

# Galleries

## the cemetery before clearing



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## the volunteers working



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# Report about the international work-camp to clear the Jewish cemetery of Czernowitz of weedy vegetation. August 2008

*I also wanted to relate a touching offer that was made to me by Marina, the young (Ukrainian) student who's been working with us. This afternoon at the cemetery, she said, with one of the volunteers translating, that she would like to keep my great grandparents' graves clean for me, if that was all right, and that she would send me pictures.*

*Joanna Liss, August 20, 2008, [gojo08.blogspot.com](http://gojo08.blogspot.com)*

The work-camp was held from Aug. 7th till Aug. 21st. It's aim was to clear part of the totally overgrown and neglected Jewish cemetery of bushes, sapling trees and climbing vines and to make this part of the cemetery accessible to those wishing to visit the graves.

The work-camp was established by SVIT Ukraine ([www.svit-ukraine.org](http://www.svit-ukraine.org)). SVIT is a young organization, who's aim is to support the activities of volunteers in the Ukraine. SVIT Ukraine was established in the fall of 2000 as a working group about volunteering and was officially registered in November 2005 as a local non profit organization, created for the promotion, support and development of volunteering in the Ukraine. Julia Myasysheva, the head of SVIT, worked hard and persistently to make it possible for this work-camp to take place. It is largely due to her efforts, that it did.

The contact with SVIT Ukraine was established through Service Civil International Germany ([www.sci-d.de](http://www.sci-d.de)) and Mr. John Myers, a member SCI. SCI is a general international organization, who's aim is to promote voluntary work for peace, the resolution of conflict by peaceful means, social justice, enduring development, and intercultural exchange. SCI has a network of over 35 national branches on five continents and cooperates with about 80 partner-organizations, one of which is SVIT Ukraine.

The 12 volunteers who participated in the Chernivtsi Jewish cemetery work-camp, came from Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the US. After a report about the work-camp on the local television station, 5 young Ukrainians, residents of Chernivtsi, joined the international volunteers.

We consider the fact that local young people, joined the international volunteers, a great success of the work-camp.

Barbara Chmielowska (from Poland) and Jasmin Söhner (from Germany) were the organizers of the work-camp on location.

The volunteers had to pay their own traveling expenses. They received support from the Chernivtsi city administration in the form of accommodation in a home for handicapped children, which was empty during the summer, free transport to and from the cemetery and help in clearing the cemetery, provided by two workmen, one of whom used a chain-saw to cut the sapling trees.

The modest cost of the work-camp was about 1000 Euro. This sum was raised by SVIT Ukraine, SCI Germany, and through individual contributions.

The work was carried out under difficult conditions. During the whole duration of the work-camp, the temperature was above 30 degrees Celsius and occasionally reached 37 degrees. The heavy rains of the previous weeks and the ensuing floods in the area, caused a plague of mosquitoes. Stinging nettles, toppled gravestones and the stumps of





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## the cemetery after clearing



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## beauty of old tombstones



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## the volunteers



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the cut saplings, made it difficult to move about. The tools used by the volunteers (axes, shears, sickles and machetes) were of simple design, lacking any safeguards, which made them dangerous to use. Fortunately, no one was injured.

Despite the difficult conditions, the group of volunteers worked eagerly and in a very dedicated manner. They got along harmoniously and worked cooperatively.

Their motives for participating in the work-camp were quite various. One was a student of Hebrew, one had family roots in Czernowitz. Most of them had an interest in discovering Eastern Europe and had already had experience with voluntary work. This particular project, connected as it is to a central European past, while situated in a new young state of Eastern Europe had a particular appeal.

The interest in Jewish culture and history, certainly was also a motive for joining this work-camp.

We consider it very important that some young Chernivtsi people, recognized the opportunity to meet young people from various countries, to get to know them and to spend some time with them. In addition we could see the birth of a new civic involvement. As one of the local volunteers expressed it: "Here, essentially, no one cares about anything. But, I do want to care about things, after all, this is my city."

