

Lynn & Jorge Covarubias
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Overlooking a near-by river (**photo above**), the scene was beautiful, yet marred by the story that it was the site where Germans forced women to swim from one shore to the other, when they were forced to swim back, continuing until all were drowned. We were struck again and again by the beauty and the horror, both simultaneously.

We also took another small stop at an old castle and museum, ruins from ancient times. The museum had displays from artifacts from different cultures of the area. It was one of the few museums we visited with Jewish items (**photo right**). Atop the castle were wonderful views of the western countryside (**photo below**). Other short stops included an old graveyard, which housed a tomb of a Hassidic leader. There were Hassidic pilgrims making the trek to visit this tomb, crying along the path. So many pilgrims come there that a building was erected, and



On the road to Belogorodka We met up again with guide, Yulia, translator Nadya, and bus driver, Victor, and began our trip to the Katz hometown of Belogorodka. Whereas Glukov was close to the Russian border on the northeastern border of the Ukraine, Belogorodka was southwest of Kiev, in the opposite direction. Only about an hour outside of Kiev we stopped briefly to see Berdichev, once home to the famous Jewish writer Sholom Aleichem, among others. Our guide told us that before WWII Berdichev was 95% Jewish. Earlier in the 19th century, it was the second largest Jewish community in Russia. Now only 3% of the city is Jewish. We visited the site of a German massacre where tens of thousands of Jewish were killed.



nearby houses were purchased by the Hassidic community to temporarily house them. The countryside, while beautiful, was often very poor. Some houses held multiple families in much disrepair.

Visiting Khmelnytsky Because Belogorodka was such a small village, we were booked into a hotel for two nights in Khmelnytsky, a city of about 300,000 with an active

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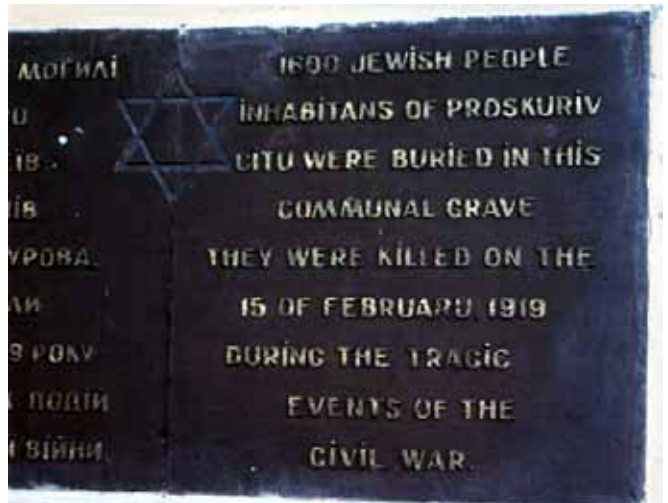
Jewish community (and hotels). It took most of the day to drive to the city, which was originally called Proskuriv. Under Soviet rule, the city was ironically renamed Khmelnytsky, after a leader who was known for his fierce fighting and also for his massacre of Jews. The town had broad, tree-lined streets, with several squares and fountains (**photo left**). Chestnut trees were in full bloom, a non-fruit-bearing variety, as were lilacs. Our bus was met by Alla Zimmerman, a young Jewish woman who was a native to Khmelnytsky, and who helped us during our tour in the area. She led us to our hotel, which was a real treat, new and surprisingly luxurious in its amenities.

One commonality in all of the Ukraine was its cleanliness. Workers were always seen sweeping the streets, gutters, even dirt roads with hand-held brooms. Trash bins were used by everyone instead of littering, and after celebrations, beer bottles and refuse was cleaned up that

night or the next day by the latest. For a poor country, its cleanliness impressed us.

After riding for most of the day, we walked around the city, seeing a memorial to the pogroms of Proskuriv (**photo right**), a street fair, and eating at a cafeteria. We also visited an old Jewish cemetery. Lynn was able to eat kasha as often as she wanted, plus given her love of soups, she was in heaven in most restaurants where they served soup with every meal. As was our typical routine, we readily found an internet café and a supermarket before we made our way in for our first night.

We awoke early to meet our tour guides to visit the Hesed, a



Jewish non-profit organization that supports elderly and poor in Khmelnytsky. This Hesed was housed in an apartment, similar to the museum in Glukov, the apartment being donated by a holocaust survivor who had participated in the Hesed's programs.

