

Three Days in Czernowitz

May 3-5 2006

by Jane Rostos

Wednesday, May 3, 2006.

We leave SV at 9:00 a.m. Our party is made up of three people: Professor Hans Wellmann, Ph. D., of Augsburg, Germany; Genoveva Volosciuc, assistant lecturer at the Ukrainian Language Department in our college; and yours truly.

We've got a fancy car and a driver from the so-called "SV County Council", so we don't even need to get out at the customs. Once we arrive on the Ukrainian territory, the customs officers give us a form to fill in (info about ourselves and about the car we're using, the purpose of our journey, etc.). There's a panel there somewhere letting us know, in Ukrainian, Romanian and English, that we are not allowed to take along any chemicals, too much food, and more than \$1,000 in cash. But no one's asking about that, and no one seems even curious to see what's in our purses and bags.

We cross the border and check our mobile phones. Prof. W., who in Romania was on Vodafone, gets the Ukrainian net Kyivstar right away. It's one of the many mobile phone companies in the Ukraine: actually, just like in Romania, pretty much everyone has a mobile phone. There are also pay phones everywhere in the streets, and they work with either coins or cards. Phone cards can be bought at every newspaper stand (strangely, these are called POST, but on the other hand, I didn't see any post offices), and there's plenty of them, too. Other things that can be bought there: very nice postcards, city maps, stamps (the clerks will even glue them to your envelopes), books about the city (Prof. W. got a great one in Ukrainian and German, with lots of good-quality, colorful pictures), and, of course, magazines and newspapers, but those are only in Ukrainian, as far as I could see. The mailboxes are emptied every day at 4: 00 p.m.

Also, there are quite a few ATM machines, which, although out in the streets, look safe. I don't know if they work for foreign currency. The banks offer Western Union Money Transfer services as well. But, as someone pointed out, it's a cash economy, so...cash is recommended. Can be exchanged quite easily on just about every street.

Anyway. Genoveva's phone and mine are on the Orange network, and, for some reason, that doesn't seem to find a partner in the Ukraine. We have the Romanian net a long way beyond the border, but afterwards we have to rely on Prof. W.'s phone. (My husband made big eyes hearing that: he's been in the Ukrainian a couple of times, as well, and his phone did work there! So, make your own rhyme out of it...)

The road is good, so much better than in Romania, in villages as well as in the beautiful beech forest we pass through. Seemingly, the Ukrainians would never destroy their forests! We're on the verge of getting a speeding ticket, as our driver (young and restless, yeah) reaches 116 km/h instead of the legal 90. But he gets off and explains that we're kind of in a big hurry, so the policeman dismisses him with the request that he shouldn't break the law again. It's the first instance of Ukrainian nicety: we were to become convinced that the Ukrainians are incredibly nice, warm, helpful people. They would do anything to help, and waste any amount of time on us, just to make sure that we're all right and pleased with whatever it is they can offer (road directions, food, merchandise).

Soon enough the city comes into view. It's my second time here, so I'm not amazed at how large it looks. I know that the old part of it can't be seen right away: it's surrounded by the "new" neighborhoods built in the communist times. The streets and buildings look much alike those in Romania or Bulgaria. Nothing interesting, and the road isn't too good, either, here on the edge of the town. The traffic is kind of wild,

too, but there are traffic lights everywhere, and they do work! Lots of cars, most of them old and not in great shape. Those are the old Russian cars, which most people seem to still own. Fewer new, fancy, western cars than in Romania. We pass by a KIA and a SKODA showroom. Also, the city busses look very old. They run on either gas or electricity, and are smaller than the Romanian ones. There are also minibuses, and those are larger than in Romania. The streetcars have been gone since the mid '70's.

