

Journal Excerpt of Trip to Zhurawno, Ukraine

September 3, 2003

By Bob Boehm and Steve Boehm

Set forth below is an excerpt of the transcript of the daily journal kept by Bob and Steve Boehm on their trip with cousins Sam and Ted Jonas.

After arriving in Vienna on Friday, August 29, 2003, the four travelled to Krakow on a short flight aboard a two-engine Tyrolian Air turbo craft. On Monday, September 1st, 2003, the group traveled to L'viv via a Krakow-Odessa train. The trip of approximately 200 miles was scheduled for 12+ hours and included a 4 ½ hour stop in the town of Przemysl (pronounced "Premish"). On Wednesday, September 3, 2003, the group drove to Zurawno.

Wednesday, September 3, 2003: Lviv/Zhurawno

Today, we drove the 50 or 60 kilometers from Lviv to Zhurawno with Alex [Dunai] to see where our grandmother Lottie Spinner Jonas was born in 1889 and lived until she left for Vienna (to learn sewing skills), and ultimately the United States, in 1907. The trip, primarily on a well-paved major highway, took us through rolling hills dotted by small towns and their Uniate churches in the orthodox style. As we approached Zhurawno, our journey into the past was foreshadowed by the sight on more than one occasion of families driving horse-drawn farm carts along the side of the highway.

Prior to the War, Jews had lived in Zhurawno for hundreds of years. Zhurawno, in the heart of Galicia, was a largely Polish and Jewish community, with some Ukrainians, until the end of World War II. Today it likely is virtually all Ukrainian, and the town's population includes not a single Jewish resident.

In Lottie Spinner's time, Zhurawno had between 3,000 and 5,000 residents, a substantial percentage of whom were Jews. Lottie's family consisted of her mother Blima, a thoroughly modern woman who ran a hardware store in the middle of town; her father Schlomo, who sold grain from a horse cart; her brothers Chaim (Charlie) and Itzik (Fred), who, like her, would emigrate to the U.S.; a brother Dudge (David), who would later marry and have one or two sons; and a sister Lena, who also had two sons. All those who remained in Zhurawno, other than Schlomo who died before the War, were murdered by the Nazis.

Most of the Jews living in Zhurawno at the time the Nazis entered in 1941 perished in the War. Most were murdered in one of two ways: they were either rounded up and taken to an area across the Dniester River (towards the Bakocin Forest), where they were forced to dig their own graves before being shot to death and buried there, or they were deported to transit, labor and/or extermination camps where almost all of them died. Although, we know that Lottie Spinner's family perished during the War, we are not certain of how they met their fate. Although we know that Lottie was told at some point after the War that her family members had been "taken away in trucks." Whether this means they were taken by truck for execution "across the river" or to an extermination

camp is uncertain. (One of the elderly residents in town that we interviewed about the War years confirmed that some Jews were taken away from the town in trucks.)

A story which Ted had told us after his first visit to Zhurawno in 1995 is telling as to Zhurawno's Jewish history. Apparently only one pre-War Jewish resident of the town returned, and stayed, after the War, Yakov Laufer. Mr. Laufer had left Zhurawno before the German occupation and, like other Jews in parts of Poland occupied by the Russians, went east and joined the Russian army. After he returned around 1946, he was at some point named the head of the town's collective farm, a very important position in the Soviet system. Given his position, he was likely viewed with some combination of respect and fear, but at a minimum he was shown significant deference. Thus, he and his non-Jewish wife apparently suffered no direct effects of anti-Semitism. Indeed, the synagogue and cemetery were undisturbed during his lifetime. Almost immediately following his death in 1989 (ironically, he was buried in the town's Christian cemetery), however, things changed. The synagogue was torn down and its bricks used to build a school. Also, virtually all of the cemetery headstones were removed, they too becoming part of a school. This left but a few chips of stone remaining to identify the area in which 400 years of Jewish life in Zhurawno is buried.¹

¹ Ted learned this story in 1995 by speaking with Mr. Laufer's wife, who subsequently emigrated to Israel to join her daughter. We were told that in the past few years she had actually come back to visit the town. We had hoped she would be there as a source of information and continuity from Ted's past visit and were disappointed to learn from the Secretary to the Mayor that she had left.

