

Lynn & Jorge Covarubias
2007 Ukraine Journal
Preface

To our readers we want to say a few caveats. First, the reason for this trip was for Lynn to learn about her family's history in the Ukraine. That alone may be enough explanation, but perhaps Lynn's quest had more to do with the silence that surrounded the family's time in the Ukraine, rather than just their origin. Lynn and other family members have scant family histories; a few stories repeated many times were more the norm. As a family we have discussed why, perhaps their lives were too hard, perhaps the pogroms too atrocious, but we were left with the impression that as a family, they left and they never looked back.

In trying to eke out her family story, history didn't help out either, because of the troubled past—both recent and far—of the Ukraine itself, the Russian, Polish, Swedish, German, Turk invaders who laid waste to the people and the land. Life was all too frequently turned upside down with massive destruction many, many times in that troubled region. On top of this, of course, were World War II and the massive killing of Jews by both Ukrainians and Nazis. The final destruction of any shreds of family roots was the Soviets who worked to deny Jewish heritage.

As one of our tour books suggested, "Imaging a couple who were born in Austria, married and raised their children in Poland, lived in Germany, died in the Soviet Union and are buried in the Ukraine...that could have happened in L'viv."

Another suggested this quick timeline:

- 470: Legendary Slavic brothers Ky, Shchek and Khoriv and sister, Libid found Kyiv
- 878: Nordic King Oleh becomes ruler of Kyiv & the first eastern Slavic state, Kyivan Rus
- 989: Volodymyr the Great organizes a mass baptism into Orthodox Christianity in the Dnipro River
- 1240: Mongols sack Kyiv, Kyivan Rus crumbles and its east is absorbed into the Golden Horde
- 1349: Poland overruns Galicia & with Lithuania, inches further eastward into Ukraine
- 1648: Local Cossacks rebels against Polish rulers, but end up with Russian masters instead
- 1775: Russian empress Catherine the Great destroys the Cossack settlement at Zaporizhzhya
- 1918: Early attempt at independence fails & Ukraine comes under Soviet control
- 1932-33: More than 5 million Ukrainians die in a famine engineered by Stalin
- 1939-44: The country is a battlefield for Nazi, Soviet & nationalist forces; 6 million die
- 1986: Chernobyl nuclear reactor explodes spewing out radioactive pollution
- 1991: Ukraine's parliament votes for independence
- 2000: Allegations link President Kuchma to a journalist's murder
- 2004: Opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko is poisoned during election; he lives to win

Left out of the timeline were the expulsions and massacres specific to Jews in the area from its inception, under the leadership of Cossack leader Brodan Chmelnitsky, Tsars Alexander & Ivan, Peter the Great, plus the concentration of Jews into the Pale of the Settlement wherein pogroms were violent and unrelenting.

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To be honest, Lynn was hoping to learn the names of her maternal grandfather's siblings and to confirm those of his parents. Perhaps because her mother, Sylvia, is still alive, the last of her generation, and it is a few years after Ukrainian independence, it seemed a good time to attempt this journey.

To family, Lynn wants to tread gently on childhood memories of what grandparents did or didn't say or do. Any distortions or things that do not jibe are not intended, and she has attempted only to include verified information in her journal and within the family tree. She is also open to discussion, so please do not hesitate to contact her to discuss any details of the trip.

To our friends, just a little family background so names make sense. Lynn's mother, Sylvia and her family came to the US in December 1922, having been raised in a small village, Belogorodka. All throughout her life, Lynn heard the name of the village pronounced "Bellarudka." The emigration journey took the family a couple of years to accomplish; they spent time in Poland, so Sylvia was almost 9 years old by the time they arrived. Sylvia's maiden name was Katz and her mother's maiden name was Ehrlich.

Lynn's father's family also emigrated from the town of Glukov in the Ukraine in 1905, with her grandfather, Mosea DeWoskin (later changed to Morris) bringing his family (wife and 3 children) to St. Louis when he was 40 years old. Mosea's last children, including his youngest, Albert, were born in the US. Albert was Lynn's father. The family names on her father's side are DeWoskin and Moloff.

Now to the impressions of the country itself: The land is beautiful and fertile, with rich dark soil that looks like life itself. It is also poor. In fact, the population is decreasing, owing, we believe, to the weakness of their transition to a free-market economy and a lack of infrastructure (of course corruption doesn't help any either). We were surprised to learn that the Ukraine is to Western Europe as Mexico is to the US. Ukrainians cross illegally into Europe to work crops and in service industries, remaining there as long as possible, sending money to families back home. (There's also the same backlash against them from the Europeans, we heard). There isn't really much of a middle class, a few very, very rich and most just making do. The translator and guides we used were all fully employed in other jobs (university professor, non-profit director, etc) and worked more than one job just to try to make ends meet. There is little adequate medical care. People in cities have their "own" apartments, from the Soviet times. But ability to buy property is unattainable to all but the rich. Unskilled labor we heard about was paid about \$3 per hour US equivalent. In the cities, that amount wouldn't cover utilities and food. The translator told us that city dwellers often used to have a small plot of land in the countryside so they could plant and consume their own produce. But recent years have seen robbers taking the goods before the city folk could get out to harvest the crops, so they have given that up. Most work very hard; it means more than both parents working, both parents work more than one job. Also, the people's thinness is apparent.

