

MY VISIT TO A UKRANIAN ANCESTRAL SHTETL

Mitchell Polman, JGSGW

Last July I visited one of my ancestral shtetls in the Kiev oblast in Ukraine. From a research standpoint it was a complete bust as I discovered that the Nazis had destroyed the village's entire archives and all signs of Jewish life. From a spiritual standpoint, however, it was tremendous. The village of Pyatigory (Piohter in Yiddish), about two hours drive south of the city of Kiev, is a very beautiful place. I had heard that it was, but I wasn't prepared for the small lake and dense forest surrounding it, the rolling wheat fields, and omnipresent cherry trees. The village, with its beautiful old church, looked like it could have come off of a tourist poster. It was very moving to walk the same paths as my great-grandmother and her forebears. By the same token, I'm saddened by the thought that so many won't make journeys of this sort. I was not the first Jewish American to come to Pyatigory looking for roots. In fact, I was told I was the third.

There are no Jews left and the vast majority of people were born after World War II. Nevertheless, everybody tried to be helpful. They knew the names and addresses of the few Jews born in the village who were still alive and living elsewhere. They were keeping names and addresses of Americans who came through. They listened quite intently as I told them what I knew of my family's past in the village and its Jewish life—knowledge of which had all but disappeared. My interpreter, a young Ukrainian gentile, had a grandfather who was a renowned local historian of the region, but did not himself know much of the Jewish past of the area. His grandfather did tell me he once received a fan letter from a woman in Israel who was born in Pyatigory.

I'd like to stress that at no time during the course of an entire week in Kiev and on the road to and from Pyatigory did I ever feel any personal danger from either crime or anti-Semitism. It's a silly notion to deny yourself these wonderful experiences because of our overblown headlines. Remember, Ukraine in 1995 is not Czarist Russia in 1895

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any more than Alabama of 1895 is Alabama of 1995. It's true that economic conditions are not the greatest, but travel is not impossible and I found people to be very gracious and friendly wherever I went. Being unduly apprehensive can deny you both excellent spiritual and research opportunities.

I was fortunate enough to have a friend of a friend take me to Pyatigory and back for \$50. That included gas and dinner at his parent's house (and lots of vodka with dinner). If you can't come up with such connections I would highly recommend Mr. Fyodor Pyerevyerzely of Ukraine Tourist at 26 ul.

Bogdana Khmelnitskovo, Kiev, was willing to arrange a trip for me with an interpreter (who was also going to help find whatever records there may have been), a driver/mechanic, gas, and three meals for all of us for \$150. His phone number is 044/224-7258.

It was a great experience for me and it can be for you as well!—Mitchell Polman, 32, has lived in the D.C. area for 15 years; he has a degree in Soviet and Eastern European Relations from G.W. University. Mitchell is active in high school student exchange programs, and has been pursuing his personal genealogy for 20 years.



Conversation with Mitch Polman

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“When I was [in Pyatigory in 1995] I asked about a Jewish cemetery. The villagers directed us all over the place and we found a large stone in the woods by a stream that I found puzzling. It wasn't until later that I realized... that it must have been a mass grave site. They had told us the Nazis had killed all the Jews in the village.... They also told me that there were still Jews from Pyatigory alive in nearby Tetiyev as well as in Kiev and Israel. I was told that a couple of women came every so often to tend to the "cemetery", but they never talked to anyone.

I was told that the records had been destroyed, but I have learned to take such things with a grain of salt.... It could just as well be that the archives were evacuated to some place and nobody was aware of it. There are many things that I wish I could do over again from that trip. The town records were in a "town hall", which was an unusual building in the village center. It sat near an Orthodox church and had a bust of Lenin in front of it, which was why I didn't take a picture of it. When I got back [my cousin] asked me if I saw anything that looked like a synagogue. I told him that I didn't. He then told me the Ashkenazim synagogue (there had been a Sephardic one as well) sat near an Orthodox church. Then I realized that the hall we went into must have been a synagogue. It had an elevated floor where the woman who worked there said that looked like a *bima*.... Heck, my great-grandparents were probably married there!

One other thing I am sorry about -- there was a man in the village that everyone told us we should talk to. He was 104 years old and was supposed to be full of stories. However, he was off in his car (!) running errands and my guide/driver did not want to wait around for him. I was kicking myself later for caving on that.”