

Searching For Our Jewish Roots in Vienna, Moldova, and Odessa by Michael and Andrea Burke

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In late September and October 2012 my wife, Andrea, and I traveled through Eastern Europe and Turkey. The primary purpose of the trip was to research my family background, primarily my father's roots in the former Bessarabia, which currently is roughly contained by the borders of Moldova.

The original impetus for this trip was a photograph, taken in about 1937, of my father standing in front of a mosque. My father served with the American Lincoln Brigade, fighting against the fascists in the Spanish Civil War, so I had originally thought the mosque was somewhere in Spain. When my youngest daughter was in the eighth grade in 2005 she worked on an assignment called Peopling the Nation in which each student chose a relative and researched this person's role in American history. Madeleine's study focused on my father. We searched the Internet for photographs of Spanish mosques, hoping to find the location of the photograph. We were eventually able to pinpoint the location, not in Spain but in Istanbul: it was the Sultan Ahmed Mosque (also known as the Blue Mosque). Whether at that moment or shortly thereafter, I promised myself I would make the journey to Istanbul and stand in my father's footsteps.

Our original itinerary had us traveling to Istanbul and then heading north and west through Eastern Europe. From stories I remembered my father telling, I surmised he had been in Istanbul when he traveled through Europe raising funds to fight Franco. He had returned to his hometown in Bessarabia to visit his father, a rabbi in the shtetl where he grew up. It was the last time he saw his father. He probably traveled between Istanbul and Odessa by ship across the Black Sea. Andrea and I looked into booking a passage, but we eventually decided to begin our journey in Prague and conclude in Istanbul because we were enticed by additional Turkish destinations such as Capadocia and Konya. It also turned out to be inconvenient to travel by ship from Odessa to Istanbul as there is now only one ship available to passengers which sails only twice per week.

Our itinerary took us to Prague and Vienna first, then Moldova, Odessa, and finally Turkey.

Vienna

We traveled from Prague to Vienna by train, a very comfortable four hour ride. Our primary interest in Vienna was to locate the house where my mother was raised at 22 Große Mohrengasse. My mother was a Holocaust survivor, having fled Vienna in 1938, around the time of the Anschluss. She spent the war years in London, including many nights in bomb shelters. We were able to find the location where my mother's house had been, which is now occupied by a modern apartment building. On the sidewalk near the entrance to the building are three small brass plaques commemorating Jews who had been taken from the building and sent to death camps. It was immediately apparent my mother would have been among these people had she not been able to save herself. I leaned my head against the building and cried – for my mother and what she must have had to endure, and for myself in gratefulness that I had a life because of her actions, and for the lost lives of the 91 human residents of the building that formerly stood on the spot.

The next day we met my cousin, Mary Steinhauser, who was born in Vienna in 1938. Soon after her birth she fled with her parents to Shanghai, eventually returning to Austria at age 11. (Mary's story is told on The Museum of Tolerance website in their [Children of the Holocaust](#) pages.) I had known of Mary from another cousin but had never thought much about

her until we began to plan our trip. I wrote to her and received a welcoming reply. Andrea and I spent several hours visiting and interviewing her. She showed us a picture of “Baba” Hudes, our great grandmother and common ancestor. Also in that photo is my grandmother, Helen Hudes, at age 10. Among the many photos she shared with us was one of her school class in Shanghai. The boy in the front row, far right is Peter Finkelstein, better known to the world as [Peter Max](#), the psychedelic artist.

Other highlights of our visit to Vienna were the Jewish Museum and the Holocaust Memorial in the Judenplatz. The subject of Jewish Vienna would take an entire essay itself. The impression we left with was one of a city that for decades had denied its involvement with the Nazis and the Holocaust, one that has only in the past 20 or 25 years come to accept its responsibility and acknowledge the loss of so many of its citizens. Vienna’s mayor, Michael Häupl, wrote about this in his forward to the Jewish Welcome Service’s booklet *Jewish Vienna – Heritage and Mission*:

Two thirds of Vienna’s Jews were expelled and more than 65,000 murdered in concentration camps. All of these people deserve our respect, and the city of Vienna is well aware of its historic responsibility to ensure that events like this are never repeated. Commemoration and communication are key instruments for confronting and explaining the past, and also send a clear signal that forgetting and looking the other way are not an option. The city has taken an important step in this direction by establishing the Jewish Welcome Service Vienna. This institution has set itself the task of demonstrating and documenting the presence of a vibrant Jewish community in 21st century Vienna. ... The city of Vienna invites former inhabitants now scattered throughout the world to return here to rediscover their own past or that of their friends and relatives. We regard this as a small, symbolic gesture which demonstrates that Vienna is dedicated to promoting understanding and cross-cultural awareness.

