



Photo courtesy of Jere Friedman

Roots and branches: Touching the family tree

The author, at far right, enters Verbovets, Ukraine, with family members and their tour guide. The matching shirts have a "Shtetl Rats" logo.

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Roots and branches: Touching the family tree JERE FRIEDMAN Special to Jewish News

In August 2010, my brothers, some other family members and I spent eight nights in Ukraine exploring our family roots. Our group included my brothers Murray, Lenny, and Bill Friedman; Lenny's wife, Colleen, and their children, Alison and Nick; my wife, Ellen, and her son Ben Alter; and me.

Along the way we met with people with whom we might be related. We saw and, at times, touched places where our ancestors lived, worshipped, and are buried. We stopped in Kiev, Berdychev, Medzhybizh, Uman and other places of great significance in the history and culture of Eastern European Jewry. We also saw and learned a lot about the history of Ukraine and other countries in the region.

How did this trip come about?

In the 1980s, I became interested in my family history and genealogy. With the help of many of our relatives, I was able to put together a rudimentary family tree showing my maternal grandfather's "branch" of my ancestors. We knew that my grandfather, Abraham (Stolin) Stein, came from Bila Tserkva, a city about 90 minutes south of Kiev, Ukraine. "Pop" left Bila Tserkva in 1913 to come to the U.S. From a cousin, I learned that Pop's father and grandfather were pharmacists and had an apothecary in Bila Tserkva.

I next tackled the genealogy of my maternal grandmother. I remembered that my two oldest brothers had recorded interviews of our grandmother, Annie (Greenberg) Stein, before she passed away, as well as one of her sisters. From the tape recordings I learned that Grandma Annie and her family lived in a shtetl (Yiddish for "tiny village") called "Verbovets" somewhere not far from the city named Kamianets-Podilskyi. This is in or near the region called "Bessarabia," in what is now southwest Ukraine, across the Dniester River from what is now Moldova and Romania.

Fast forward to the late 1990s. A distant relative of my grandmother passed away, leaving a small estate and no direct descendants. The attorneys handling her estate used the family tree that I had done 10 years earlier to

establish that our extended family was entitled to share in at least a portion of the inheritance. But the attorneys did not stop there - they hired a genealogical search firm to see if they could turn up any other living relatives.

The search firm came back with a report that there were, indeed, several people still living in Ukraine who claimed to be related. They traced their ancestry to two Greenberg brothers who were born in Verbovets in the 1880s. The brothers' father was Yitzhak Greenberg. When I checked my family tree, I saw that my great-great-grandfather's name was Yitzhak Greenberg. Unfortunately, any written birth records or other documentation from that era were destroyed by either the Soviets or the Nazis so, no one could prove whether my great-great-grandfather is the same Yitzhak Greenberg from Verbovets as the ancestor of the people who still resided in Ukraine.

For several years, my brothers and I talked about traveling to Ukraine to explore our ancestral lands and to meet our "relatives" there. Finally, when my brother Bill decided to retire in 2010, he announced, "If we're going to make the trip to Ukraine, this is the year to do it."

We coordinated calendars and settled on travel dates. Ellen remembered that someone we know here in Phoenix is originally from Kiev. That person contacted one of her friends in Kiev, and the friend put us in touch with Jeanna Burgina, a professional guide who specializes in Jewish heritage tours in Ukraine. Our adventure was set.

Visiting 'relatives'

The highlights of this trip were our ventures to Bila Tserkva and Verbovets and, especially, meeting several Greenberg "relatives" who still live in Ukraine.

We did not have a lot of information about our ancestors in Bila Tserkva. A relative who emigrated from Kiev to the United States in the 1990s said the city museum in Bila Tserkva had an old map of the city that showed our great-grandfather's apothecary at a certain intersection. Our guide called ahead about this, but after a search the museum curators told us they could not find such a map.

We walked around the city a bit, and our guide showed us several buildings that had served as synagogues prior to the Soviet era. We also saw the building that has served as a central market for more than a century. I envisioned my grandfather as a young man, selling various goods at this market before he departed Bila Tserkva for the U.S. in 1913.

We did have one little clue to go on: a letter that my great-grandmother wrote to one of her sons in Moscow in 1939; the envelope has a return address in Bila Tserkva. After a few minutes' walk, we arrived at the address. Some local people told us that the house that stands there now was built after World War II. Still, it was thrilling to know that we were standing at the site of a house where our great-grandmother had once lived.