The Hesed was financially supported by the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which receives most of its funding from the United Jewish Federation. It functioned to support the Jewish community with various programs and services, one of which was to house documents and records of the Jewish community and the holocaust (**photo left**). We met the curator, Mariya Borisovna, who reminded us both of Aunt Lil, something about her stature and

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mannerisms. When Mariya learned our family names, she told us she recently had a holocaust survivor as part of the program named Marsha Ehrlich who recently passed away (born 1923, died 2004).

We were able to research the Katz & Ehrlich family names, but didn't find any who were killed in the holocaust from Belogorodka. We did find many Katz's from other places because it was a very common Jewish name in the area: 61 people named Katz ranging from 1 to 83 years of age were killed in Slavyta on June 27, 1942; in Polonnye there was a ghetto in which 4 people named Ehrlich ranging from 3 to 42 years of age were killed, and 29 people named Katz were killed. In total, 1270 people were killed in a common grave in Polonnye; 16 people named Katz were killed in Staro-Kostyantynovsky district. The list went on and on. It quickly became evident we were not going to be able to track down any information on family members that remained in Belogorodka.

We were able to find out that many Jews from Belogorodka were killed during the WWII years in the ghetto in Isaslav, a center for the area. The historical notes stated that in Isaslav there was a concentration camp that held thousands from the town and near-by villages. Local people tried to give food, clothes, sometimes tried to hide them. There started mass shootings at a ravine named Obloga. Jews were brought to the forest, forced to dig long and deep graves, were shot, killed by the thousands, mothers, children, elderly. They were covered with earth, but after a while the earth was moving from those who hadn't been killed and were still suffering. Story after story, town after town, stories recounted such horrors, documented by eyewitnesses.

Another historical account told of the battle to liberate Isaslav on March 4, 1944. The Germans had made Isaslav a fortress, and the battle raged back and forth, being taken by the Soviets, then the Germans again, finally a battalion led by a man named Hohryakov was aided by partisans to retake the village. Almost two thousand soldiers were killed altogether over this one town.

After thanking Mariya, purchasing some postcards telling about Jewish Proskuriv, we were about to leave when Mariya said she so missed her brother who lives in America, she hasn't seen him in years. He lives in St. Louis! Last name of Goldman. Another emotional leaving, as we started our trek to Belogorodka.

History of Belogorodka Yulia, our guide, read from a history book as we rode along country roads. Belogorodka's history was long: In 1508 a Polish king decreed that Belogorodka belonged to Prince Zoflofsky. Peasants had to pay large taxes by giving large portions of their crops. Agriculture predominated in the area. There were very hard living conditions for the peasants, who were often forced to work for the Prince building his castles, forts and other fortifications.

From time to time there were Tartar attacks, feudal fights, and peasants always had to worry about being inducted into the army. Belogorodka was viewed a favorable location so over the years the town was destroyed and re-built many times.

In the 18th century there were about 3800 inhabitants (more than live there now). Fairs and trade started. Jews lived there from the 17th century on. During the second half of the 17th century inhabitants tried to liberate from the Polish prince.

In the 19th century there was a large Jewish community. Since there was a liquor producing plant near-by in Isaslav, villagers grew wheat to make vodka. A highly stratified society existed among the Jewish community. After the revolution of 1917, people moved out to large towns and mostly only the old remained. No Jews live in Belogordka today; about 20 live in Isaslav.

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Belogorodka As our guides knew we were close to the village, we stopped to ask pedestrians on the road where the village was, and how to locate the main part of town. We were given directions and quickly found the village road signs (**photo left**) and the main square. There was a recent Soviet memorial to the war in the square with one unusual aspect. The memorial list of names of Soviet veterans killed and included the identifier of “Jewish” by the names of Jewish soldiers. It was the only Soviet memorial in all the Ukraine that we saw that identified Jews in any way.

As our bus pulled into town and we started taking pictures, neighbors gathered to see about the commotion. Our guides spoke with a

gentleman at a bus stop who remembered a man named Katz who lived by the square. He pointed to a pile of rubble he said was once the Katz home (**photo right**). As the man spoke animatedly to us, translated, of course by Nadya, he told us that Katz was a master carpenter, the kind who supervised at construction sites, an expert. He also told us that Katz was buried in the old Jewish cemetery by a nut tree with a little gate around it. Meanwhile the guides were able to find the names and address of a couple who were village elders, one who had been a school teacher, and we were told they might be able to remember more and help us with information.



