the family grew. It is now owned by Sergey Musienko, director, Advisory Board with Belarus President's Administration (+375 297 69 0718), from Minsk. It was moved from the original location, and now sits on a small lot near the lake. Eventually additional Weizmann homes were built in Motol. The home has some historical documents, pictures, and photos from Weizmann's life.

We returned to Pinsk by taking a small back road through the villages of Moladava, Parecca, Mercycy, and Stavok. During this one hour drive, we saw more pasture land, forests, and wet lands with flowing streams and abundant bird life.

In Pinsk, we stayed at the Pripyat Hotel, located on the bank of the Pripyat River. In the late afternoon we strolled over to the synagogue, and then along the river to find a place to eat. During the walk we passed the gymnasium where Chaim Weizmann went to school and saw a plaque on the outside of the building in his honor.

The Soviet-style hotel has seen its better days, with its block concrete rooms. As our rooms were on the seventh floor, we had to take a closet-sized elevator that clunked up to our floor and jerked to a stop. The disco downstairs kicked in around 10 pm and there was thundering music until the small hours of the morning. Ear plugs are a real blessing and are highly recommended for travel in Belarus.

Having survived the pounding bass of the late night disco, I awoke to a lovely scene of the sun rising over the Pripyat River, which was lightly covered by a low lying fog on the river surface and banks. The late night reveries were replaced by the chattering of birds and the sound of a tug boat pushing a barge up the river.

I welcomed the morning with a breakfast of an omelet, black bread, and a hard cottage-type cheese topped with sour cream. We ate in the disco hall, now converted to a dining room, under large speakers and lighting equipment. I chatted with Bella for an hour in the hotel lobby, and then had a visit from the President of the Pinsk Jewish community, Joseph Lieberman, who brought me information on Czemerenski family members who lived in Pinsk. Mr. Lieberman spoke no English, but we took photos of each other and he presented me with two newspapers of the Pinsk Jewish community. Together we then drove over to the Pinsk Synagogue to visit the Yeshiva and the Rabbi; only 3 minutes from the hotel. I met a few of the yeshiva bochers, gave some tzedakah, and we headed over to the mikvah building. The mikvah is well established and there are two units for men and women. The building is being remodeled into a Jewish museum upstairs and there was a renovation taking place of some old Jewish grave stones in the back yard. We loaded up a few cases of kosher gefilte fish and tuna from the storage unit in the back yard, and headed out again for Motol and Ivanovo. The fish was destined for the Jewish community back in Minsk.

We returned to Motol the next day by driving highway M10 towards Kobrin and turning north at Ivanovo. Highway M10 is a two lane road, but in good condition and well marked. Morning traffic in Pinsk is very congested and slow.

It was another sunny day, with wispy clouds. I remember the clouds as we pulled into Motol: they were forming a type of abstract crown and I saw the Hebrew letter tsadi sofit in the sky. I felt somewhat serene walking through Motol and appreciating the local environment. Of course it was a scene of slaughter during the Holocaust, but there once were hundreds of years of a thriving and vibrant village life. I wandered around town breathing in the wonderful air and trying to visualize what it was like as a remote and vibrant Jewish community. I meandered along side streets, paused by the edge of the lake, and went by Chaim Weizmann's house, taking photos and imprinting the visual experience in my memory. Across the lake were flocks of swans or white geese, and a few boats were drifting on the lake, with people fishing. The lake appears to have a large amount of aquatic plants on the surface, but still is navigable. There are rushes and cattails growing along the edge of the lake. We went back to the cemetery one last time to light yahrzeit candles and take a few photos in the area. The cemetery has only two or three remnants of headstones in an open grassy area surrounded by a metal fence. One of the stones still has faintly visible Hebrew lettering. It was hard to leave this village, and I darted down one of the dirt roads alongside the Jewish cemetery to take one last look at the area and homes.

On the way back to Minsk, we drove south from Motol back to Ivanovo (Yanova), and then West on M10 to Drahichyn. It takes about 20 minutes to drive from Motol to Ivanovo. We went to the city square and to Lenin Street, where there are some surviving Jewish homes. I took a few photos, and then we drove over to the square with a large church, the government building, and a statue of Lenin.

On leaving Ivanovo, we drove west, then turned north on road #136 from M10, as I wanted to stop in Chomsk for some photos. We stopped at the Jewish Holocaust monument and a quick walk around town for pictures. Chomsk is not far from Motol, probably only 10 miles as the crow flies on a back road, but further via the highway. It was the site of another Jewish massacre. The Nazis had a large extermination operation in a ring that was demarked by the villages of Zabrinka, Shereshov, Pružany, Chomsk, and Antopol. From Pružany, either Jews were murdered or deported to Auschwitz.

We continued on road #136, passing through many villages, and reached the intersection with highway M1 after 40 minutes, to head back to Minsk. Overall the roads were well marked, and I saw no accidents on this trip. The speed limit on M10 is from 100 to 120 km/hour, although about 10% of the traffic was moving at 150 km/hour. On the smaller road, the speed was about 60 to 80 km/hour. There were many stands and vendors along the highway and side roads, selling berries, mushrooms, potatoes, and other produce. As far as human necessities, there are roadside restrooms on the main highways, in addition to restaurants and gasoline stations. All facilities were well maintained and restrooms were clean. I ate in restaurants along the highway and in a café in Motol, and was impressed with the quality and safety of the food.

We made a quick dinner stop at a restaurant just off the highway. Dinner was tomato juice, cabbage borscht, black bread, herring, and a plate of fried fish and mashed potatoes (too much food!).

Back on the road, I watched as the fields and forests flew by, trying to digest my dinner and also what I had seen the past two days. We went by farms with crops of sugar beets, potatoes, and silage corn, still under harvest. Time passed quickly, and I barely had a chance to absorb the dialogue from Bella and the visual images. On the other hand, while wandering the back roads of Motol, time stood still as I was transported back in time over 100 years to a thriving shtetl on the brink of large changes and eventual destruction. How could a people who lived in this land since the eleventh century find such a final fate to their existence?

We parted ways with Bella back in Minsk and reentered the world of a large city filled with cars, people, and grocery stores. At the end of the day, I was dazed and felt my journey back in time was all somewhat surreal.

H. J. K. 02/02/12

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Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to my loving parents, Nathan and Phyllis Kronenberg.

I wish to express my thanks to Jenny Schwartzberg, Chicago, IL, for reviewing this article.