

Voyage to Ukraine 23rd. August to 28th. August 2005
Woolf Marmot, France

3rd. September 2005

A week has passed since my return from Ukraine and, already, places, dates, time and history begin to be mixed into a sort of compote in my brain.

Andrew Goldberg and I (accompanied by our guide/interpreter Alex Dunai) had three intensive days of traveling into “our” past. This was sandwiched between our first night in Lviv (also known as Lvov or Limburg) at the beginning of our trip, and our last night in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine.

The main object of our trip was to “see” the places where our parents and their parents had lived before emigrating to England, America, Israel, South America etc..

Basically this comprised the towns or “shtetls” of:

- KREMENEC [Kremenets] (where my mother Dora Marmot née Kritz was born and lived till her marriage; and Andrew’s great-grandfather Aaron Kritz, the cantor, was born and lived till his departure for London around 1904);
- VISNEVIC [Vishnevets] (where my father Alec Marmot was born and lived till his marriage in 1902 to Dora Kritz);
- BEREZITS [Velikiye Berezhitsy] (where we only recently learned that the parents and siblings of Dora and Aaron lived or were born before moving to Kremenech in the 1870’s);
- BALYN (where Andrew’s paternal grandfather originated);
- VOLOCYSK (where the family of the father of a dear friend of ours had told me that his family had a grocery store which used to be a customer of my father’s!).

KREMENEC is less than 100 kilometers north from TERNOPIL, and one passes VISNEVIC on the way. BEREZITS is some 10 kilometers from KREMENEC. Every day of our stay we made this journey from TERNOPIL

TERNOPIL was our base for this voyage into the past. TERNOPIL is a pleasant town of some 250,000 inhabitants where we stayed in a large Soviet-style hotel, recently more or less modernized. Our breakfasts there were minimal and chaotic. But our dinners in the evening were much more satisfactory, on the outside terrace of a pleasant café with the young over-dressed folks parading up and down in the street outside. My meals, most evenings, usually consisted of borscht and latkes.....but none of us suffered from the usual tourist stomach upsets.

TERNOPIL is also the repository of the archives of TERNOPIL OBLAST or County.....where many of the records that interested us of births, deaths, marriages etc. are kept. (As I pointed out recently: before the break-up of the Soviet Union, few people knew that these archives were still in existence. But they have since proven of invaluable assistance to genealogists and roots-seekers like ourselves.) We did spend a few hours in a dark-ish room looking through 150-year old papers in Cyrillic- and occasionally Hebrew or Yiddish. An experience in itself. But it needs specialists to help decipher these papers and some fees and –even more- diplomacy to make copies of them. The Mormons or LDS (Latter Day Saints) have micro-filmed many of them. And an enormous job of translating and interpreting many of them is being undertaken by a voluntary organization of descendants of people from

Kremenec run by a Dr. Ronald Doctor. We were in constant touch with this Ron Doctor before our trip and his advice and “tutoring” has been of invaluable help.

2.

As I pointed out in my previous letter of 30th. August, our primary object was not to find traces of family killed during the Holocaust.....but to walk in the steps, see the same sights and breathe the same air as our ancestors. But it rapidly became impossible to ignore the horrors of the last world war.

You will remember that –thanks to Andrew’s research through a specialized genealogical research organization called Routes to Roots- we had discovered that the family name of mother’s family was KRITZER rather than KRITZ (and even that was spelt in many different ways). And the MARMOT name was more like MAMOT –both in Hebrew and Cyrillic i.e. without the “r”. We also discovered that, although my mother Dora – and Aaron were born in KREMENEC, their brother and sisters and parents all lived –and some were born in BEREZITS.

So we decided that BEREZITS should be our first stop.

BEREZITS is really a very small village or “shtetl”. It is a small agricultural community probably of some 300 families or so. And in the days before the war and the arrival of the Nazis there were probably some 30 Jewish families living there. One could believe that the village must have been the same size and that there were probably the same proportions of Jews and non-Jews at the time of our grandparents etc. in the 1870’s.