Unbeknownst to any of us, Jorge was beginning to feel rumblings in his abdomen.

Remembrances We were quickly able to locate the unpaved street of the schoolteacher, and asked neighbors for directions to the house. We took pictures of many of the nearby houses to give a sense of the area (**photo left**). The whole area was green, overgrown and had a ramshackle feel. Fences separated yards and houses, with gardens attached behind sheds and outhouses. Chickens, goats, dogs, cats were common yard animals, and the schoolteacher had all of them. We made our way to the back of the house, a little unsure if we were intruding. But soon the couple welcomed us into their backroom and made us sit down to talk.

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The schoolteacher, Georgeeva Anastasiya Makarovna (**photo left**), was born in 1921, and her husband, Kozybets Nikolay Mitrievich, was born in 1915. Yulia proved very talented and sensitive in her questions and allowed the couple to begin remembering and speaking about those difficult times. After hearing from us the names & limited information we had of Katz and Ehrlich family members, Anastasiya started speaking by recounting the Jewish families she remembered (**photo below**). A Katz family lived across the street: the father, Hankel, was a singing teacher. The mother was Chana, and they had 3 children, Ruhlah & Lucia were girls, and one son Simeon. Nikolay remembered that Ruhlah had one shoulder that was higher than the other and she had a

very good voice. He sang part of a song from an opera that they had sung together as a duet (**photo bottom left**).

Another Katz family was a blacksmith. There was a son Abraham and a daughter Manya.

About this time Jorge indicated he needed to use a bathroom. He was directed outside and later said he was never so glad to see an outhouse in his whole life. Poor guy. We knew something was amiss, but were so engrossed in the conversation, no one paid attention. I got the clue when he had to go again a few minutes later.

Anastasiya remembered that when the Germans forced the Katz' to the ghetto, they brought their cow over to Anastasiya's house and wanted to give it to them. The



couple said no, they couldn't keep the cow because it was forbidden by the Germans to take anything from Jews. So the Katz's took the cow back home. But when she awoke the next day, the cow was in her yard. She explained that they kept the cow for a while but when the German army left they took the cow with them.

Another Jewish family they remembered was named Greenfelt. The children were all girls, Luba, Bella and Raya. They remembered that when the family was taken to the ghetto, that at first they thought maybe everything would be all right, that they had just been relocated. At first they were free to come and go, and Luba & Bella used to bring some food back to



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Belogorodka. Later when freedoms were taken away, Luba tried to escape and was shot. When Raya saw Luba being shot, she came out and was shot too.

Other Jewish neighbors were the Roisman family. The father was a carpenter who made furniture and the daughter was a teacher. The children were named Lova and Peter. Another Jewish neighbor had three children, Zelda, Boruch and Gelma. Other Jewish last names she remembered were Ferner and Thronl.

Anastasiya explained that there were 2 synagogues in Belogorodka at the time my mother's family lived there. There were also 3 schools: one Polish, one Ukrainian, and one Jewish. She remembered that when she was a child that one of the Jewish mothers would eat only kosher, but the children would secretly eat Ukrainian food too. She remembered Passover, as what she called the Jewish Easter, having matzoh and matzoh meal being baked. She ate it too. Jewish students shared matzoh with others, they sneaked and didn't let the adults see them sharing food.



Anastasiya described the Jewish families as generous. They gave shoes, coats, things saying that they didn't need them anymore. When the Nazi first came, the couple said they didn't disturb the coop (village farm) because they wanted the food. So the couple thought things might be okay. But later the Jews were forced to move to the ghetto. Yulia asked if years earlier there was starvation in the village during the Stalin-induced famine, and Anastasiya said no, no one starved to death in Belogorodka. She admitted, though, that today they have to tend their plot of land themselves and it was hard for her to keep up the crops. Sometimes she said she had to pay a little money for

someone to help them.

Anastasiya said she knew some Yiddish words, more she could recognize than speak. Once they had a Jewish man come back to visit who had been born in Belogorodka and left when he was a little over a year old. When he spoke to her she couldn't understand the language but recognized some words. Later she realized it was Hebrew he was speaking, that he had gone to Israel to live.