One by one, the old buildings start coming into view. First smaller, then ever larger ones. We keep driving, and only stop in front of the university, where we go looking for Prof. Volodimir Antoficiuk, the one who has arranged for our accommodation. He'll be using our car and driver to get to SV, where he has classes with our students, so he briefly introduces us to his staff (he's the head of the Ukrainian Literature Department) and, more importantly, to Irina, who's going to be our guide for the entire duration of our stay. She speaks Ukrainian, some English, and a very entertaining, dialectal sort of Romanian. She's going to prove invaluable to us.

They take us to our quarters, a so-called "official apartment" in a hostel for doctoral students. It's in one of the old buildings, a couple of blocks away from the university. The address is: Ul. 28 Cervenii 23 (Street 28th of June, #23). Personally, I get a strange feeling walking into it. I can't help wondering what has become of the people who used to live there before WWII...

The doctoral students all share the rest-rooms, but we've got, like I said, an apartment made up of: a broad hallway, a large dining-room, two bedrooms, two bath-rooms and a large kitchen. Irina has even brought us mineral water and food: tomatoes, huge red peppers (the mild sort!), cheese, ham and sliced bread. Those will do for breakfast, but right now she's supposed to take us out to lunch.

So off we go. On our way to the restaurant (it's small, and all small restaurants are called "Cafés") we come to realize what the typical Czernowitz old house looks like: a café in the basement, with the entrance directly from the street; a store or a lawyer's office on the first floor, and apartments further up. Some buildings have recently been renovated, others don't look that good (meaning that the doors and windows are very old, and the paint is quite faded). Some front doors are ajar, so we can peek inside, others are locked up. There are interesting-looking locks on every door, all provided by the State: criminality had soared in Czernowitz in the 1990's. But I'm willing to bet that it's totally safe now. We walked those streets, up and down, in full daylight and after dark, too, and I never once had the slightest reason to feel insecure. There are no beggars, no Gypsies, no weirdoes. Even the streets are cleaner than in SV. It's a comfortable feeling of security, compared to the one I had, for example, in Germany...

We get to the restaurant and find the food waiting for us on the table: vegetable salad, fish, liver, chicken soup, steak and potatoes, tea, juices. It's a lot, and it's all very tasty. And, we're talking a small, modest café. But the thing is, I'm convinced that the Ukrainians are cleaner, in both their cooking and housing, than for example the Greeks. I would go to any café in Czernowitz and eat anything and bet that it comes from a very clean kitchen. Plus, everything's incredibly fresh, including the vegetables and the juices. They're famous for their candy, chocolates, and natural fruit juices. No matter if they come from a box or a bottle, or are made on the spot, the juices are just incredibly good. Forget Coca Cola!

We eat our fill and head for the State Archives. We're told that there are several locations of the archives throughout the town, so one needs to know exactly what he/she is looking for, in order to know where to go. We're looking for the Czernowitzer Morgenblatt, which is kept in the former Jesuit Church. It's a long way to walk, but we don't mind: the city is too beautiful, and the weather too warm not to be enjoyed. Actually, although Czernowitz is to the north of SV, the weather's much

warmer, and the people are dressed more lightly. The leaves on the trees are larger, and they are already in full bloom, the apple-trees, lilacs, the beautiful pink magnolias, and...everything else.

The church we're looking for stands in the immediate vicinity of a market place/bazaar, and also of one of those "general stores". This one's called Riaziani. We go around the church, trying to find the entrance. There are many doors, and all but one, on one side, are bolted. It's taken some patience, but now we can go inside, and up, up, up, on a breath-taking, winding staircase, all the way to where there isn't anywhere else to go. There we find a reading-room, with 8 tables and some 20 chairs, and an office. In the office there's one lady that speaks perfect Romanian, and another who just listens to us talk among ourselves in German. The first one goes off into the archive storage hall to look for the Czernowitzer Morgenblatt, and the second greets us...in German. She turns out to be Maria Nikirsa. An elderly lady, a very sweet grandma-kind of lady. The next day we were to find out that she's the best archivist in Czernowitz and, although retired, she's indispensable to the State Archive. Indeed, she seems to know a lot of things. But, there's no time for a long chat, as the other lady has already found the Czernowitzer Morgenblatt, and we have two forms to fill in and a "Request" to write to the director. I must write that myself, in Romanian, so I doubt he'll ever get or read it, but I have no objections. They give me a pen and a sheet of paper and I briefly write down who I am and what it is that I need to read and what for.