AND HERE WE WERE PLUNGED RIGHT INTO THE HORRORS OF THE LAST WAR!

Andrew, who by profession is a maker of documentary films came into his own, brought out his camera and started to take pictures and interview some people – through our guide and interpreter Alex. We were so moved and impressed by what we saw and heard that we came back the following day to fill in some of the gaps.

Nobody, of course, could tell us, for sure, which houses were occupied by the Jews in the 19th. Century but probably they were the same houses as those which were pointed out to us as occupied by Jewish families before the war in 1940. Not one Jew there now, of course. We looked for some older inhabitants of the village who could tell us about these houses and their inhabitants. Then “Lydia(?)” came walking down the village street . A peasant lady in her early 70’s dressed in a lilac colored plastic raincoat (it was beginning to rain) with the ubiquitous scarf round her head. She was soon joined by two other bescarfed women of about the same age and we began to ask them questions about the war period. They spoke very freely and easily about it.:

They explained that they remembered very well the Jewish girl friends with whom they were at school. They all seemed sincere when they explained that these girls were really their intimate friends. Then the Germans came and evacuated all the Jews to the “island”. (The “island” was a piece of land surrounded on three sides by the waters of a river or lake and closed off on the fourth side by barbed wire. We went back the following day to see the exact location.). Apparently they would occasionally smuggle food to these Jewish families through the barbed wire and they told us the heart-rending story of the little Jewish boy who swam out of there to get some food and was caught by the Nazis who started to tease him and beat him up.

We asked them what happened to these Jewish families and they said that they were all shot. We asked them what they felt about it and I will never forget the gesture of the hands of all three of them as they said: "We cried"!

There was also a retired school-teacher who was setting up some sort of museum for their little town but he seemed very busy so we decided to come back and see him and his museum the following day.

We had also heard that there was an old Jewish cemetery outside the village and went to look for it. With great difficulty we found it. Everything was over-grown and it was in what had become in the meantime a little forest. We saw some 30 or 40 graves there but all the graves were moss-covered and it was impossible to read the inscriptions on them.. We decided we would come back the next day with some fibre brushes to try to read them.

When we went back the following day we found another peasant lady who took us to show where the "island" was but when Andrew wanted to interview her with his camera she asked for a few minutes to "make herself presentable" for the camera. This consisted mostly of adjusting her head-scarf. She too explained about the "island" and pointed out the houses where the Jews had been expelled to. She gave us some hope when she mentioned "Katerina" who was 99 and could perhaps tell us more about the pre-war period. With some difficulty we located her.... but, unfortunately, Dr. Alzheimer had got to her before we did.

We visited the school-teacher's "museum" which he was proudly preparing for its opening. It had some local folk-lore items and just one board about "The Hebraic Community". There, on one of the boards were photos of some young pre-war intellectuals or revolutionaries. There was also one page from some Hebrew document or prayer-book which he had picked up somewhere and which was proudly pasted on the board. We pointed out to him that it was pasted upside-down. He was grateful.....might even change it.

We then went to the "Cemetery"...brushed the moss from two or three graves and photographed them. The inscriptions were in Hebrew and not very clear..... Perhaps we will be able to get them translated?

VISHNEVETS: Andrew was nice to me. After all it was only my father - not a KRITZER – who came from there. So we went twice to VISHNEVETS. It is a bigger "town" than BEREZITS. I had remembered that my mother had told me that my father's family possessed "flour mills" either there and/or in RADOVIL (where Dora and Alec Marmot went to live after their marriage). We went to see two of the flour mills" still in existence.....Both over 100 years old. The guardian of one of the mills gave me a brick marked 1900, from the previous construction. I have it in my home now. Nobody has told me that it is not from my father's flour mill!

We went to visit the Jewish cemetery in VISHNEVETS. Like most of the Jewish cemeteries we saw they were in a poor condition, over-run by cows, geese, ducks etc. There is however one NEW Jewish grave there in very good condition of a local Jewish man who came back there (a tailor who had been in the Army, I believe) and was buried in 2004!

4.