Nikolay went out and brought in photos the couple had collected. One could immediately recognize the photo of each of them as young adults (**photo above**). There were also photos of classes she taught with her students. One boy reminded me of Uncle Izzy's ears, but it couldn't have been he.

She also confirmed that another Katz family had lived by the main square and he worked as a master carpenter at construction sites, not on furniture.

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It was an emotional parting after the couple insisted we share some homemade apple juice with sweet apples (**photo right**). There were tears all around when we expressed our gratitude. Anastasiya said I looked Jewish and she was sorry she couldn't be more helpful to me. The painful stories the couple had recounted touched not only us but also the native Ukrainians with us as well. As I expressed my appreciation, the interpreter became overcome with emotion as we left. Anastasiya walked us outside and watched as we left the yard. (**photo below**) Plenty of tears and long last looks.

Leaving Belogorodka Our bus made its way slowing down the lanes of the village to the



Jewish cemetery of Belogorodka. Stretching out across a slight hill that overlooked a valley was the green grass carpet of the old Jewish cemetery. Horses grazed the hillside, and we easily found the grave described as belonging to the carpenter Katz, surrounded by a gate next to a nut tree (**photo below**). Unfortunately the tree covered any view of the gravestone itself, but others nearby let us feel we saw it by example.

As our troop left Belogorodka, horse drawn carts carried stacks of grasses cut by farmers with hand-held scythes. (**photo on next page**) Back on the secondary road, when we stopped to photograph the Isaslav town sign, several women rushed to our bus to open the door, thinking we were public

transportation. They started to walk away when they noticed who we were, but we extended the invitation to ride with us and they gladly accepted, showing us to Isaslav. One woman stayed with us on the bus and helped us find different parts of town.

Our new rider came in very handy to Jorge, who again needed a bathroom by the time we made the main square. I mentioned his difficulty to Yulia and our translator and all 3 ladies went off with Jorge to find some facilities. Unfortunately the first shop they tried didn't have running water, but the second shop did. As the 3 ladies waited for him inside the shop, apparently a long discussion ensued as they wondered if they should come get me because they didn't know if Jorge had toilet paper or not. While the discussion raged on, Jorge came out, reassured them that everything was fine, and



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they were all greatly relieved. They laughed with us on the bus about the incident, since they didn't know we had read of toilet paper shortages, so we came well prepared with tissues everyday.

Yulia remembered from the museum in Khmelnytsky that Isaslav had a fortress where the German units housed thousands of troops. She and Nadya laughed at the irony of the name of the town because they said Isaslav was an obviously Jewish name, yet this was the place of mass destruction of the Jews of the area. The woman to whom we gave a ride generously rode with us to the ruins (**photo below**) of the fortress. We then visited the Soviet memorial to those killed in the war, but again no mention of Jews or of the

concentration camp. We found an old Jewish cemetery before we made our way back to the highway to return to our hotel for the night, emotionally spent.

On the ride back, Alla Zimmerman, our Khmelnytsky contact, told us about her experiences growing up in Khmelnytsky during Soviet rule. Apparently when she was young, her parents never told her she was Jewish. When she first started school, a day came when the teacher asked the students to stand and tell their ethnicity. Alla said she was French. The teacher contradicted, "Oh no, you are a Jew. Go home and ask your parents." She was embarrassed. Later in school, students who did well academically and met a certain standard were able to attend a camp in summer. It was very prestigious to be able to attend the camp. Alla met the standard, but her name wasn't on those going to camp. She asked why & was told the spaces were being filled by Ukrainian students. She never did get to go. At another time a teacher asked students to stand and tell what characteristics they associated with Jews. In spite of some of the stereotypes being partially positive (they were intelligent and cunning, they had a lot of money) she felt the sting of them.

In high school, students had to sit for university exams, but only if their grades were high enough. Alla had high grades, but wasn't included in the students selected to sit for exams. Again she asked her advisor about not being included, and was told he didn't think she would do well enough. She pressed the issue because she was near the top of her class and was finally told that she wasn't being considered for



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university training because as a Jew the government thought she would immigrate to Israel, so it wasn't worth investing the training for her. To us it seemed a clear indication of institutionalized racism. She pushed for being allowed to take the exams, promised to remain in the Ukraine and finally was allowed. She did quite well on the exams and was able to get her university degree.