When we arrived in the town, a farmer's market was being conducted, and the road that ran by it was crowded with small, older automobiles. As we got closer to the center of town, however, the scene became much quieter, and few cars were to be seen.

The town is built around a small town square, the centerpiece of which is an old municipal building which is now the local library [NOTE: We now know that the building was originally the home of a leading Jewish citizen]. The spartan nature of the building, and of the town itself, was underscored when we discovered that the public "toilet" in the building consisted of a stone bench with a round hole in it. In that building was also a small, but cheerful restaurant, ironically named "Oskar's." We would enjoy a wonderful, and almost embarrassingly inexpensive, late afternoon meal there at the end of our visit to Zhurawno.

A few automobiles could be seen on or around the square, with horse and donkey carts apparently a common method of transit. Horses, ducks, chickens, and cattle freely roamed the town. After arriving in the center of town, we tried to find helpful locals, and proceeded to the "town hall," which was housed in a sad two-story concrete structure. We ultimately went upstairs and found the office of the Secretary to the Mayor, which consisted of a small room with a desk and decaying conference room table, an ancient manual typewriter, some worn bookshelves with a few simple decorative items, and a middle-aged woman who spoke no English. We told her through Alex that we were seeking information on whether there were any local residents who might be old enough to have remembered the Spinner family, which we had always heard had owned a hardware store in the middle of town that was run by Blima. We also told her that we were seeking municipal records

relating to the Spinners. The woman indicated that there were virtually no records from prior to the War (she exclaimed that any records were “in Chodoriv!”, a town about 20 km north), thus eliminating any hope of a paper trail, and also was not familiar with any individuals who might be able to help us.² As she spoke, she was clearly agitated and, sensing her discomfort, we told Alex to let her know that we were not in Zurawno to reclaim family property. Upon hearing this news, she visibly relaxed and became more helpful. Regarding our request to speak to locals who might remember our family, she made a few phone calls. Within a short time she was able to refer us to a gentleman over the age of 90, and of another couple, with whom we could speak.

We then wandered about the square and down the one commercial street in town (which was on the main square) which we assumed, and later had confirmed, was where the family hardware store was located. Evident on some of the door jams were slots where mezuzahs had once been affixed. Several shops were on that block, though Ted said that when he was there in 1995, there were no shops operating there.

We also chatted on that street with a man who said he was eight years old when the Germans arrived in 1941, who told us what he saw in that regard (that information as translated by Alex Dunai, is on the CD Rom that has the videos we took on the trip.)

We then made our way to the site of the former cemetery, which had been a focal point of Ted's earlier visit. On the way there, we met a woman who appeared to be in her 40's who, after giving

² Apparently, records relating to the Jewish (and perhaps Polish) residents of various parts of Ukrainian Galicia have actually ended up in some archives in Warsaw and L'vov.

us directions, apologized for the cemetery's sorry state. The cemetery was as Ted had described it: a small overgrown field with chips of stones, protruding remnants of some grand and some less grand monuments to the town's deceased Jewish citizens. A cow, and a goat with a goatherd, wandered nearby and an old produce truck sat in its tracks.

Adjacent to the cemetery and separated by a wire fence was a small house and its subsistence garden. Near the end of our tour of the cemetery we had a conversation across that fence with the elderly man of that house, with whom Ted had also spoken in 1995 (it did not appear that he remembered Ted from that time). As we spoke, his elderly, babushka-rapped wife worked the small garden.

The man said that he remembered a grain salesman "Schpinner," although he said generally that he did not remember much from that period. He added defensively that he had been away from Zhurawno during the War as a slave laborer in Germany and did not witness what happened to the Jews there. He was affable without smiling, in the way of a man who had lived a hard life. As we met and spoke to various Ukrainians, Alex was able to help us assess the reliability of their stories. This man's story of slave labor, with reparations still being paid to him by the German government, had the ring of truth to it.

