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Archives in the Ukraine

By Miriam Weiner

For twenty years I dreamed of visiting the shtetls where my grandparents were born. Until recently, it seemed about as possible as a visit to the moon.

However, the many changes sweeping the (former) Soviet Union in late 1990/early 1991 resulted in my dream becoming a reality. In April, 1991, I made the first of four visits to the Ukraine. When I arrived in Kiev from Moscow, I made arrangements for a car and driver to take me to Priluki, about a two-hour drive, to see the place where my maternal grandmother, Miriam Odnopozov Rabkin, once lived. For the past two years, I have corresponded with Natalia Borisovna Elkin, a curator at the regional museum in Priluki, who sent me excerpts from the Jewish vital record books documenting the births of 17 of my Odnopozov relatives, including my grandmother, Miriam, for whom I am named.

In planning my visit to Priluki, I wanted to be photographed with the actual book containing her birth record and also wanted a xerox copy of the document itself. The likelihood of finding a working photocopy machine on the premises was a chance I was unwilling to take. Therefore, I took my own copy machine with me, rather bulky and difficult to carry around, but there were no problems in entering or exiting customs at the border checkpoints.

When I was in Kiev, I met with archival personnel in the Ukrainian State Archives for the purpose of arranging genealogy tours to begin in 1992 and also received written authorization for on-site research in its Priluki branch archive. Armed with my "permission letter," I arrived at the archives only to be told that although all documents older than 75 years were supposed to have been transferred from the local town hall

(ZAGS office) to the archives, for some reason, this had not occurred, and I found myself in the difficult position of wanting access to documents which are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice (in Kiev), and definitely closed to foreigners.

Fortunately, Natalia interceded on my behalf through the Mayor's office and after much difficulty, I was at last allowed to look at my grandmothers birth record. When I requested to have a photograph taken of me with the book, and then to make a xerox copy of the document itself, the answer was a definite "nyet!" The frustration, disappointment and years of waiting caught up with me and the tears began to fall. Shortly thereafter, the town clerk left the room stating she had a wedding to perform and would return soon. I didn't waste a minute and could hardly believe I was actually in the Priluki City Hall with my camera and copy machine in action.

The Jewish history of Priluki is well documented back to 1648, but it was the Holocaust period which interested me the most as so much of my family had remained in Priluki. Several years ago, I was reading *The Black Book* by Ilya Ehrenburg and found a chapter entitled "The End of the Jewish Community of Priluki." One of the few surviving residents described what he saw:

"The Germans herded the whole Jewish population into the large wooden pavilion in the center of the market place, poured kerosene over the pavilion and set it afire. The pavilion burned for almost two hours. The cries became weaker and weaker until they ceased altogether. All that remained of the Jewish community of Priluki, which consisted of some few thousand souls, was a mound of ashes."

During my one-day visit to Priluki, I saw the market square described above,

and the Jewish cemetery which is still intact and filled with tombstones of my family members. Today, there are perhaps 100 Jews still living in Priluki including the last Odnopozov, one very old woman named Batya.

I also visited the synagogue, closed in 1961, now an abandoned building which was severely damaged inside and very



Miriam Weiner in Central State Historical Archive in Kiev, Ukraine.

painful to see. Standing there, looking at the synagogue and thinking of times gone by, it was clear to me that I was standing on the ground frequented by generations of Odnopozov relatives before me. However, one visit was not enough. There were more people in Priluki to talk with who remember my family and so much more to see. Therefore, in August I repacked my photocopy machine and returned to the Ukraine to once again walk in the footsteps of my ancestors.

Once back in Kiev, I scheduled a meeting at the Ministry of Justice where I received a "permission letter" allowing me access to the local ZAGS office in Priluki. I learned very quickly that an official "permission letter" is necessary in a variety of circumstances to "open doors" and not only for visits to the archives. Without it,

no amount of pleading, cajoling, tears or other tactics will allow a bending of the rules.

During my second visit to Priluki, I stopped by the Mayor's office and met with his assistant who presented me with a recently-published booklet about Priluki and several banners with the official Priluki crest. Everything was proceeding well, everyone was cooperative, smiles all around, until I reached the local town hall and presented my official "permission letter."