Then Prof. W. and I start perusing the paper. Genoveva has found some interesting books too. As for Irina, she needs to leave us: she lives in Storojinetz, and has a bus to catch. She tells me that Storojinetz is a small provincial town, where most of the old buildings have been torn down, so it looks more modern, that is, infinitely more boring than Czernowitz. But, it's her home, and it's also cheaper to live in than Czernowitz.

Speaking of cheap: all foreigners coming to Romania can't stop marveling at how cheap everything is—for them anyway, not for us. We have the same kind of feeling in the Ukraine: everything is just so cheap. That's quite incredible for us—for us Romanians, I mean. Irina smiles sadly hearing that. It's just as expensive for her there, as it is for us here. Where should THEY go to find lower prices?!

The numbers from the first years of the Czernowitzer Morgenblatt don't look that good, really, but still, they're in much better shape than the collection in Bucharest. The last years look incredibly good, but the paper feels damp—or perhaps just cold. The Romanian-speaking lady tells us that the large hall where everything is kept is dark and damp and cold and...does not get heated in winter. Actually, there are enough heaters in the entire building, but I do doubt they're ever used. The few hours spent sitting in the reading-room drive a bitter cold into our bones, even though we're dressed warmly, and the sun shines friendly through the stained-glass windows.

But, the program is over at 6:00 p.m., so we need to get going. We ask what time we should come back the next day. Not earlier than 10, says the lady, then she changes her mind: 9:30 would be fine, as well. They also have a break from 1 to 2 o'clock, then they're back in business until 6:00 p.m. And, unlike in Romania, that does mean 6:00, not 5:30, or 5:00, or anything else!

We badly need to use the restroom. It's downstairs, we're told, on the ground floor, through the black door on the right, and then straight ahead. We find the black door, and pass through a number of ever smaller and darker rooms that may well remind one of some amusement-park spook-house. Accordingly, a woman pops up from nowhere, and asks us what we're looking for. It turns out that we're hopelessly lost, so she re-directs us. We finally get there, and it's narrow, dark, cold, but...clean! And, surprisingly, there's no stench at all. There's even a sink and—you'll never guess—an

electrical hand-drier, the Russian variant. Yes, they did have that in communist Russia! Unbelievable.

Anyway, we're only too happy to get out of there and be able to breathe in the fresh spring air again. We go around the church once more, trying to grasp its true size. It looks huge even from the outside, but inside it's much larger.

We go back downtown, and stop by the Rathaus (today: the city council) trying to figure out on which street the restaurant is, where Prof. W. and I had had supper during our previous visit in Czernowitz, two years ago. It's called Vienna Café (Videnska Kaviarnia) and it's at the other end of the Herrengasse (Ul. Olga Kobilianska). Now, I must add that the Herrengasse is probably still pretty much what it used to be: very little traffic, nice restaurants, fancy stores, trees, colorful lights (only for the winter holidays, though, but they're still hanging there). And, of course, there are all the old houses and palaces (that's what I call them).

Now, I'm an emotional person myself, forever in love with the past (old buildings, old pictures, that kind of thing), so it's an incredible experience for me to be walking those streets. Just the thought that they've been virtually unchanged for the past century or so. Unlike the Romanian communists, the Russians have not torn down any of the buildings. Well, yes, the Temple is now a movie theater, and a catholic church on the University Street is a library, and on the Austria-Platz there's a statue of the Soviet Hero, but...someone born in pre-war Czernowitz would have no difficulty at all getting around. It's like a time capsule. You'd have to go there to believe it.

