

Return flight to Czernivtsi

HARRY JARVIS provides us with a compelling follow-up to his last article¹ with this report of his visit to his home town in south-west Ukraine.

By joining a lively web site discussion group², I made several important contacts and was encouraged to make a second visit to my birthplace of Czernivtsi. [Note the spelling variations of the name in this article.]

The site provided a large archive of interest to the Jewish community who were there during World War II. The collection gives details of the work on the restoration of the local cemetery, offers travel advice to Bukovina, assists members with their search for lost relatives and acts as a repository for unpublished material.

After meeting Professor Hirsch, the poems written by my sister, Sonja, in a concentration camp were translated and published. After reading these poems, Professor Irene Silverblatt, of Duke University, North Carolina, gave me two volumes of verses written by Selma Meerbaum-Eisenger, b 1924, who died of typhus in 1942 in a forced labour camp.

She was related to the poet Paul Celan³ and when I met Professor Hirsch at her Weiner Library lecture, I gave her my signed copy of *Pearls of Childhood*, written by Vera Kissing.⁴

In May 2011 I returned to Czernivtsi after 25 years. Now freed from the iron grip of communism it seemed almost prophetic that my previous article could have a follow-up. This unforgettable town has become a welcoming haven to a large numbers of visitors each year.

Speaking in 1951 in Bremen, Paul Celan referred chillingly to the place as "*Wo Menschen und Bücher lebten*", namely, where people and books were alive once.

A modern town

In 1987, it took two days for me to get there, whereas now one can arrive by air in five hours, flying into its new airport. Fortunately the official tourist guide, Natasha Masly, who had helped me then, was again available every day to act as interpreter, provided drivers and assisted in every possible way. On my second visit, the modernisation and economic vitality of the town was overwhelming.

The population has doubled to 250,000 with only 1,250 Jewish families. At the Museum of History and Culture of Bukovyna Jews I was welcomed by the newly appointed Ukrainian director, Mykolaya Kushnir, who has devoted his life to editing the town's history and I quote him:

"The first Jews came to Chernivtsy before the name of this city was ever mentioned in documents of the Moldavian principality of the 15th century. By the late 17th-early 18th century, a full-fledged Jewish community had been formed in Chernivtsy. Their numbers grew due to the addition of migrants from neighbouring states. In particular many Jews came to the Bukovina area during the Russian-Turkish war of 1769-1774."



The town had just celebrated its 600-year anniversary and almost all the buildings were renovated, newly painted with numerous plaques about the Jewish ghetto and the murder of 50,000 Jews in Transnistria.

I went to the synagogue where the internationally famous Josef Schmidt once sang, and took part in a recorded interview for a documentary film which will be made by a producer in Cologne. The producer had read my article in *Shemot* and, informed of the visit, arranged for a cameraman and interpreter, with a script, to carry out a recording. The building was set on fire during the War and is now a cinema showing the latest films.



Half a day was spent visiting the restored graves of my grandparents and a day some eight miles away in the villages where I had lived as a child. My father's house is being completely renovated and my grandmother's house is now a citizens' advice bureau where the staff invited me in for a chat.

I was also fortunate to meet a group of railway workers whose grandparents had received medical treatment from my father. Czernowitz today has many modern vehicles, excellent restaurants, shops and elegantly dressed people milling about. The five days passed only too quickly.

REFERENCES

1. "This year in Czernivtsi", *Shemot*, 18.3.
2. <http://Czernowitz.ehpes.com>.
3. "Poetic licence and relative values", *Shemot*, 2001.
4. In June 1939, before her 11th birthday Vera Gissing escaped from occupied Czechoslovakia, leaving her family behind. The memories rekindled by a reunion of the Czech school in Wales where she was educated, encouraged Vera to go back to the diaries and letters that she had not touched for 40 years. 100 pages, pub. Robson Books Ltd, 1999.