This welcoming invitation from Vienna has inspired us to return as soon as we are able. We would like to support and encourage the other countries we visited to embrace similar invitations to Jewish citizens of the planet to be members of their communities. We would like to have an active part in helping those whom we met to reach out in Holocaust and Jewish education.

Chisinau

On Monday, October 8 we flew to Moldova. We were met at the Chisinau airport by Elena and Alexandru Zgardan whom we had befriended on the internet when we were preparing for our journey. Elena is a young, progressive, and positive Moldovan who cares about her country and encourages others to take steps to improve Moldova for future generations. She was instrumental in bringing independent TEDx Talks to Moldova ([TEDx Chisinau](#)). Alex is a professor at the Academy of Economic Studies in Moldova and lectures internationally on business law.

Later we were joined by Natalia Alhazova who would be our guide, translator, and nearly constant companion for the next four days. Natalia, who goes by Natasha, was recommended by several people who responded to our inquiry to the Bessarabia Special Interest Group on JewishGen.org. We were not disappointed. She is fluent in English and Russian as well as Romanian. (Many Moldovans speak Russian in addition to the native Romanian language. Most Moldovan Jews are Russian speakers.) Natasha walked us all around central Chisinau. We visited the public market where we sampled delicious local cheeses and meats from vendors

whom she knew. In the parks and on the streets we saw many statues. Natasha explained their history and significance. She showed us how a statue of Mihai Eminescu – the romantic Romanian poet, novelist, and journalist born in and loved throughout Moldova – revealed the profile of its sculptor when viewed from behind.

At my request Natasha arranged a meeting with Rabbi Zalman Abelsky, the Chabad rabbi. I wanted to visit him for two reasons. First, when I began reading about the Jewish community in Moldova I was intrigued by a picture of this rabbi standing with several other men. One of them looked a lot like me 20 years ago. I wanted to know who this man is. I thought perhaps he could be a relative. Second, I wanted to present Reb Zalman with a copy of the letter my grandfather wrote on behalf of my father when he traveled from Bessarabia to Paris and hence to Canada in 1920. The letter was written in a style of Hebrew not commonly seen today, I'm told, and contains some words in Aramaic. As my grandfather was a rabbi in Baimaclia, I thought it appropriate to present it to a prominent rabbi of Moldova.

We presented ourselves to the Chabad Lubavitch synagogue at the appointed time, but before I could meet Reb Zalman I was asked if I wanted to pray. The request seemed more a prerequisite than an option. What was optional for some reason was the tallit or prayer shawl, but the tefillin were not. I had never worn tefillin before. An assistant helped me read the Hebrew in their siddur. Then it was time to see the rabbi.



At the Chabad "Glazier Sheel" Synagogue-Chisinau

Reb Zalman shared a good deal of his time with us. We concluded with a sing-a-long. The rabbi sang a verse and we sang along with the chorus of bim-bim-bums. He presented us with a book he wrote on the history of the Lubavitcher rabbis, written in Russian. As it turned out, the man in the photo who resembled me was one of Reb Zalman's 70 grandchildren.

While in Moldova we met Svetlana Klimina, the principal at the ORT Jewish School who for many years has helped develop a wonderful kindergarten through 12th grade Jewish education program. We also met Irena Shihova, curator of the Holocaust museum at the Jewish Community Center in Chisinau. The JCC provides a safe and nurturing center for the community to participate in Judaism. We toured through Hebrew and art classrooms with Olga Sivas, librarian of the Jewish branch of the Chisinau Public Library system and librarian of foreign languages. A part of the Jewish day school is a ceramics workshop where they make many small, handbuilt works of art. We were given a beautiful mezuzah made by someone at the workshop. It's very important that these people – the school, the librarian, and Irena – be recognized and supported by outside Jewish interest groups.

