

KREMENETS - THE KASPLER FAMILY 1993

I have been to Kremenets only once, and only for a few days, although I hope very much to return sometime. Kremenets is located in the district of Ternopol, in an enchantingly beautiful landscape - nestled as if in a thicket of mountains covered with thick forest. On one of the mountains one can still see the ruins of an old fortress. But in the very midst of this overabundant nature lies a city that has surely seen better times. During my visit there the prices for goods of all kinds were soaring rapidly; people had nearly emptied the stores before the price increase took effect. It was all very unpleasant to see, and one sensed the same mood almost everywhere: "What else do we have to look forward to?"

Kremenets was once a major European cultural center, and despite its general decline the city still remains a powerful attraction today. Signs of its former greatness are visible everywhere. The Jewish cemetery in Kremenets, which dates back to the 14th century, is one of a kind.

On my visit to Kremenets I had the good fortune to enlist the aid of the kind people at the museum of local history and geography. They had arranged for me to stay with the Kaspler family, and I spent the three days of my visit in their small house. Esther Kaspler was born in Kremenets and could remember a great deal about how life had been, particularly during the period before the war. Like many others who had lived through the war, this small, bent-over woman with her astonishingly clear eyes and beautiful face had suffered a cruel fate.

She told me about the life of the Jewish population in Kremenets and showed me the shtetl, the section of the city where the Jews had lived. Before the Second World War, and until 1941, there were about 8,500 local Jewish residents in the city, in addition to nearly 4,000 refugees. Esther's family managed to flee before the arrival of the German occupation force, but during their journey her sister-in-law went into labor, and her brother was forced to return with his family to Kremenets, where they, and many others, later died.

Upon entering the city the Germans executed the entire intellectual class of the city, comprised of people of various different nationalities. Afterwards they herded the Jews into a ghetto and enclosed it with barbed wire. There the people suffered on without food and water under appalling sanitary conditions. In August of 1942 the ghetto was finally set afire and burnt to the ground, killing nearly all of its inhabitants. It has since been established that only fourteen people escaped that hell.

Esther, her mother and her sister worked throughout the war in a field hospital, eventually moving with their mobile clinic (there were so-called hospital trains back then) to Berlin, where they witnessed the end of the war.

Returning to Kremenets after the war, they found no one there. The local authorities placed a small house at their disposal, in which the mother and daughter chose to stay. Esther, however, remained in the army, for she had achieved the rank of lieutenant and had not been released from service. In Poland she met the man who later became her husband. He was an officer, and the two of them moved about often before finally settling in eastern Siberia. Pensioned in 1955, they returned to Kremenets, where by then virtually no more Jews were living.

They now live alone, visited infrequently by their daughter and grandson from Ternopol. Esther told me that some of the former residents of Kremenets had returned **after** the war and walked around the city. They had looked at everything, they had cried, and then they had departed once again.

In 1993 there were only four Jews left in Kremenets - out of a population of 24,400: the Kasplers and one old man and woman, each living alone.