From Bila Tserkva we drove to Zhitomir, a city of about 300,000 people that is about two hours west of Kiev. We had dinner with Olga Greenberg and her family in their apartment. Olga is one of the descendants of Yitzhak Greenberg from Verbovets. As noted earlier, there is no documentary proof that we are related. We went to Ukraine, however, on the assumption that we are related in some fashion. After spending time with Olga and her family, we felt an even stronger connection than before.

Olga is about 55 years old. Until recently, she worked as a physician - her salary was about \$225 per month. She retired recently due to health reasons, and her pension is now about half of what she earned when she was working. Her husband works as a construction engineer designing industrial buildings.

Olga traveled with us from Zhitomir to Verbovets and the nearby village of Murovani-Kurylivtsi, where she grew up. Verbovets is in extreme southwest Ukraine, about a one-hour drive from Kamianets-Podilskiyi. About 600 people lived there in 1900 and many, if not most, of them were Jewish.

When we arrived in Verbovets, our guide asked a local woman for information. She told us where to find the building that had been the synagogue before Soviet times. It still stands today - it now is used as a recreation hall for the local school. The building was locked and we could not enter, but we all felt great excitement as we stood in front of the building where my great-grandfather and other ancestors had once worshipped.

From there, another local woman led us up a hill to the Jewish cemetery. After a brief walk past farmhouses, haystacks and barnyards, we entered a cow pasture atop the hill. Scattered all about the hill were ancient granite headstones: a few upright, many tilted at various angles, some flat on the ground. Most were too weathered to read but we could make out the names on a few: "Aharon son of David," "Yitzhak son of Mordecai." We walked about in hushed amazement, taking photographs and filled with wonder, excitement and joy to know that our ancestors were buried in some of these graves.

I found it especially touching to realize that, notwithstanding the history of the Jews in this region and what happened to them in the early 1940s, the farmer who owns this hillside cow pasture still goes to the trouble to mow around the headstones. It would be much easier for him to just knock them down and mow over everything. We were all thankful that he has not done so.

After spending the better part of an hour in the cemetery, we said kaddish for our ancestors and the others who are buried there and continued on our journey.

We next drove to nearby Murovani-Kurylivtsi, where Olga grew up.

She showed us the area in the center of the village that the Nazis had enclosed in 1941 as a ghetto for the Jews of Murovani-Kurylivtsi and other villages, including Verbovets. Within this area is a Soviet-era memorial to all of the local men who died in the Great Patriotic War (what we know as World War II). The name of one of Olga's uncles is inscribed on this wall. Her father was the only one of four sons that survived the war.

From there we proceeded to a clearing in the forest just outside the village. On Aug. 20, 1942, the Nazis marched all of the Jews from the ghetto to this clearing, shot them and buried them in mass graves. A modest monument acknowledges the memory of the more than 9,000 victims there. We recited kaddish once again at this site.

We said our goodbyes to Olga and went to another nearby village, Nova Ushytsia. There we met with Dina Greenberg, another of the descendants of Yitzhak Greenberg from Verbovets. As with Olga Greenberg, there is no documentary proof that we are directly related.

Dina is about 60 years old and nearly blind with cataracts. She also lives on a meager pension and is trying to save her money for the surgery that will restore her sight. She showed us her siddur and told us that she prays daily and goes to the local synagogue regularly.

Dina's three daughters are grown. After Ukraine became independent in 1991, all three daughters emigrated to Israel. Two daughters are still in Israel, while the third moved to Australia after she completed her university studies because she found the security situation in Israel too unsettling.

We had a very emotional meeting with Dina. She was overjoyed to meet us and burst into tears several times, saying "I knew there was family!" She told us a story that her mother had often told her. During the great famine in Ukraine in

1932-33, when millions of people in Ukraine starved to death as a result of the collectivization of farms and economic and trade policies instituted under Stalin, Dina's family received a letter from some relatives in Baltimore. The relatives sent \$5 with the letter, and that money enabled them to buy food. Dina told us that her mother always said, "That money saved our lives."

My great-grandfather's brother and his family lived in Baltimore during this time - it is quite possible that they sent the letter and money. As with Olga, this and other "circumstantial evidence" is certainly compelling for me to believe that we are, indeed, related to Dina.

Kiev and Babi Yar

We spent the first day and a half of our trip in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine.

Kiev is a beautiful city along the banks of the Dnieper River and we stopped at all the major tourist sites there: St. Sophia Cathedral, Kiev Pechersk Lavra (Monastery of the Caves), St. Andrew's Church, the House with Chimaeras, and the stupendous Mother Motherland monument at the Museum of the Great Patriotic War.