The clerk who has direct control over the Jewish documents in the local town hall was not enthused to see me return again wanting more photographs and xerox copies. Even though I had the official "permission letter," she refused me access to documents. I went to her direct superior, the vice-mayor who initially was cooperative as described above, but also was intimidated by this officious clerk in the ZAGS office. At one point, he decided to pass on the responsibility for resolving this dilemma and advised me to please wait in his office where I was invited to a meeting with the K.G.B. who would be "arriving shortly."

Several hours had already passed in trying to resolve this matter which included long-distance telephone calls to the Minister of Justice in Kiev who ordered the clerk to cooperate. She again refused. I was running out of patience and out of time. I told the vice-mayor I was not interested in accepting his invitation to meet with the K.G.B. and instead requested a meeting with the Mayor who had just returned to his office.

After seeing my official "permission letters" and hearing the whole story (another hour passes), the Mayor telephoned the clerk and told her in no uncertain terms that she was to cooperate. He then dispatched me to her office with "his" official "permission letter." At last, after six hours and three "permission letters," she reluctantly allowed me to photocopy material from about half the registers of Jewish documents.

Upon my return to Kiev, I made an official report to the Ministry of Justice and requested that the Jewish documents be moved to the local archives in Priluki where they should have been transferred long ago, according to State law. This one episode is the only difficulty I encountered

(with people) during any of my visits. The difficulty with telephones is another story.

The happy ending to the "documents in Priluki" story is that last December, I returned to Ukraine for the fourth visit and after a frustrating week of meetings and telephone conferences, the Jewish books were transferred from the local town hall to the Priluki archives, and I had the euphoric pleasure of xeroxing over sixty documents for my family members dating back to an 1840 birth certificate.

During all my visits to the Ukraine, I used both Lvov and Kiev as my base while visiting ancestral towns on one or two-day trips including an overnight stay in Shepetovka. My father's family came from Sudilkov about three kilometers from nearby Shepetovka where other cousins lived. According to the "locals" in Shepetovka, I was the first American to ever stay overnight in the hotel and it took some convincing to arrange it. Shepetovka is about a five-hour drive from either Kiev or Lvov and after visiting there from both directions, I can see why it doesn't attract too many foreign visitors. The highway conditions and traffic patterns are not as we know them (read between the lines), and it is not likely



Yankel D. Barshak shows Torahs in Shepetovka synagogue which arrived in June 1991 for re-dedication of synagogue.

these towns will become tourist centers in the near future.

In Shepetovka, there are close to 1,000 Jews still remaining, although many of them are in the process of immigrating to Israel. First, I went to the synagogue which had been converted into a sports center. Four months later when I returned, I again stopped by the synagogue and was literally dumbfounded to



Collection of Torah Scrolls (from over 100) in Central State Historical Archive in Kiev

learn that two rooms had been returned to the Jewish community and a small prayer house had been re-established. I was shown a locked cabinet with several Torahs which had been brought from Lvov in a dedication ceremony the previous month. Perhaps some measure of Jewish life and ritual will again flourish for those Jews who choose to stay. From there I went to the Jewish cemetery which remains intact and went through the book maintained by the caretaker listing the names of those buried there. I found one "Winikur" who is probably my relative, but it will take some further research to determine the relationship.

While in Shepetovka, I went to the local ZAGS office, but was unable to locate any surviving documents prior to the Nazi occupation. The sympathetic clerk wanted so much to help and she began telephoning surrounding towns in the hope that we might find something. In nearby Polonnoye, she discovered there were some Jewish documents for Sudilkov and Shepetovka. She offered to take me there the following day.

Unfortunately, the Jewish documents for this locality were destroyed during the Holocaust and although I hoped desperately that, somehow, somewhere some of the books had been saved, I could not locate any documents for this branch of the family in Polonnoye or anywhere else; however, both clerks promised to make further inquiries on my behalf and I really believe they will.

Most of all, I feel relief and gratitude that my grandparents had the courage to leave their parents and come to America where I never had to know such a life. I

have a much deeper understanding and appreciation for their sacrifices now that I have visited the places where they were born.

One of the major problems with locating Jewish records in the Ukraine and throughout Eastern Europe, is that no one is really sure what exists and where. During the Holocaust, documents were sometimes moved to strange places for safekeeping and never returned to the proper repository.

When I returned to Kiev from Shepetovka, I stopped by to visit with Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, the Chief Rabbi of the Ukraine, who was most helpful in arranging meetings for me prior to my arrival.