In the countryside, poverty is evident, but it has a different face from how it looks in Mexico. The Soviet coops once flourishing in the farmlands have disappeared, and along with them the tractors and combines. We saw some farmers pulling the plows by hand and shoulder—not even animals to tend the fields. The old couple we spoke to in Lynn's mother's village said they had to tend their land themselves—sometimes they tried to save a few dollars to pay someone to help them. On the other hand someone owns the large fields of grain we noted, so there goes the few "very rich."

Quoting from our travel books, the country has 47 million inhabitants today, down from 52 million in 1993. An article we read while there said the average life expectancy for Ukrainian men was something like 65--owing in great part to tobacco. They're still smoking and drinking up a storm. Birthrates have fallen also.

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The young ladies decked out in revealing clothes and high heels, we were told, reflect a kind of need to secure a prosperous husband, thus the provocative advertisement of their “goods”. But too, they were just beautiful and young and showing a lot of skin. But very dressed up, not casual at all.

The country actually isn’t all that stable, it appeared to us. There are daily protests, a big split between pro-nationalist and pro-soviet forces, which go to the core of the ruling government. Now the president has suspended some of the constitutional obligations because of the shifting balance of power. So who knows, civil war isn’t out of the question. The Orange Revolution favorite, President Yushchenko, isn’t as popular anymore, and his enemies (led by prime minister Yanukovych) are on his tail. He always said Putin was behind his poisoning, and it is a realistic conclusion.

The museums we saw were in private apartments because nothing existed for Jewish history until after the Soviets left. The Ukrainian government now doesn’t fund such enterprises, so it is up to Jewish organizations to fund restorations and tell the history. Anti-Semitism is still alive and well there, and minorities in general aren’t well accepted. One of the 32-year-old university-trained translators we had in L’viv, for example, was just learning new information about Jewish history in her home city with our tour. She was never taught anything about such history under Soviet rule or since. The B’nai B’rith and Joint Distribution Committee (funded through Jewish Federation) were the main funding organizations we encountered directly in our search.

We did quite a bit of research before we went, including asking for references and recommendations from some Jewish organizations. Lynn found a book on Jewish history in Russia and the Ukraine and it mentioned one tour agency in particular. When that agency’s name came up again in other recommendations, we went with them. We did some comparison-shopping, and because the agency was so expensive, we used them only for finding Lynn’s parent’s villages and the days travel to those places. For the days we spent in the larger cities (Kiev and L’viv) we hired guides and made arrangements ourselves. We also had the help of one of Jorge’s nieces, Anna’s sorority sister from college who has been living with her husband in Kiev for a couple of years. He works as a civilian contractor for government grant projects, so she was extremely helpful in assisting us to rent an apartment rather than paying exorbitant hotel rates (over \$300 a night) for not-so-nice hotels. Plus she gave us the confidence of having an English-speaking contact there in the city. She was extremely helpful and made the trip much more comfortable. We could ask her questions, bounce ideas and price quotes off her.

Since the free-market economy really hasn’t yet flourished, tourism hasn’t expanded much. Kiev, capital and largest city, has much to do and see, but is extremely pricey. I think it is only behind Moscow and St. Petersburg in tourism costs. But we had the tour books and Karen, Anna’s friend, so we were able to stay in one-bedroom apartments quite reasonably (\$85 a night) and comfortably. It helped to be able to wash clothes, keep beer cold in the fridge and such. Some of the small things we were warned about, not having toilet paper in restrooms, power going off, things like that turned out not to be so bothersome. But we also went in spring so didn’t have to battle winter demands. Since we’re walkers, we weren’t gouged by taxi drivers, and we made realistic plans for sightseeing that didn’t leave us exhausted or dissatisfied. It seemed to be unexpectedly hot in Kiev (93 degrees) so that sapped our energy too, but things like that are just part of travel. Luck was on our side in that we only got diarrhea a couple of times, and it only lasted one day at a time. It could have been much worse, and we weren’t that uncomfortable given everything.

We did get tired from the daily stresses of figuring out things like where to eat if places didn’t have English menus or trying to read inscrutable street signs. But most days we hired a guide for about 2-3 hours and were able to ask about things we needed to get done. We always found very reliable internet connections, and usually stuck to one or two restaurants unless we were with someone who could help us. Ukrainian food was cheap in restaurants that didn’t cater to foreigners. We knew how to say beer and thank you by the second day, and what else did we need? Oh yeah, the word for toilet sounded very much the same as in English, so we got by. In the cities it wasn’t hard to find at least one young person who spoke English. In the country or smaller

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cities, not much English was spoken at all. We thought that apart from the emotionality of the Jewish connection, the next biggest stressor was the language barrier. That said, there are always helpful people everywhere in the world, and we found our share of them on this trip too.

There are things we would have done differently, but all in all those were minor and had more to do with not knowing the terrain than anything else.