The Vienna Café is probably the fanciest restaurant in town. It has a terrace up front, on the sidewalk, with wicker furniture draped in colorful sheets. Also, for the people who want to spend their evening outside, there are large, warm blankets in every armchair—something I'd never seen before. Still, we choose to spend our first evening inside, and it's totally worth it: framed old Czernowitz pictures and postcards on the walls, maps, old books and albums for the customers' perusal, candles on every table, a genuine gramophone, a piano, two mirrors and other pieces of furniture which, although in the best of shapes, do look old enough to have made it through the war. The waitresses are dressed in black and white, with clean, starched aprons and caps, and black bodices and skirts. They even speak German and/or English, and there's one, Liuda, who speaks perfect Romanian. Actually, I get the feeling that in Czernowitz you never can tell what and how many languages the people you walk by might know.

We get three menus: one of several dozen kinds of coffee; another of several dozen kinds of the strangest, most exotic and aromatic teas you've ever tasted; and a third one for food and all other drinks. The languages are English, German and Ukrainian. We order steak, beer, juices, tea, cakes. The cakes (Torten) are on display in glass refrigerators, and they all look delicious! The fruit juices are, of course, freshly pressed, and, generally, everything is excellent! Depending on what we order, we even get little flowers and/or small candles on the plates.

The restroom is in the basement, and again, it's incredibly clean. It has TP, paper towels, hot water, and the best, most fragrant liquid soap I've ever used in my life. The music is not loud (it never is in Ukrainian restaurants!), and totally enchanting: orchestral edits of famous international songs, from Lili Marleen to Wiener Walzer. All in all, a cozy, romantic, wonderful place you'll start missing right after you step out of it!

About 10 o'clock we leave. The girls tell us that it's open until 11, but we could stay even until 12 if so we wished...but we're too tired. There's been just too much to see, to admire, to take in. We need to rest our eyes...

Back at the hostel, we take hot showers and go to bed. The windows have been open all day, but it's not cold. The old building lulls us to sleep.

Thursday, May 4, 2006.

We girls wake up around 8:00 a.m. and fix breakfast. Prof. W. joins us, and can't stop marveling at how tasty the food is. No chemicals, no artificial flavors added to it, just the real taste of fresh, healthy food.

We then walk to the university to meet with Irina and with some people from the local Bukowina-Institute and from the German Language Department. Irina has already arranged everything: she's not only nice, but also very efficient, that is, very good at making effective phone-calls. Then she takes us to lunch again. Apparently, she has received money from either Mr. Antoficiuk, or from their dean, or from both (we're not allowed to know that!) to pay for our lunches (and hers). This time it's another great place, called Sorbonna. It's a large, modern building, with casino, disco, bar, restaurant, and of course a terrace. Next to the terrace there are marble steps leading up the hill, and one of the Sorbonna-employees is in charge of washing them every two hours or so, with water from a hose—just so the dust won't spoil the food, I suppose. Isn't that amazing?

Besides, the terrace (just like the one from Vienna Café, it's covered, but the roof is transparent, so a mild sunlight does seep through) has rattan furniture, little bamboo plants on each table, pleasant music, and...bronze statues and a bronze fountain, where we take pictures. Plus, again, old photos from Czernowitz. Great food, great natural juices. Great restroom. Not even the fussiest person would have any objections (and I'm saying that not as a Romanian, but as a person who's seen quite a bit of the world: the States, England, Germany, Turkey, Greece, Kosovo, etc.)

While there, Irina gets a call from the rector of the university, who apologizes a million times for the inconvenience, but he needs our apartment for some Polish guests (actually, he did not know that we lived there—the dean had never revealed that...). So she should tell us that and take us to another hostel, on the other side of the city. We understand: the rector's guests are more important than the guests of a dean. It may sound bad, but it's a fact. And then, why not spend our second night in some other "official apartment", as well? We try telling Irina that, but she's just so unhappy about the whole thing. We can tell that it's not just a show she's putting on, but she really feels that way, really wants us to be pleased and happy with everything. She's such a good kid. (22 years old and soon to be married. She even expands on Ukrainian marriage customs, some of them totally new even to us Romanians. But, that's another story.)