The idea of working for something without getting paid, is new to many young Ukrainians. Thanks to the engagement of the volunteers, now, some citizens have adopted the idea of working to improve both their city and themselves.

Barbara Chmielowska and Jasmin Sohner, the two "on location" organizers of the work-camp described the atmosphere among the volunteers as: "very good, in spite of the fact, that we were a bunch of quite different people. The volunteers were hard working, very lively and patient during our excursions and funny and philosophical during our evening talks."

The work-camp succeeded in clearing only a small part of the cemetery, of weeds, bushes, vines and young trees. We believe that areas #33 and #34 and a small section of #31, as numbered on the new cemetery plan, were cleared. Sections #29 and #32 are relatively clear of weeds. This means that currently only 4% of the cemetery is free of weedy bushes, sapling trees and climbing vines. A drop in the bucket.

But despite the small area cleared, we should consider the work-camp a success and a hopeful beginning. The work-camp had been announced quite late in relation to when it would take place; in June 2008 for August of the same year. This was in no way the fault of either SCI Germany, or SVIT Ukraine, but due to the fact that applications to these organizations were made rather late. The resources available for the implementation of the work-camp were meager (no financial aid to pay the volunteers' travel expenses), all of which contributed to the relatively small number of volunteers, who could participate in the work-camp and the small fraction of the cemetery which could be cleared.

Plans are under way for SCI Germany and SVIT Ukraine to hold additional work-camps to clear the Jewish cemetery of Chernivtsi, in 2009.

Some of this year's volunteers have already declared their desire to participate and the longer time available to publicize the camp and to apply for funds to aid in it's implementation, bodes well for it's success.

On the other hand, the goal of work-camps is never exclusively to achieve a tangible result. The education and the inter-cultural experience of the participants, is at least of equal value. We believe that this goal was largely achieved. Aside from the fact that the volunteers came from so many different countries and had the opportunity to get to know each other, they also had the opportunity to explore Chernivtsi and vicinity, get to know some local young people and learn about the Jewish aspect of the city's past and present. They went on an excursion to the Carpathian mountains and on a tour of Sadagora, it's synagogue and Jewish cemetery. This tour was organized



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and paid for by Rabbi Kofmanski. Thanks to the intervention of Dr. Bursuk of Hesed Shushana, the volunteers were invited to the opening and evening activities of the Yiddish conference which took place during the time they were in Chernivtsi. Natalya Shevchenko, showed them the only partially set-up new Jewish museum and the attached library and archives.

The two of us, Christian Hermann and Miriam (Mimi) Taylor spent some time with the volunteers, both working at the cemetery and talking to them. Mimi talked to the volunteers about Czernowitz as it used to be, before WW2 and during that war and Christian Hermann, about the available literature about Czernowitz and by Czernowitzer authors.

The little free time they had, the volunteers spent in getting to know the City and it's people. Of high significance and long-term value, is that they chose to spend some of their time to distribute leaflets about the work-camp on the central square (the former Ringplatz), which resulted in some young local people joining them in helping to clear the cemetery.

The human contacts created during this work-camp are best exemplified by the statement of Joanna Liss at the beginning of this report.

In a sort of reverse order, we would like now to describe how the work-camp came into being:

The initial idea was Christian Herrmann's. In March of 2008 Christian and Mimi composed a letter to the mayor of Chernivtsi, asking for his willingness and cooperation in having a group of volunteers work to clear the Jewish cemetery. Mimi got many members of the Cz.-List as well as former Czernowitzers, who do not belong to the list, to sign this appeal to the mayor. Mayor Fedoruk, sent Mimi a positive reply and on the basis of this reply, we could apply to SCI Germany and SVIT Ukraine, which we did.

But, the fact that the work-camp took place at all and that it was successful, cannot be attributed to individual people. It was a joint effort of many people; those who initiated it, those who were willing to sign the petition to the mayor, those who took the idea and gave it, it's practical framework, but most of all the volunteers who participated in this project. It is them that we owe our deep and sincere thanks.

This is just a beginning!

*Christian Herrmann  
 Miriam (Mimi) Taylor  
 September 2008*