

Rhoda Miller's Litvak Trip Journal
with a focus on the Orlya, Belarus portion of the trip
Note: References to videos are located on the website

Note: The days described below were the Roots Tour portion of a tour with the Jewish Heritage Trip To Lithuania sponsored by Howard Margol and Peggy Freedman.

Tuesday, June 22, 2010

When I was walking to the Babylon train station, shlepping my stuff, I was thinking that when my grandparents left Russia Poland, their journey started the same way. They walked to the horse and wagon which took them to the train station which took them to the seaport, etc. My trip was uneventful....

Monday, June 28, 2010

This morning I set out from Vilnius with a driver, guide/translator, and a friend Susan Stone who also has a grandparent who came from Orlya (formerly Orlove). We crossed the Belarus border in search of our ancestral shtetl. It took two hours to cross the border with waiting as the most painful part of the three-step process. It was very interesting, and somewhat scary, to witness the driver and guide go into their "Soviet mode" during the border crossing procedure. They told us not to talk, eat, play music, or make eye contact. In other words, do nothing that will call attention to oneself. This seems to be a remnant of the time they lived through before Lithuania became an independent nation in 1990 from the former Soviet Union. We did get through the border just fine. Victor took all our passports to get us all through more efficiently. At one post, we did all need to step out of the minivan and then get back in. There did not appear to be any reason for that activity. With great urgency to use a rest room after the drive and border wait, I was directed to the outhouse...a wooden plank with a hole in it...my welcome to Belarus!

My goal for this trip was to retrace the places in the story Aunt Gussie wrote for the Orlya-Zholudek yiskor book. We came to Zholudek first and so made a quick tour of the town. The Jewish cemetery was destroyed during the war. I was under the impression that there was a Holocaust memorial to the mass killing that took place there but that did not seem to be the case. Rather, we were directed to a monument signifying the Soviet occupation. We spoke to a woman and some young boys who told us this news and directed us to the place where we could take care of bodily needs...a replica of the border crossing experience. This town had a few large municipal buildings, a community center, hospital, and first aid area where the driver was able to obtain some medicine for his mother that he is unable to purchase in Lithuania. It was a town without charm and evident of Soviet rebuilding. Off we went to find Orlove, only a few kilometers away.

People who gave us directions to Orlya



The storks did not provide directions but we greatly enjoyed seeing them along the way.

After a few wrong turns in the short distance, we learned that we needed to turn off the main road and was directed to a dirt road leading to Orla which eventually led us to the paved road of the town.



There were rich green fields as far as the eye could see with an occasional horse to break up the scenery.



As we entered the town, we first came to the Orla Farm Cooperative although at the time we were unsure of what we were observing. [Video 1]



We located the municipal building which we eventually learned was the former residence of a Jewish blacksmith. The original heating stoves were still evident in every room. There was one old computer that we could see in the building and an orange dial phone that had to be from the 1970's. We were directed to the Chairman (still Soviet language) of the town, Yanina Yarochek, who had been in this position for one month. Yanina greeted us warmly and informed us that she had records from the town only since the end of World War II. At it happened, the Director of the Orlya Farm Cooperative was in her office when we arrived.



Yanina, in an honest attempt to be helpful to us, made some phone calls (using her cell phone) to older people who would have memories of the town. One woman was visiting a son elsewhere; another wasn't answering her phone.

In the absence of other resources, Yanina decided to walk us to the Jewish cemetery. As we walked along the road from which we had just entered the town, I noted that she was wearing a blouse with English words on it. She did not know what they were; she just bought it for the design!

On the way, a horse and wagon passed us by and it seemed as if the driver was employed by two women for transportation purposes as had been described by Gussie. It was as if time had stood still! The cemetery was sadly neglected and quite overgrown. There were about a handful of gravestones that were readable. Then her cell phone rang. [Video 2-4]