We go to our apartment and see that the ladies have already made the beds for the new guests, so we pack our bags and take our food and are quickly ready to go. Meanwhile, Irina has called a cab. The nicest thing about the cabs and the cabbies in Czernowitz is that, for any ride, they'll charge a fixed sum of 8 Hrivni, regardless of the distance they have to go. Actually, it's 8 Hrivni during the day, and 10 after nightfall. In Storojinetz it would be only 5 Hrivni. So, there can be no cheating (unlike in Romania, of course!). But, as a rule, no Ukrainian would ever want to cheat another, or a tourist. It just seems inconceivable to them.

The ride takes some 15 minutes. It's about 3:00 p.m., and the streets are busy. But, the cab is comfortable enough, a VW I think it was. There are all sorts of cabs there, so you never know if you'll get a Lada or a Volga or a Volkswagen or a Daewoo Cielo. But, that doesn't actually matter much, as they're all in pretty good shape. Anyway, I think this other hostel is somewhere on the other side of the large park, the Volksgarten. Actually, it's a complex of many (huge!) student hostels, somewhere in a neighborhood where there are no more "castles", just beautiful villas, each surrounded by a large garden. It's wonderful, but it really would be too far to walk. Irina calls the area "Prospect", so I don't know what its old name would be.

The cab stops in front of the entrance. We go in, the ladies at the front desk know about us, and we immediately get the key to a two-room apartment. Prof. W. takes the smaller room, we girls the other one, where there's also a couch. Everything's new, the bathroom, the modern furniture, unlike in the first hostel, where only the bathroom was modern, while the furniture was kind of '80's or '90's. No kitchen this time, but Irina takes our food to the hostel administrator's fridge. She envies us the room—she lived there, too, as a student, but there were 3 girls in a room with the restroom down the hallway. Well, back when I was a student in Iasi, Romania, we were 5 in a room, and the restroom was a nightmare.

Another cab, and we're off to the archives again. Actually, it's only Prof. W. and I that stop there, whereas Irina and Genoveva go for a walk. We'll meet later on in the Vienna Café. It's 4 o'clock, and unfortunately Ms. Nikirsa is already gone. That's too bad, we would've liked to chat with her a while longer, especially that it's our last day there. But, the lady who speaks Romanian seems delighted to see us. Still, we can't meet with the director: I have his visiting card and he knows about us (he was a student of Prof. Antoficiuk's), but he is not in Czernowitz at the time. Also, his office is not at the church, but somewhere else. Anyway, soon enough it'll be 6:00 p.m., and we'll need to get going. One last look around: old furniture, two microfilm-reading machines, pot plants (most of them dead!). Everyone has already left, including the lady sitting up front using a laptop computer. We leave, too, and head for the restaurant. On our way there, we stop by the huge, funny, pink Orthodox Cathedral on the Herrengasse. Prof. W. takes some pictures.

Once in Vienna, we make up our mind to sit out on the terrace, as it's pleasantly warm outside. We could also have sat upstairs (the room is so high, they've built a staircase and a deck half-way up the walls inside). That would be original, too, but there's nothing like a warm evening on a quiet Czernowitz street. Genoveva and Irina show up in a little while. Irina has decided to join us for dinner and take the night bus home. Again, a delicious tea in an earthen pot and cups, natural fruit and carrot juices, chicken tenders fried with almond crumbs, cakes. Most dishes have fancy names, and they look fancy, too. You can order everything from sea-food to veal, from fondue to vegetarian dishes. And the servings are huge, too. Our conclusion: whoever wants to put on some weight should go to the Ukraine! The others...you should still go, but... be careful! Everything looks and smells and tastes so good, that temptations are hard not to give in to...