Baimaclia

On Thursday we left Chisinau and traveled with Natasha to the village of Baimaclia in the Cantemir district of southwest Moldova. We spoke with the mayor's assistant, Romica Gurusciuc. She was very helpful. She introduced us to a history teacher at the local school, Alexandru Sirbu, who has written a history of Baimaclia. He has documented the names and occupations of Baimaclia residents, including Jews, who lived in the town between the two wars. He had another list of people who were deported. He allowed me to photograph those pages of the book. There were no Bercovicis on either list. Alexandru read to us from his book, and Natalia translated. (I have this on video.) He said when the Romanian fascists came they took the Jews to the river and shot them. Dead bodies were left on the ground. Some people in the town remembered this but would not talk about it.



We then went with Alexandru and the mayor's assistant to an old Jewish cemetery some people knew of. Alexandru had not known of it, but Romica recalled that she and others were required to care for the cemetery during the Soviet years. Ilya, one of the older boys at the school, showed us where it was as no one else seemed to know. Plowed land surrounded the ruined cemetery.

Fragment of tombstone in Jewish cemetery-Baimaclia

The cemetery itself may have been plowed over at one time, but it is now overgrown with weeds and shrubs. There is also a small garbage dump. There are no standing gravestones. We could only find one stone that had recognizable markings on it, which appeared to be in Hebrew. Most of the stones are buried or only slightly protrude from the ground. It's hard to imagine that the graveyard was maintained even as recently as the Soviet years. I wonder if this cemetery has been documented.

I sensed a feeling of discomfort, perhaps remorse, from the Baimacliens who had guided and accompanied us to the cemetery. I was moved to say the following: Very few people who are alive today are responsible for what happened; certainly no one here. But all of us are responsible for preventing genocide. That's why we must not forget and why we have to teach our children about these things. Heads nodded, and there was a sense of relief. I am compelled to tell one more brief anecdote about that afternoon in Baimaclia. It seems a bit trivial compared to the gravity of the information we had learned, but the experience was nonetheless heartbreaking. We had returned to the schoolhouse after spending about 45

minutes at the Jewish cemetery and were saying our farewells to Alexandru and Romica. They had both interrupted their day for us, unannounced visitors, and we were grateful to them.



Andrea, Natasha, Alexandru, and Romica at ruins of Jewish cemetery in Baimaclia. A gravestone can be seen at far right.

I asked to use the restroom and was shown to an outhouse behind the school. This was surprising because there was plumbing in the school (at least I recalled seeing a sink and faucet). The condition of the outhouse was wretched. As I was returning to the school building I passed the principal heading in the direction I was coming from. I had met this handsome, well-dressed woman earlier in the afternoon. We nodded to each other as we passed. She was on her way to squat over a hole in the ground. I realized that all the administrators and teachers, as well as the students, must submit to the squalor of the outhouse several times a day in all seasons. Later Andrea and I would discuss how any attempt to restore the Jewish cemetery should also include assistance to improve the village.

Cahul

On the way to Baimaclia Natasha's phone kept ringing. Natasha had arranged for us to meet some of the Jewish residents of Cahul, a larger town about 20 km further south. One man, Simeon Bornstein, thought he might be a relative because his mother's maiden name was Bercovici. The people in Cahul were very excited and were anticipating meeting relatives from America! They kept calling Natasha to find out when we were coming. "What are you doing in Baimaclia?" they asked. "There are no Jews there!"



Simeon Bornstein standing next to his mother's grave in Cahul.

We arrived in Cahul in the late afternoon. Simeon and Sophia had been waiting for us at the Jewish Community Center most of the day (there is no synagogue in Cahul). Simeon is the president of the JCC, Sophia the vice president. Sophia had prepared a meal which included gefilte fish. Simeon told us the names of his mother's family of Bercoviches (another common spelling of Bercovici). We could not identify a common ancestor, but neither could we rule out a relationship. Perhaps Schloime Bercovich, his maternal grandfather, was my grandfather's brother, but there was no way to know at that moment.

After our visit at the JCC we said farewell to Natasha who returned to Chisinau. We stayed in Cahul overnight. Sascha, our young driver, had attended high school in Philadelphia and was thus able to translate Romanian and Russian for us. The next morning Simeon took us to the Jewish cemetery in Cahul where we visited the graves of his parents. This is a well-maintained cemetery. Next we went to the home of Sergei, a journalist who wanted to write a news story about our search. Sergei is a former Olympic soccer star. He proudly showed us the many medals he had earned playing for the Soviet Union. He also treated us to homemade wine and fresh pears from his trees. Although it was a cool and rainy fall morning, he served us from his summer kitchen. We stood beneath the grape arbor which partly sheltered us from the rain.