It was a beautiful spring day when I arrived at the one (functioning) synagogue in Kiev, and I was surprised to find a large group of people gathered in the courtyard. The occasion was a wedding about to take place and although I was dressed for casual city touring, I stayed awhile anyway to meet the bride and groom. When it was explained to the bride, Yana Shapiro, that I was a journalist for Jewish newspapers, her face lit up and she excitedly said, "My father, Yefim Shapiro, now lives in St. Louis and he would be so happy to read about our wedding and see a photo." When I returned home, I sent a brief story and photo to the "St. Louis Jewish Light" which ran the story and picture.

According to Leonid Shmulic, one of the guests, such a wedding wouldn't have been possible just a few short years ago. Several other guests then joined the conversation to describe other changes taking place which made their lives somewhat easier. My translator had a difficult time keeping up with the conversation as everyone wanted to talk at once.

The bottom line is that even though some things are possible which were not even thinkable a few years ago, on the other hand, some things never change and it is still possible to encounter "road-blocks" — both actual and bureaucratic — in certain circumstances. Further, there is no consistency or logic to the "rules" (long outdated, but not yet officially replaced with new policy) which some officials find easier to enforce rather than accommodating reasonable requests from tourists.

The purpose of my visits to the

Ukraine were two-fold: to visit my ancestral towns and to finalize arrangements with the Main Archival Administration in Kiev for access to documents by tour groups. During my visits to the Central Historical Archives, I was allowed to go into the climate-controlled special rooms where the archival material is kept. I was told not to take a camera and also informed that non-archival personnel were normally not permitted into these storage rooms, especially foreigners. The first item shown to me was a Torah scroll and then the clerk pointed to a floor to ceiling set of shelves all filled with Torahs. I was shocked and inquired as to how many there were. The response was "about 100." At that point, I pleaded to return upstairs for my camera which was



Synagogue in Priluki, Ukraine, closed by authorities in the 1960s.

allowed after an interview with some official who reluctantly gave permission for photographs.

When I went to the Central Historical Archives in Lvov, the director referred me to an archivist who is fluent and very knowledgeable about the extensive archival holdings of Jewish institutions, organizations and related material. In addition, there are over 500 metrical books of Jewish documents (births, marriages and deaths) for towns and villages in the Lvov, Tarnopol and Stanislawow oblasts (regions). As in Kiev, I photographed a substantial collection of Torahs, stacked neatly on shelves, gathered from many communities which no longer have Jews or Jewish life.

Throughout my visit to the villages of my ancestors, I ached when I saw the devastation and neglect of Jewish cemeteries and the present condition of synagogues. However, now and then there were some nice surprises. In Lvov, a synagogue is being restored and there is a Hebrew day school for the children of approximately 8,000

Jews still living there.

Before I went to Eastern Europe, I had a visual picture in my mind about the shtetls of my grandparents, probably based upon the scenes from "Fiddler on the Roof" and other stories. It wasn't that way at all. My father's family comes from the small village of Sudilkov where the people have very little and to this day, live a meager existence. When I went to the area where the Jews formerly lived, all I could see were ramshackle buildings, poverty and dirt.

There are many highlights from my visits to the Ukraine. The moment when I stood in the Priluki town hall where I made a photo copy of my grandmother's birth certificate was very special to me. Of equal importance was meeting over 50 relatives throughout the former Soviet Union who came from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Chelyabinsk, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, and Kirovograd to learn exactly where they fit on the family tree.

There are more relatives who couldn't come to meet me who live in Odessa, Gomel, Tashkent, Tallin, Buzuluk, Dushanbe and other places I cannot even pronounce.

In my St. Petersburg hotel room, four people said "my grandparent was an Odnopozov born in Priluki." What was surprising about this was none of the four people had ever met each other previously! It was the culmination of years of planning and dreams to gather my relatives together for a family reunion in the "old country." My next goal is a family reunion in Priluki, hopefully within the next year.

In researching my family history, I located many documents in the National Archives in Washington D.C. Among them were transcripts from the Nuremberg trials including testimony by Nazi officers about the areas where they served, including Shepetovka.

Miriam Weiner, the first Board-certified Jewish genealogist in the United States, lectures on exploring Jewish "roots" and Holocaust research. She is also the coordinator of "Routes to Roots" Genealogy Tours. For information on tracing your family history and visiting ancestral towns please send a self addressed stamped envelope to Miriam Weiner, 136 Sanpiper Key, Seacaucus, New Jersey 07094.