Irina leaves earlier, so she tells Liuda to get us a cab later on, and to give the driver the right address and the 10 Hrivni. It's after 10 when we leave, and we're even more tired and more delighted than the night before. Sleep comes quickly, as well, in the student's hostel.

Friday, May 5, 2006.

We need to be at the university at 9:00 a.m.: Prof. W. has one more meeting, then we're off on a tour of the city with a young lady called Oksana...Something (too long and complicated to remember).

Irina comes to pick us up with a cab, we drop off Prof. W. at the Bukowina-Institut in the university, then stop at the university bookstore. It's small, but it's got all sorts of wonderful books, some of them written by the local professors and assistants, others imported. Again, they're much cheaper than in Romania: I quickly decide to buy a book I could use for my classes at the college. It's written and published by people there at the university, where the head of the German Department is an old communist whose German is quite poor. But this one book is better than every such book I've ever seen in Romania. The language is clear, the explanations reasonable, the spelling perfect. As if it were published in Germany! The saleswoman shows me some other

books, no doubt just as good, if not even better, but I've fallen in love with this one, especially that it's got texts about the history of Czernowitz, of the Czernowitz theater, and so on.

I only have 27 Hrivni with me, and the book costs 33, so I decide to exchange \$50. Money can be exchanged just about anywhere in town, there are several exchange offices on every downtown street. Certainly, there are banks, too, but, just like in Romania, the small offices are all right. For \$1 you get approximately 5.05 Hrivni, for 1 Euro, approximately 6.30 Hrivni, plus/minus a couple of Hrivni. So it doesn't really matter when and where you exchange the money, as a couple of Hrivni more or less don't really make much of a difference. Conveniently enough, I exchange my money at the exchange office in the university.

Then we go to the Ukrainian Literature Department, where Irina fixes a cup of tea. The furniture is new, here as well, and they've got a fridge, a microwave oven, a TV-set, a DVD-player, etc. Also, beautiful pot plants everywhere, which I admire. Irina says she's got them from the botanical garden of the university (there's a College of Biology, too). She promises to take me there: all sorts of pot plants are for sale, for smaller prices than anywhere in town, and certainly than in Romania.

But by now time has come for us to start the tour of the city. Oksana is waiting for us. She works for the Foreign Affairs Bureau of the university, is responsible for the relationships with Germany, and speaks an almost perfect German. Virtually no English, however, although she understands it. So, I say to her, you wouldn't do a tour of the city in English, like, for this Jewish group that's going to be in town in two weeks' time.

Oh, for the Reunion, you mean? she promptly asks.

How do you know about that?

Well, everyone knows, by now. (Es hat sich herumgesprochen).

Wow.

We don't have much time, so she shows us the most important landmarks, like for example the theater, but only from the outside. She could've gotten the keys in advance, if she had known that we wanted to go in, but now it's too late for that. Then, the Jewish House. It looks okay from the outside, but we notice the grayish bed-sheets (!) covering most of the windows. It's used mostly for cultural activities and shows, she says—actually, the communists turned it into a so-called "House of culture". Also, the offices of the local Jewish Community are there, and those of one of the four Jewish associations in Czernowitz. The Hesed Shoshana is the wealthiest of the four, because it gets the greatest financial and material support from abroad. The other three are barely struggling to survive. According to the official census, there are still some 2000 Jews in Czernowitz, most of them having come from all over the Ukraine and the former Russian Federation. As someone once said: the genuine Czernowitzers are all over the world now, except in Czernowitz!

We enter the Jewish House. Seemingly anyone can walk in and take a look along the hallways. On the walls there are dozens of pictures of kids: singings, dancing, acting in plays. Certainly not Jewish kids, but...Oksana shows us the staircase, with the David's Stars: the communist ripped two wings off of each star, so the original shape would be lost. Now the broken wings are back in place. Only one star was still left the communist way, as a reminder and a warning. Otherwise, nothing that catches our eyes on this side of the closed doors.

