

Hello guys,

Sorry for the late sharing of this. I was in Ukraine for a while, and on the go constantly! I've only just returned home to Jerusalem. I thought I'd share the pics as a memory movie of my trip to the town that my Zaida Harry left with his family for Montreal as a child in the early 1920s. Didn't mean for this to be as long as it is, but I just kept writing...

Sokyryany is a really small country town in Bessarabia. We were lucky to be there on a beautiful, sunny summer day. I was so moved to be in the place my grandfather had left about a hundred years ago! I never thought I would ever step foot there. Up until a year or so ago, I didn't even know the name of the place. I just thought my zaida was from Romania and that was that. It actually was only part of Romania for a short time during the interwar period.

It had never really occurred to me to look into the places in Europe where my grandparents were from. It was a blind spot, a disconnect that I believe many Ashkenazi Jews have. Something to do with a combination of the years of "iron curtain" impenetrability, the loss of the original language, the immigrant experience, and the horror of what was lived in the old country.

My grandparents never had any intention of going back to Poland or Ukraine. As a family and as a community, we lived like we were from no where. I understand better now how trauma can rob us of our identities. And specifically on how we allow it.

It was only when I was invited to a body-psychotherapy conference on trans-generational and history healing in Warsaw, where my maternal grandmother was from, that I decided to look into our family history. I wasn't even sure I should go, but since I was on my way to Frankfurt to give a workshop on that particular topic (what I call "the work that renews"), I decided that a stop in Warsaw the week before wasn't too much of a detour.

The "work that renews" is what got me to move from Montreal to Jerusalem, and to spend time in Germany, Poland, and Northern Ireland in the last few years. And now Ukraine. As a therapist and educator, I've always been somewhat of a time traveller. The question of how to work through the past, live in the present, and create something new, has been a perpetual exploration.

I was lucky to be travelling with a few Russian speaking women from Kiev interested in healing Ukrainian-Jewish history. Without Inna, Sasha and her daughter, Anya, I would not have been able to connect locally and learn as much as I have. (You'll see them in the pics!)

Sasha helped me make a request to the archives for historical documents. From what I learned, the archives for Sokyryany are located in Chernivisti, which we also visited on Rosh Hashana (the city, not the archives). To do this, you need to submit documents providing evidence that you descend from the people you are looking for information on, and the purpose of your request, and then wait. I haven't heard anything yet. From what I understand as well, many of the archives were destroyed during the war. I'm not sure what the case is for Sokyryany. Does anyone know?

Chernivsti is the closest city to Sokyryany. The buildings reminded me of Vienna - vestiges of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The Jewish museum there was closed indefinitely because of corona. I really wanted to see it because nothing like it exists anywhere else in Ukraine. There's no state of the art Polin museum like in Warsaw. In fact, a Polish-Jewish friend, a theatre director, who works in Ukraine said that the Jewish renewal that happened in Poland, is only just beginning in Ukraine. In Kiev, the only Jewish museum is the one dedicated to writer of

“Fiddler on the Roof” fame, Shalom Aleichem. Which is essentially a small room with some old things that once belonged to him.

At the entrance to Sokyryany, like every Ukrainian town, you’ll see a Communist-era block letter sign in blue and yellow - the colours of the Ukrainian flag. There’s a pic of me jumping for joy in front of it. The horse and buggy type tractors typical of the area added character and drama to our arrival. Then there’s me and my new friend Tanya - a Jewish woman who grew up in Sokyryany. Without her, we would have had no idea how to find the cemetery or known where Jewish people used to live. She’s the one with the short blonde hair and scarf with stars on it. I’m the one with the glasses.

Tanya and I communicated in Hebrew. I could not communicate with the Jewish people I met in Russian or Ukrainian, but Hebrew and German-Yiddish actually were helpful a few times. Tanya lived in Israel for three years working as a nanny. Like many Ukrainian Jews I met, she returned to Ukraine because she didn’t feel comfortable there. Her Hebrew wasn’t the greatest, and mine’s alright, but somehow we managed. When we were standing in front of the Jewish school, a young mother walked by with a baby carriage and said “shalom”. I was so surprised, I didn’t get a chance to ask her how she knew we were speaking Hebrew.

Apparently, there are still Jews in Sokyryany as in much of Ukraine. The country has the most Jews in the world after Israel and the U.S. Most are secular and many are the children of mixed marriages, or have only one Jewish grandparent. Many Ukrainian Jews kept their identities secret after the Holocaust for fear and because of the repression by the Communist regime. In these small towns, most have left to live in Israel, the US or Canada.

There’s a lot of footage of the cemetery. At first, I tried to take as many pics as possible in hopes that I would capture something meaningful for you. But then I realized it wasn’t going to be possible. It’s surrounded by a stone wall and has an iron gate. When we were going in, an older man, walking past the goats that were chewing up the grass, approached us and told us that he had built the wall. I asked him if he could tell the story and if I could photograph him, but he declined. He wouldn’t tell us more.