The call enabled Yanina to take us to the home of a woman who was 100 years old. Located at the end of a semi-paved street, the house was painted bright yellow and in reasonably good condition. [Video 5-6] Julia came outside to greet us and she was an absolute delight. She had her full faculties but was hard of hearing...apologetic that she did not have makeup on for the occasion of our visit. She mentioned several Jewish people she remembered

from the town, including Chaika (Fanny/Ida), my grandmother. I got very excited at this revelation but afterwards thought about the dates and she could not have meant my grandmother. She claimed to have bought her house from a Jewish man named Schmulka. Gussie describes a Schmulka in the yiskor book chapter as a youth who was arrested. One delight of the visit was that she counted to 10 in Yiddish for us! This charming lady brought me to tears as she clearly had a connection to the Jews of Orlove, if not directly the Kotlowitz family. She pointed to the woods behind her house and declared that was the location of the synagogue which no longer exists. Julia even counted in Yiddish for us! There was a woman taking care of Julia, an arrangement the Chairman had made. This woman had just mowed her grass and was about to tend to other needs of Julia. This woman was very protective of Julia. When our visit was worn, we walked back through the town to the municipal building. [Video 7-8; Listen VERY carefully at the beginning of video 8 to hear Julia count in Yiddish]



Just outside Julia's home, at a main town intersection of semi-paved roads, the Chairman met an older man who she introduced to us as a military veteran of the Soviet era. He seemed excited at meeting Americans and the feeling was mutual.





The main street was lined with shtetl-type homes that are typically seen in photographs and other likenesses. However, the gardens were the striking feature of the town. Beautiful rows of vegetables and flowers that gave a very neat and clean appearance to homes that ranged from old and neglected to reasonably maintained. We passed two nicer brick homes and I recalled that Gussie mentioned a Jew having owned the only brick home in the town. Another

home was pointed out to us by the guide as clearly a former Jewish home as it had two doors in the front; one for the family's residence and the other for the shop. [Video 9] We spoke to several of the local people as we were clearly a curiosity that day. People were extremely friendly and welcoming. Off in the distance we could see some modern homes that were being built in the town and were mostly owned by younger people. As we walked along, lo and behold, the horse and wagon was returning with another woman as passenger. Gussie describes Itsak Havazak, the wagon driver, in her yiskor book chapter as playing an important role in her story. This cartage has been happening for at least nine decades since the Kotlowitz family left the shtetl! We did not see any businesses. In the time of the Kotlowitz family (1850s-1921), the population numbered about 700; now, there are 400 people living there. It is the missing Jews that make the difference. The town did have a lovely Russian Orthodox church. [Video 10]



Based upon Gussie's story, I was eager to see the Nieman River and the bridge over which the Germans marched during WW I. Today it is a modern bridge as part of a modern highway. Yanina told me the river still freezes over and children still ice skate there. It was not the charming small town bridge I had imagined. The river was also wider than I had anticipated. The views from the river were very beautiful and pastoral. The water was clear blue surrounded by lovely greenery from trees and shrubs on little islands and along the banks. [Video 11]



Across the river, we were surprised to be taken to the reconstruction of a non-Jewish partisan bunker in the woods. This bunker had been reconstructed as an historical site to demonstrate local resistance to the Germans during World War II. While the bunker seemed hardly hidden, we were told that the access road had once been all woods thereby making this hiding place deep in the woods and largely inaccessible. It contained two wooden planks for beds with an angled plank

for a "pillow," a large central table, two little windows, candle holders on one wall, and a water bucket hanging from the ceiling.



As we were driving Yanina back to her office building and we were preparing to say our goodbyes, her cell phone rang once again. To her great surprise, the phone call informed her that the European Union (EU) approved giving Orlya funds to reconstruct the Jewish cemetery and



those officials would be arriving in two days to seal the deal! She made a phone call and in a few minutes we met Anatoly Omelchenko. Anatoly is a handsome modern young man who is the medical doctor living in the town and responsible for 20 surrounding communities. He is also the person who will be in charge of the cemetery reconstruction. His business card states “Expert on Sustainable Development.” After chatting a bit with this man, I am confident that he will do a fine job in the preservation of the cemetery. Local men and teenagers will be helping him do the work. I gave him some candy from the U.S. for his children and he was thrilled to receive a NYC tee shirt from me. I told him to

think of me if he got it dirty working in the cemetery. I left Yanina with a copy of both of Gussie’s stories and an online map of Orla she had never seen before. She seemed to prize these items immensely. She said she would get the stories translated from English to Russian. We exchanged contact information. [Video 12]