KREMENEC: This is quite a busy, bustling town of some 30,000 inhabitants. At the request of Ron Doctor we went to see the Mayor to discuss the work that needs doing on the Jewish cemetery. He was very courteous. We had our photo taken with him and he presented us with a book about KREMENEC. It is obvious that the Jewish cemetery is not his top priority even though he is sympathetic to the project.

There are many quite pretty churches in Kremenec as well as a large seminary. Today the town is a commercial hub for the many surrounding towns and villages, as no doubt it was in the days of our forebears. At one time probably most of the stores in the main street were Jewish owned.

The surroundings of KREMENEC are quite attractive. There is a beautiful hill called Mount Bono on one side of the town with a ruined castle at the top. This is a popular place to visit and the surrounding park is used as a picnic ground. Oddly enough, Uncle Aaron (the great-grandfather of Andrew) referred to his excursions as a young man to this place in one of the stories he recounted to (and was written down by) his son-in-law Larry Perkins.

We met one or two of the “Jews” who now live in KREMENEC...but unfortunately had no common language with them! Unusual for Jews! One of the old synagogues is now the main bus station. Apart from that and an overgrown Jewish cemetery there is very little trace of Jewish life left. There is a monument to the thousands slaughtered there during the war. We managed to locate somebody who had some “old” photos of KREMENEC...but these were of the “ghetto” during the Nazi occupation period. One of the photos was of the ghetto burning!.

At the end of the 19th. century and the beginning of the 20th. century many of the KRITZERS left KREMENEC (some to Odessa and then to England , some directly to England). At that time, there were some 6,000 Jews living in KREMENEC – about a third of the population. They were an important part of the economic life of that community.

However, my mother’s oldest sister called MISHKET Fishmann née KRITZ left Ukraine – probably KREMENEC about 1922 to go to live the USA. where she died in 1952 aged 96. She had had many children whose descendants now live in the USA, Israel, Australia, Argentine etc.)

The fate of those Jews who stayed behind and lived in KREMENEC until the last war was horrific. The Jewish population which had more than doubled by that time was practically eliminated by the Nazis.

VOLOCHYSK: We visited this town where the Kruh’s paternal grandfather had originated. There was a busy street market in operation. It was most interesting to see some old “babushkas” (grandmothers) sitting behind their little bundles of tomatoes, cucumbers, onions etc. which they had managed to grow in their little gardens or plots of land....and which helped them eke out a living.. Alex explained to us some of the changes which the de-sovietisation had brought about, and the difficulties many of the older people had, to make ends meet. .

BALYN: The “shtetl” of Andrew’s grandparents from his father’s side: We spent quite some time photographing old graves in the old Jewish cemetery which was on some farmer’s land with cows grazing, geese and ducks scratching for food. We met a young lad on a bike and asked him what had happened to the Jews in BALYN during the war. He volunteered to take us to see for ourselves. We followed his bike to a place quite a distance away. There, there was a monument erected to the people “Jews and others” who were taken there, dug holes and were shot by the Germans. He refused to take some money we wanted to give him. It was obviously his way of showing us the sympathy he felt, by taking us there.

From there we drove on to KIEV. A “normal” 3-4 star hotel in the capital city of Ukraine. A big “civilized” city a far cry from the little shtetls we had visited.

Of course we took many photos and had so many impressions of present day Ukraine in big and small towns. We could somehow, sometimes, imagine how our “ancestors” might have lived. We couldn’t help feeling grateful that they had had the “good sense” to leave that country and seek their “parnasse” elsewhere.

We managed to uncover some more of our roots and will –eventually – have more details and information. Sometime, perhaps, we will make up a more complete family tree so that you can see – if you wish – how you are related to that “distant cousin” in America, England, Israel, Australia, Argentine etc. It probably won’t change much in your lives if I door even if I don’t.

Personally, I am very content to have made this trip. It had been long time ambition for me.. It was also a plus for me to get to know, and appreciate, one of my “distant cousins”. But I particularly had a deep emotional satisfaction in walking in the steps, seeing the same sights and breathing the same air as my parents and their parents and their parents had done.

WOOLF MARMOT