

Subject: Ukraine
Date: Fri, 15 Sep 2000 09:10:02 -0500
From: "Beth Miller" "beth.miller@heifer.org"
To: rondocor@uswest.net

Hi Ron,

Yes, I found Kremenetz. An incredible trip. I'd love to go back. The stones were written only in Hebrew and English (only two in Russian), and were not in good shape, but still an intense visit.

I found the (abandoned) Jewish cemetery and spend about 2 hours searching through it. Although I did not find any family names, I thoroughly enjoyed the time there. It was a warm, peaceful day, and the bees were buzzing, the pears and nuts were ripe and the trees and bushes starting to turn color. The names were all in Yiddish, and I could sound them out:
Freida....Fish....man.....Yaacov....cooper..stein....David....levy...

Despite the broken stones, overgrown weeds, and mossy surfaces, I felt a great sense of normalcy. Husbands and wives, mothers and children, the history of a community. It didn't matter that I couldn't find my grandmother's grandparents, because we are descendents of the community, not individuals. To understand our lives, we need to understand theirs. Both their closeness and their repressiveness.

I also spent time in Kiev. I found the Babi Yar memorial, to the 30,000 "heroic Soviet citizens" massacred in 1933 in the gorge outside Kiev. No mention that they were Jews, and the Ukrainians enthusiastically helped the Nazis. A few years ago, the Israeli government put up a memorial which is this amazing sculpture, but not at the site, and written only in Hebrew so that the local people cannot read it.

But I found the site. It is filled with trash and silence. It is next to a children's park, and is unmarked. The bodies were removed before the end of the war. It is quiet, and the fall leaves were falling into the gorge. I thought a lot about history and memory, and the balance between commodification of suffering and the injunction to never forget. Mostly I thought about the terror a mother must feel when her child is murdered in front of her. How can people rationalize the evil that they do? Do they even remember it?

I am glad that I went. I feel like I have a better sense of my own identity since I have seen where I come from. Now if I can only put it all together, and communicate this to my children.

[snip]

Beth
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Subject: Re: Kremenets
Date: Mon, 18 Sep 2000 08:25:55 -0500
From: "Beth Miller" <"beth.miller@heifer.org">
To: "morris tony" <"tonymorris52@yahoo.com">
CC: rondocor@uswest.net

Dear Tony,

Greetings from the USA. I find the Kremenets email group fascinating, and also very quick acting! What a great group.

I was able to find Kremenets so easily because I work for an organization with an office in Lviv, Ukraine. Lviv is the major city in Western Ukraine, and Kremenets is about two hours away. A good portion of the road was rough dirt, and poorly marked, but it was through scenic countryside, and my driver asked for directions frequently. He found an easier road back that was all paved.

I was very lucky to have a Ukrainian contact. Our country director (not Jewish, but English speaking) and the office driver took us there, and helped find the cemetery. It is not marked in any way, but the people in the marketplace all knew where it was. Still it took a few wrong turns up dirt roads to find it.

The cemetery is on a hill on the outskirts of the town, and you must walk on foot from the base of the hill. My colleague felt very safe in leaving the car in front of a farm house, but we locked it well.

The oldest stones are barely legible, and are closest to the bottom of the hill. The newer ones are higher up. The last is from 1914.

The most difficult thing for me was to decipher the dates. Most are written with Hebrew characters representing the (Hebrew) year, and I did not have a ready conversion table with me.

Also, all of the writing was in Hebrew or Yiddish, with only two stones (that I saw) using Russian. Therefore, my Ukrainian companions were not able to help look for names with me. (They gathered nuts for the two hours I was there).

I believe that you can rent a car with an English speaking driver at the major hotels in Lviv. (I stayed at the Grand Hotel on the main square; magnifique!). Kremenets itself seems to be a small city now, with hotels, but I do not know their quality.

Good luck! Please let me know if I can help you any more.

Best regards,
Beth