Another Baimaclia

In Baimaclia, Romica had told us there is another village named Baimaclia in the Căușeni district. Sascha checked with the post office in Cahul and located this village. We had planned for Sascha to drive us to Odessa where we would search for the Zheleznyak branch of my family, descendants of my father's sister, but when we saw on the map that the second Baimaclia was close to the Ukrainian border we asked if he could take us there, too. Sascha was reluctant because of the terrible road conditions. It would be better to return to Chisinau and drive on better roads from there. It was a much longer drive, but Sascha thought it would take about the same amount of time. After speaking with his employer Sascha agreed to drive us directly to Baimaclia #2. The route took us through the autonomous region of Gagauzia inhabited by descendants of Orthodox Christian Turks.

We reached the Căușeni Baimaclia by mid afternoon. It is contiguous with another village called Taraclia. We found the mayor, Anatolie Zaremba, who took us around the village to talk with older residents. We spoke with a 77 year old man and a 92 year old woman, both of whom had lived in the village their entire lives. The man recalled that Jews had lived in the village at one time. The 92 year old woman remembered nothing. We spoke with another woman who had lived in Taraclia before moving to Baimaclia some 50 years ago. She knew nothing about Baimaclia before the time she relocated there.



On the road to Baimaklia

We discovered very little. Jews had once lived in the town but had left, either before or



during WWII. There had never been a synagogue but some Jewish activities had taken place in the house of a Jewish family. The house was destroyed during the Soviet era. A cross had been erected at that location, possibly where the cross in the picture is located. The mayor mentioned another village named Baimaclia de Solcie which may be located closer to Cahul. (Later, in Odessa, we were told of another Baimaclia near Ismail. This part of Ukraine had once been part of Bessarabia. I started thinking of all these Baimaclias as a set of matryoshka dolls, one nested inside another.)

**Anatolie Zaremba interviews
a resident of Baimaclia on our behalf**

Rain fell and the streets turned to mud. We drove on toward Odessa as it got dark. I was disappointed, but Andrea felt enthralled as our research unfolded and we continued to make friends along the way.

Odessa

Except for an aunt, all my father's known relatives were living in Odessa before WWII. When we were in Chisinau, Irena Shihova had referred us to Pavel Kozlenko, director of the Odessa Holocaust Museum, for help with our search. We emailed him ahead of our arrival. His colleague, Nikolay, met us at our hotel and walked with us to the museum. We spent about an hour getting a private tour from Pavel and Nikolay. Then we all sat down to discuss my search for members of the Zheleznyak branch of the family. I showed them images of photos and other documents I had in my computer.

The Odessa Holocaust Museum, although small, has set for itself the huge task of documenting the details of Nazi persecution of Jews in Odessa and Ukraine. The displays consist mainly of photographs, printed information, and some models, through which the history of Romanian and Nazi occupation, deportation of Jews to camps in Ukraine and Transnistria, and liberation by the Soviets are portrayed.

Istanbul

We traveled in Turkey for 10 days where we visited the tomb of Jalalludin Rumi in Konya and toured the amazing scenic wonders of Cappadocia. Our final stop was Istanbul. Andrea and I had our photo taken in front of the Blue Mosque where my father had stood 75 years ago.

Epilogue

I found my relatives, the Zheleznyak family, on New Year's Day. About a week earlier I had listened to a radio interview of Charles King, a historian and author of *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams*. He said that during WWII many Odessan Jews had fled east into the USSR to escape the Romanian fascists. When they returned to Odessa they found their homes occupied by others. Many came to America. The Brighton Beach neighborhood of

Brooklyn, New York is called “Little Odessa” because of the large number of immigrants who settled there.

Until that moment I had not thought to look for my Zheleznyak relations in America! Within minutes I had located a man whose first name was similar to the one on the caption of a photo my father had kept. From the date and the age of the baby in the photo I had surmised this person was born in 1937. The man whose name I found on Google was born in 1937. The only other bit of information was his telephone number. I hesitated for a week, then called.