What was much more meaningful to us, however, was learning about the rich Jewish history in and around Kiev and visiting the various Jewish sites there. We went into the magnificent Central Synagogue, also known as the Brodsky Synagogue in honor of the wealthy Brodsky brothers who helped finance its construction. The Soviets closed down this synagogue in 1926 and in the 1950s it was turned into a puppet theater. After Ukraine's independence in the early 1990s it returned to Jewish ownership, underwent a full renovation, and now serves as the center of Kiev's Chabad community. An active minyan service was underway on the morning that we visited.

We also visited the Synagogue of the Jewish Community of Kiev. This was built in 1894 and the Nazis used it as a stable during World War II. After the war, it was Kiev's only functioning synagogue, although the few Jews who ventured to pray there during the Soviet era were kept under tight surveillance.

I recalled briefly visiting this synagogue on a Saturday morning during a prior visit to Kiev in 1990, when Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union.

Our tour included a brief stop outside a building where the great Jewish writer, Sholom Aleichem, lived as a child, as well as a delightful statue of him tipping his hat to passers-by.

Finally, our guide took us to the ravine known as Babi Yar. In September 1941, the Nazis assembled all of the Jews of Kiev and the surrounding areas, marched them to the edge of this ravine, and systematically shot and buried a total of 33,771 Jewish men, women, and children in a period of three days. Over the course of the Nazi occupation of Ukraine, more than 100,000 people were murdered and buried at Babi Yar, including at least 80,000 Jews as well as thousands of Roma (Gypsies), members of the underground, and Soviet prisoners of war. A Jewish memorial in the shape of a menorah was erected adjacent to the ravine in 1991.

Near Babi Yar is a large park and memorial built by the Soviets in 1976. While this memorial commemorates the slaughter at Babi Yar, it does not mention that most of the victims were Jewish.

A statue to Jewish resistance fighter Tatiana Markus stands a short walk from the main memorial. Markus was a beautiful young woman who obtained forged identity papers and participated in acts of sabotage against the Nazis. Later, she obtained a job working in the German officers' mess. There, she was able to slip poison into the officers' food and, in a few cases, lure officers to a "romantic" encounter where she was able to shoot and kill them. She is

credited with single-handedly killing numerous Nazi officers, soldiers and Gestapo informants. She was eventually captured, tortured and shot by the Nazis.

Another very moving memorial at this park is dedicated to the children killed in the Holocaust. At first glance, it looks like three children in various poses, at play. Upon closer inspection, one realizes that these are dolls and puppets - the children that once owned these toys will never return to play with them.

Walking in the footsteps

We stopped at many important sites of Jewish interest as we traveled from Kiev to Bila Tserkva to Verbovets and back to Kiev. In Berdychev we visited the grave of Levi Yitzhak, the "Berdichever Rebbe." We learned that Levi Yitzhak believed in the innate goodness of human beings and taught that people could serve God through their daily actions as well as their prayers. His grave is in a cemetery where most of the headstones are shaped like shoes or boots. Our guide explained that the local custom originated from the belief that when the Messiah comes and all of the "dry bones" rise from the graves, the awakened deceased would need their shoes and boots for the long journey to Jerusalem.

While we were in Berdychev, we also visited a local synagogue that has been restored and is once again being used by the few Jews who remain there. Across the street was a much larger building that had also served as a synagogue prior to World War II.

From there, our guide took us to a local monastery. Within its high brick walls, in a lovely courtyard behind the cathedral, was a stone memorial to the 960 Jews who were rounded up, shot and buried at that spot.

As we departed Berdychev we stopped by a field along the road a short distance from the town. A stone monument here marks the airfield where 18,640 Jews were murdered by the Nazis in September 1941. Yet again, we recited kaddish.

Our next stop was the village of Medzhybizh, where we visited the grave of Rabbi Yisroel ben Eliezer, who is more commonly known as the Baal Shem Tov, which means "Master of the Good Name."

The Baal Shem Tov lived from 1698 to 1760 and was the founder of what we now know as Chasidic Judaism. He lived and taught in Medzhybizh from 1742 until his death. He declared the whole universe, mind and matter, to be a manifestation of the Divine Being and that nothing can be separated from God; rather, all things are forms in which God reveals Himself. Every person must be considered good, and his or her sins must be explained, not condemned. He also taught that no person can sink so low that he or she cannot raise himself or herself to God.

From the Baal Shem Tov's grave, we visited the detailed replica of the synagogue where he taught and worshiped, which was reconstructed a few years ago on its original site in Medzhybizh. I enjoyed seeing the exposed wood pillars and beams and, especially, the long wooden table and benches where old men and young boys would have studied during cheder (religious school).

I could easily imagine this room filled with black-coated men and boys davening (praying) on a cold winter Shabbat morning, with the women crowded into an adjacent room.