In an interesting side note, at one point, while meeting with the mayor's secretary, we had asked to see the mayor and were informed he was out of town. After leaving the cemetery, we went back to the center of town, where we were informed by the secretary that the mayor had "returned

unexpectedly". There then ensued a cordial, if slightly awkward, series of introductions in front of the municipal building. The mayor seemed pleased that we were there.

We then proceeded to meet with the older residents whom we were told would speak with us. At our first stop, an elderly couple sat on the side of their large and seemingly substantial brick home and told us what they remembered. They said the War was a "terrible time" and that they were aware of what was happening to the Jews, although there was very little they could do about it. They remembered atrocities committed by the Germans on non-Jewish residents, and pointed to the example of a young Polish boy on his sled who was killed for sport by a German soldier. They said they were constantly hearing gun shots, presumably from the killing of Jews. The woman, who appeared more forthcoming, said sadly how she watched helplessly (our word here) as the young, pretty Jewish girls were taken away to be killed. They also said they recalled that at some point Jews being taken away from the town in trucks. The husband was a more problematic figure. When asked if he served in the army, he claimed that he served in neither the German nor the Soviet Red Army. "I was a farmer here in Zurawno during the whole war". We knew the history of the area well enough to know that if a young man in his twenties was allowed to stay and live as this man claimed, he almost certainly served in the Ukrainian police, who were in fact responsible for most of the local atrocities in eastern Galicia during the Holocaust. Our suspicions were sharpened when the couple's 40-ish daughter rode up on her bicycle and she was visibly surprised that her father was talking about the war. "He never discusses the war", she pondered. The interview with this couple as translated by our guide is on the CD Rom that has the videos we took on this trip. On a lighter note, it was during this

visit that Steve was able to take one of his traditional photographs of a cat, as the daughter posed with him and their feline just before we left.

Our next visit was with an extraordinarily spry man who was born in 1912. As we approached the gate to his home, he briskly walked up to greet us in his oversized rubber boots and jeans. He said that he remembered the War well, and that at one point, consistent with his love of horses, he ended up serving as a keeper of horses for the Russian army. He seemed to view that with great pride, as it perhaps represented a very memorable part of an otherwise difficult life.

He also said that he specifically recalled that one day, when tending to his cows in a pasture near the river, he came upon two Jewish men in their 30s after his dogs barked and the men came out from their hiding place by the riverbank. He said they cried when they saw him, fearing that he would turn them over to the Nazis. In fact, when he went back to his house to tell his mother about the men, she insisted that he bring them milk and food, which he did. When he went looking for the men the following day, they were no longer there. He had no idea what their fate was.

Consistent with his gregarious and good-natured demeanor, the gentleman then told a story about growing up in Zurawno that, while it was intended to indicate his goodwill towards the Jews, left us quite uneasy. It appears that, at least among the Ukrainians, it was a custom to visit the homes of local Jewish families on New Year's Eve. The practice was that, upon opening the door for the visitors, the Jewish resident would then "tap our heads for good luck in the New Year". Since luck is one of life's more capricious features, it is easy to see how this practice might be a double edged

sword, both literally and figuratively. The interview with this man is also on the CD Rom from the trip.

Our final stop during our Zhurawno visit was to the area across the river from town on the road to the Bakocin Forest where many of Zhurawno's Jews were murdered. It was impossible to tell from the terrain as it existed today, and we did not otherwise have any information as to, precisely where the victims were shot and buried, although numerous topographic features that appeared to look like mounds or other areas where the earth seemed to have unnaturally been affected suggested the sad history of the place. The four of us said Kaddish before leaving the area (unbeknownst to us, Alex snapped a picture of us doing so). In the years since our visit, we have made contact with the organization Yahad in Unum lead by Father DeBois, and dedicated to uncovering the "Holocaust by Bullets" and made them aware of the site near Zurawno. Sadly, the list of sites for Yahad is long, and the victims many, but we hope the time will come that we will be able to forensically confirm those terrible events and provide a memorial to the victims.

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The trip was everything we hoped it would be. Despite its very serious purpose and the somber moments reflected in this diary, the fact is that we really enjoyed each other's company and had a lot of fun. The four of us got along easily, laughed constantly, and regularly acknowledged our affection for each other. We all expressed the hope that we would travel together again in the near future.