I'm not Jewish, I tell Oksana at some point, but I'm professionally and emotionally interested in the Jewish history of Czernowitz.

Well, I'm not Jewish, either, she replies, but an interest in the Jewish Czernowitz just comes with the territory when you live here. It's a fact of life, nothing we can or should or are willing to ignore.

We move on, toward the Rathaus. Oksana points out to me all the famous places I've been reading about: Hotel Zum schwarzen Adler (now headquarters to a bank), Hotel Drei Kronen, Hotel Belvedere, and so on. The downtown buildings have already been, or are being renovated. The new owners must do that, and they must also fix the adjacent sidewalks. So, I ask, are the present-day Czernowitzers aware of the glorious past of their city? Are they proud of it? Are they doing their best to preserve everything? I'm firmly convinced that Oksana's answer is going to be a definite Yes, but...it's not. She explains to me that awareness has only come in the past couple of years. Most people had really no idea what the city they now live in was all about. It's only recently that their eyes have been opened upon the past. But it seems to work.

We go up to the former Austria Platz. The Austria monument has been replaced by a bed of red tulips. At one end of the square is the prison, at the other, the monument of the Soviet Hero. In front of it, a children's brass band is having a rehearsal for some national holiday on the 9th of May.

On our way back to the university, Oksana tells us the moving story of the Austria monument. I also ask her about Hotel Ceremosh.

Oh, it's all right, she says. A very good hotel.

We stop for a moment in front of the former Temple. It looks quite dull now, but we've seen it in its entire gone splendor in an old picture at the Sorbonna. She also shows us the building where the university originally was—now the College of Mathematics. There are university buildings all over the town, but, of course, the most beautiful and interesting of them all is the former Bishop's Residence, the main building. We get a quick tour of that, too, but it's in a rush: just the Marble Hall, the Blue Hall and the Red Hall. It's a pity, but we've seen the rest two years ago. It's definitely worth visiting. A complete tour takes a little over one hour, and will leave anyone with strong emotions. Totally recommended.

Finally, our time with Oksana is up, so we part ways. I suppose there has been some money involved, but that was probably taken care of by Irina. Prof. W. heads off to the Sorbonna with two lecturers from the German Department, and we girls go to the botanical garden. It's somewhere behind the university, and it's not huge, but large enough: a pleasant park, with benches, alleys, a grotto, a small lake, a huge red (!!!) beech tree, pink magnolias, etc, etc. We are also allowed to enter the two hot houses, where there are hundreds of pot plants, of all sorts and sizes. I reckon that I could probably only carry two, so I choose two small ones, of sorts I've never seen before. They cost less than Lei 50,000 each. In Romania they would've cost me at least Lei 200,000 each. I have no plastic bag or anything to carry them in, and all the caretakers are doing their best to fix that, so I eventually get, at no extra cost, two small plastic bags, one for each plant, and a large one to put them both in. The price is 16.40 Hrivni for both plants. Coming from Romania, where salespeople hardly ever bother to give you any kind of change, I ask Irina to tell them not to worry about that: I can afford to pay 17 Hrivni. But she motions to me to keep quiet. Meanwhile, they are trying so hard to find 0.60 Hrivni in small coins. I almost feel bad about that! But, finally one of them comes and presses the money into my hand. Why not be correct, if you CAN be correct? A questions most Romanians would probably only laugh at.