Kamianets-Podilskyi, a beautiful city with approximately 100,000 inhabitants in southwest Ukraine, was our base for our visit to Verbovets and other nearby sites. While there, our guide took us to a large park on the outskirts of the city. A massive area within this park is set aside with four monuments to mark the mass grave of 23,600 Jewish men, women and children killed and buried here in August 1941.

Our guide told us that a staggering 2 million Jews that resided in Ukraine before the war perished in the Holocaust. Meanwhile, the sounds of music blaring from loudspeakers and children playing in the adjacent park made it difficult to comprehend the unspeakable horrors buried beneath our feet.

From Kamianets-Podilskyi we took a day trip across the Dniester River to Chernivsti. On the way there, we took a slight detour and drove through the village where the Baal Shem Tov was born.

As we crossed the wide Dniester River, I remembered the story that my grandmother told my brothers when they recorded her.

In 1912, her older brother fled to America to avoid being drafted into the Russian army. In 1913, her father and older sister left Verbovets and came to the United States. They settled with other relatives in Baltimore, worked in sweatshops and sent back money and ship tickets so the rest of the family could join them. However, the authorities would not issue the family passports because they couldn't produce the older brother for the draft. So one night, when my grandmother was about 18, she left Verbovets with her mother and younger siblings (the youngest would have been about 4 years old). The family hid in the woods for two days and nights before they were able to pay some men to take them across the river. So began their journey to America.

Chernivsti is a beautiful city with about 250,000 inhabitants. The architecture there shows more Austro-Hungarian influence than Ukrainian and Russian. Before World War II, it was the center of a large and affluent community of "Bukowynian" Jews. There were more than 50,000 Jews in Chernivsti and many more in the surrounding area before World War II. Most of the Jewish population in this area was decimated in the war, and most of the Jews who still remained by the time of Ukrainian independence in 1991 have since emigrated to Israel or other countries.

We visited the History and Culture Museum of Bukowynian Jews, which is located in a large and beautiful building located right on the main square that once housed the Jewish Community Center and other Jewish offices. Because there are so few Jews remaining in Chernivsti, all of the curators of this museum are non-Jewish. Nevertheless, the local residents are very proud of the Jewish heritage in their city and surrounding region and we were given a comprehensive tour of the museum and its collections by the docent who was working the day we were there. The museum has a wonderful collection and excellent displays that show Jewish life and culture in Chernivsti before the Holocaust.

As we traveled from Kamianets-Podilskyi back to Kiev on the last day of our trip, we stopped in Uman to visit the grave of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. Thousands of observant Jews come to Rebbe Nachman's grave every Rosh Hashana to pray, sing and dance. Rebbe Nachman was the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov. Among his teachings, he encouraged his followers to spend an hour alone each day talking to God as if "talking to a good friend." Breslover Hasidim continue to follow this practice, known as "hitbodedut," to this day.

Before his death, Rebbe Nachman selected 10 psalms that he found to be particularly healing. The Rebbe said that if a person recites these Psalms at his grave, he or she will have great spiritual healing. One of my brothers and I recited these 10 psalms there and it was, indeed, a profoundly moving experience for both of us.

Some final thoughts

I can assure you that if, before this trip, you had asked any of the people in our group to name 100 places in the world that we'd like to visit, Ukraine would not have made anyone's list. By the end of our trip we were all very grateful to have had the opportunity to go there. Ukraine truly is a beautiful country and we all enjoyed our trip there on multiple levels.

Whether or not we are related by blood to Olga, Dina and their families, we felt a great kinship with these people who, like us, can trace their roots to "Yitzhak Greenberg" who lived in Verbovets during the 1880s. Whenever we spoke about our family history, my mother often said, "There, but by the grace of God, go we."

Had our ancestors not made the long and dangerous trip to start a new life in a foreign land, we too would have grown up under the harsh conditions that these people have lived under during Soviet times and even since independence. That is, of course, if our parents and grandparents had managed to beat the odds and survived the great famine in Ukraine in 1932-33 and the Holocaust in the 1940s.

Most of all, the adults were especially grateful that the children, Alison, Nick and Ben, were part of our group. It was a wonderful way for them to see, hear, taste, smell and feel their family roots - to hear from their fathers and uncles the stories that we remember about our grandparents (their great-grandparents) - and to experience the contrasts between life in the United States and life in the Ukraine. My stepson Ben summed things up beautifully in the blog he wrote after the trip:

"It was quite eye-opening. Meeting possible (and probable) long lost cousins whose family somehow slipped through the cracks during the mass murdering of Jews during WWII was very moving. These people who barely survived were still barely surviving. Living on next to nothing by our standards was plenty."

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