When you walk in the gate, to your right is the new, post-war section that has been maintained by locals - which also shows that there are a few Jewish people around. The stones are typical of Ukrainian cemeteries complete with portraits of the deceased. On the left, a more wild scenario of old and often broken gravestones, overgrown with young trees, weeds, bushes and lots of spider webs - so thick I worried a few times that I might get stuck in one and fall pray to an unconventionally large spider. The tombstones didn’t seem like they were purposely destroyed or removed like in some other places. There were many, but all lacking care and maintenance.

I was thinking of you guys and laid symbolic stones and photographed many. Although I did some bushwhacking, it was impossible to get to most because of the overgrowth. I wasn’t able to really do a search for names - not even for my own family.

I wonder if there is a way to get it cleaned up. I’m thinking about it. My friends are, too. I know of several projects in Poland where locals - especially schools are doing this and learning about the history of their town. Maybe someone will have some bright idea.

My friends and I stood on the border between the new and old, and prayed for our ancestors, and for their descendants. I said Kaddish, Yizkor - not sure of the protocol, but, in any case, a collective memorial offering of the heart for those that came before, for the healing of history, for the restoration of any aspects of lost identity or abandoned selfhood. For life, for love and aliveness. For renewal.

Before we left, Inna and I climbed the stone wall at the back of the cemetery to get some apples from the orchard on the other side. We were worried about whether this was okay in God's eyes. Or if it was even okay to laugh as we were flipping and tripping over the piled rocks. But I decided that our ancestors would be happy that we were alive, joyful, hungry and grateful for nature's abundance. I wasn't sure if I should tell you that.

Anyway, sorry I couldn't find out more for each of you. I would have loved to help with this. I will be back in Ukraine for more work - probably in the spring (depending on what's going on in the world) and would be willing to explore further, if there's anything else to find out. So let me know if you yourselves have any suggestions, information or knowledge that might help.

Tanya then took us to the border just at the edge of town. You'll see the border control and the road just near it where Jews were marched and murdered during the war. You can stand at the edge of Ukraine and look out onto the vast cornfields in Moldova.

Every town in Ukraine has a mass burial site - a hole in the ground where more people were buried than any living person can ever ever heartfully register. That sort of imagination is only possible if one has actually witnessed it as a reality, I guess. And even then...

Despite this, Sokyryany felt very different from Skvira where my grandmother was from. Perhaps because there were less pogroms? Perhaps because the mass burial site was just outside the town and not in it? Skvira felt dark and foreboding. Sokyryany was full of light.

In the area where Jews once lived, I took as many pics as I could of the old houses. Tanya did not know of any buildings that might have once been synagogues or cheders. If you're wondering what the weird pipes, like gymnastic high bars are - that line the streets, FYI, they are for gas. They are not safe, but ubiquitous in most towns in the region.

You'll see one pic where Tanya is pointing at something. It is the direction of where the Jewish ghetto was during the war. It could be anywhere because there's nothing left of it. It was just there on that land where houses built after the war now stand.

We noticed a sign with Russian letters written as if in Hebrew script (you'll see the pic) on one of the streets. My friends said it was called the Jewish shop. We asked the owner about it and she said that the area had been Jewish. She didn't want to tell us more. I wondered why a lot of Ukrainians whether Jewish or not seemed so secretive about these types of questions. In general, I guess, anything related to Jewish history has been swept under the rug for a long time. Even by Jews. Even their own personal stories. Many Ukrainians with some Jewish heritage kept their family history secret.

The pic you see of the monument with the long column and the woman's face is for the partisans who were shot by the Nazis at that very spot. The woman depicted was one of them. Today there are children here, chasing each other across the grass with gleeful screams and joyful laughter. This was the only memorial I encountered in Sokyryany.

You'll also see some pics of what the centre of town looks like now. None of the old buildings are left. You'll see Communist era structures - a supermarket, some shops, a school, a few babushkas having a chat, kids playing in parks. We were there on a Sunday so everything was really quiet and not many people were out.

Sokyryany was so green that I couldn't photograph some of the houses through the thick trees. Every house had a garden with flowers and fruit trees. Pears and apples hung heavy from their branches. Many had old wells with buckets still hanging over them. Often the houses were

painted bright colours. Some had foundations and others originally had dirt floors that people covered with rugs.

My grandfather once said he lived in such a house. I think he was trying to remind us to be grateful for what we had. I wondered if one of the houses might have been his. And imagined him as a little boy in such a beautiful place. Besides that, he never say much about what life for him was like in Sokyryany. I wish he had. I wish I had known to ask. But our history was something we never talked about. When you don't know something exists, you can't know that it's missing. But life somehow takes us on the journeys of discovery we need to learn the truth of who we are.

With love and hope for our collective renewal,
Kim Hershorn