We said our goodbyes and proceeded to our own study of the cemetery. Susan and I attempted to photograph as much as we could and read as much of the gravestones as we could. It was a vain attempt. I sprayed the stone engraving with water to better enhance the carving but it did not help much. Some stones were leaning over, others were partially buried, and most were severely covered with lichen which neither water nor rubbing made a difference. It was getting late in the day and the sun was directly on the stones. We had to use our own shadows to cut the glare for photography and in some cases Susan and I had to form our bodies together to shade the full stone. We took photos but are really dependent upon the reconstruction to have readable stones. It will be interesting to see how much reconstruction will be done. Surely, it will be cleaned up and fenced. I just hope the lichen will be cleaned and the fallen stones will be made upright. We were told the project would take about a year to complete. [Video 13]

As we took our last view of the cemetery, we could see a tranquil peaceful view of the outlying hills, woods, a peek of the river, and slice of a lake. There were homes along one side of the cemetery and we saw a family of geese strolling along the lane between the homes and the cemetery. The family crossed the road to a property that had a closed blue fence. The geese just stood there as if waiting for the owner to open the gate and let them in. We, too, felt as if the gate was just waiting to be opened to the rediscovery of our ancestral shtetl.



Tuesday, June 29, 2010

After much ruminating as to how we would spend the day, we decided to see what Lida had to offer and take it from there as we needed to be at the border crossing to Lithuania no later than 4:00PM. After a quiet breakfast in the very loud restaurant we left the night before, we headed off with another research group to the municipal building. There we were directed to the woman who is the Chairman of the Ideology Committee...a euphemism for Jewish Studies as well as that of other ethnic minorities. She took us to see the Jewish sites in Lida which unfortunately meant the monument to the massacre in the forest. About 60,000 Jews were killed and burned in pits. Two of them are likely to have been Beryl Kotlowitz and his wife as they went to Lida as opposed to immigrating with the rest of the family. For the third time in my forest massacre travels, an impression was the beauty, the silence of the forest, and the beautiful sound of birds busy doing the things birds so. When I mentioned this to one of the guides, she told me many

survivors of these massacres make the analogy of wishing they could have just flown away like the lucky birds can do.

From there, we stopped at another site where 100 Jews from the Vilna ghetto were massacred. This site was uncovered during a construction project for a gas station on that corner. There is now a memorial with a pathway made of remnants of stones from the Jewish cemetery which no longer exists.

From there, we were taken to the Jewish Community Center. This was a fairly nice building located in a shopping center. There were local old women selling their small supplies of vegetables, blueberries, strawberries, and flowers. There were flea market stalls of various sundry items and in the midst of it all, a supermarket.

We were introduced to the woman who is a key figure in the Jewish Community Center. She was running a summer camp and so we met the dozen or so children ranging in age from about 8 to just post Bar/Bat Mitzvah. It is noteworthy that several of them were wearing tee shirts with English words but they really didn't understand what they meant...except for Spiderman and the young lady who was very embarrassed about wearing a very poorly translated version of Girls are Sexy. I told her she was very American to be wearing a tee shirt with such a saying and gave her a tissue pack I happened to have with me with an American flag design,

We were toured through the museum which had many art exhibitions reflecting Jewish and Lithuanian history, local artists, the work of children, and an exhibit of a family of artists. We were provided with a talk about the Lida Holocaust experience. A highlight was when the children sang for us. Susan led them in a hora line and then two youngsters did a folk type dance for us.

As we departed Lida, the driver stopped so I could take a picture of the bowling alley next to the hotel. Lida was essentially destroyed during the war and rebuilt by the Soviets. There are lots of apartment buildings. The newer construction is nicely styled and not that different from what is in the US. The city is currently undergoing much construction as it will be the host city of a major festival in Belarus. We saw the remnant of the small ghetto that had been established here.

From a day that started very ambiguously, the time flew by as we were regenerated by a day that turned out to be interesting and personally fulfilling. We drove to the border and arrived in Kaunas just in time for the tour dinner where everyone very excitedly shared stories of their Roots Tour. Louise, who was in Belarus with another driver wound up walking back across the border after her driver's car broke down. She did fine but has a much different story to tell.