We leave the park and go to have lunch, at yet another restaurant. It's something between a Mexican fast-food and a salad bar, somewhere just off the Philharmonic Square. Oksana had only mentioned it, and said it's the one place in town where you get the strongest feeling that you're somewhere in Western Europe. It's true, although I can't quite explain it. But I can feel it. We pass by the old (and recently renovated!) Hotel Bristol, and find our destination: The Potato House. Inside there are pictures and statues of Indians, cowboys, cactuses, and so on. It's a non-smoking restaurant (although there's a small smokers' area at the entrance, but with no tables). Both the

waiters and the customers are very young people. There are narrow tables and high stools, but my feet hurt so much, that I'm relieved to be able to sit, no matter where. We order salads, which come in small earthen bowls, then pancakes and burritos, which come on wooden plates, then cakes and natural juices. Everything is fresh and tasty and, although the servings look small, they're very nourishing. The music is not loud, and a quick peek inside the restroom shows that it's just as clean as everywhere else. But it's time to leave already.

We go back to the first hostel, where our driver is supposed to come and pick us up at 3:00 p.m. On our way there I notice, on a recently renovated building, fragments of what I could describe as an old fresco: on one fragment I can read, "mare depozit de bauturi alcoolice" (great warehouse of alcoholic beverages). Next to it, an old painting depicting all sorts of liquor bottles. Then, another inscription I cannot read. It follows that that was a liquor warehouse, before the war. The paint survived, somehow, and now they've conserved it. I find that to be so thoughtful, and so touching.

Also, not every building has a café in its basement. There are heavy iron shutters over certain doors and windows, and they bear heavy padlocks. But I can't help thinking that, if by some miracle, the real owners of those houses would come, they could just take the keys out of their pockets and unlock the padlocks and pull the shutters up and find their stores waiting for them, the merchandise untouched under a layer of dust. It's the strangest of feelings.

We get to the hostel, and our driver arrives with only a 10 minutes' delay. We go to the Sorbonna to pick up Prof. W., then to the second hostel, to take our baggage. That's where we part with Irina. Prof. W. wants to give her some money, she tries to refuse him in every which way she knows how, but then I eventually persuade her to take it and buy herself something nice. She does have nice clothes; actually, all young people in Czernowitz do.

I think I'm going to weep, she says.

But she doesn't, and that's good, because I would've cried, too. I promise to call her during my next trip to Czernowitz. I wish I could keep in touch with her via the e-mail, but she doesn't have an account. Just like in 2004, the Internet does not seem to be too popular in the Ukraine, so no one should count on e-mailing home much. Actually, come to think of it, I saw only one Internet café, in the student hostel complex. It was kind of funny that the head of the German Department, the communist, who in 2004 did not even seem to have a clear representation of what the Internet is, now proudly announced us: We've got AN e-mail address at the department, which I can give you!

We drive off, and stop by a supermarket which Genoveva knows, where we all buy things to eat and drink, because, remember, they're cheaper and tastier in the Ukraine than in Romania. I manage to fill up a large plastic bag, and only have to pay 75 Hrivni. That's just under half a million Lei. In SV I would have paid one full million, at least and at best.

We leave the city, pass through a couple of villages, then through the forest, then through more villages. Soon I get a connection to my mobile phone net, so I can call my family. They can't believe it that the weather in Czernowitz has been warm and sunny all along: in SV it's cold and rainy, a late autumn day rather than a spring day. But, as Prof. W. keeps repeating: there's a German saying that goes, "Weather has to be good when angels are taking a trip". We're no angels, but...we've had incredible weather.

Now, like I said, this was not my first trip to Czernowitz. Both he and I had visited there two years ago, as well, during his previous stay in SV. But it was in early spring then, and it was rainy and cold. So I had been left with a totally different impression of the city: a beautiful city, by all means, but not a friendly one. It's only now that

Czernowitz has revealed itself to me in its true splendor: a beautiful, warm, friendly city, with wonderful people and a present doing its best to live up to its past. For those of you who have been there, I hope I have managed to capture in words at least a part of its magic.

For those of you who have not been there, I hope I have managed to shatter all your prejudices, bad presentiments, and insecurity.

A trip to Czernowitz may well be a life-changing experience. Something not to be given up on, or traded for anything else in the entire world.

