

Dear Bessarabia SIG:

Elise Simon Goodman

My father, Abraham SCHECTMAN was born in Otik (now Ataki) in BESSARABIA (now Moldova) in the late 1880's and came to NY in 1909. I have always wanted to see his town, and this year I convinced my husband to join me.

I typed up notes about our trip and will go back to them and quote from them whatever I think might interest members of this group.

We first went to St. Petersburg which was quite marvelous. Spent Kol Nidre at what is supposedly the second largest synagogue in Europe. Orthodox, so me upstairs, Arnold (my husband) downstairs. Women seemed to say not a word though many held Russian/Hebrew siddurs. I was pleased to note that the Kol Nidre melody was the same as I am used to, and they also sang Avinu Malkenu to usual melody. The rest of the davenning was totally unfamiliar.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2012

Flew from St. Petersburg to KISHENIEV, capital of Moldova. Met at airport by our guide, Natasha Alhazov, who pointed out various monuments on way to hotel in central Kishinev - place where Jews from Kishinev ghetto were all killed, etc.

(An aside, Natasha has a PhD in English, had a Fulbright at U. of North Carolina, speaks fluent English, is very smart and funny and a treat to be with. I highly recommend her to anyone looking for a guide in Moldova or Moghilev-Podolsky in the Ukraine, or Odessa, etc. - nalhazov@gmail.com).

At hotel, Stella de Lux, N and I sat down with all the research that had been collected by Alla, our Moldovan archivist and Alex Dunai, our Ukrainian archivist and me.

I got my most of my info from the Jewish Genealogy website database put together by the Bessarabia Special Interest Group (thank you Phyllis Berenson and Yefim Kogan for helping me navigate through it). Tried to figure out info from the 1700s through most recent times. Data base organized according to records kept during mostly the Russian Empire time: Vital records on births, deaths, marriages, divorce and perhaps most important records called Revisions, which were most carefully done for taxation and recruitment (into the czarist army) purposes.

Unfortunately, the material that Alex had collected (and he was very thorough) did not arrive until after I had left NY. I had my computer with me and e-mailed what he (and his wife, who works with him) had sent to me on to Natasha, who very kindly printed out all the material and brought it with her to the airport. It was very confusing to have to put all the material together so last minute before we left for Ataki. Alla sent me mostly material from Revision lists - all the vitals from Ataki seemed to be burned or lost or whatever .

Bessarabia was part of the Russian Empire and part of the Settlement of Pale which was where ordinary Jews were allowed to live.

Bessarabia then became part of Romania after the 1917 revolution, became part of the USSR in 1940. It became the independent country of Moldova when the USSR broke up, around 1990.

(Aside: we were looking for Schectmans, which was my father's real last name. My maiden name is Simon because my father bought a visa or passport or boat ticket from a man named Simon, and kept that last name in the US. My grandfather was Yehudah Leib Schectman and grandmother was Raise. My father's older brother (and first born of Yehudah Leib) was Duvid. Next sibling down from my father, Avrum, was Elia, then sister Dvora, brother Fischel (my Uncle Philip, only sibling who came to US), and youngest brother Mordechai Josef, who supposedly died young of consumption.

After a short nap on Friday, N took us on a walk around Kishinev. Supposedly the poorest country in Europe, and it looked it (as did most of Moldova). Lots of walnut trees and bought some shelled walnuts on a street corner and delicious pears. Also bought a small hanging made of hand loomed black wool, embroidered with natural dyed colored wools. Made until around the 1960s in the countryside, but no longer crafted.

George Soros has a foundation in K. As you might expect, many of the Jewish institutions in Moldvoa (synagogues, cemeteries, memorial statues mostly relating to the Holocaust), are supported by overseas, rich Jews.

Friday evening, Natasha (who is not Jewish but who volunteers and works for many Jewish organizations), took us to the only synagogue left in Kishinev. In my father's time there were over 33. The synagogue was tiny and rather decrepit, and run by a Chabad Lubovitcher organization. Some of the men were in Orthodox dress, some in tee shirts and kippas. Some woman gave me an English/Hebrew sidur and helped me figure out where in the service they were. Poor Arnold had only a Russian/Hebrew sidur and had no idea where the service was. Very little singing, quite boring. The man who led services was a rabbi who lived in K, was a converted Jew. During the services there were folded screens between the men and women. When the rabbi gave his sermon (in Russian and therefore very long and boring) they removed the screens so the women could see the rabbi - and then put them back when (end of) services began again. There were about 25 men; 15 women. A few children - not many - ran across the room occasionally.

After services, we took Natasha and husband Edward (who brought a box of chocolates for my birthday) to very good restaurant. Lots of vineyards in Moldova and known in area for their wines. I had the most delicious mammaliga, corn flour based, with sour cream and grated cheese. Mammaliga is a Romanian name for what Italians call polenta. My mother used to make it often, and serve it with farmer cheese.

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 29

Driver Sasha, under 30, spent a year in Philly when he was 13, and was sweet and thoughtful. He often works with Natasha, and he and she arrived at hotel around 8:30 AM and we took off toward Ataki, which is about four hours northwest of Kishinev.

We stopped on the way in **Beltsy (Bălți)**, the second largest city in Moldova, which before the Holocaust was 50% Jewish. The stop was planned because my research showed that one of my father's younger brothers, Elia Skechtman (spelled many different ways in this report because spelled different ways in data bases and in Cyrillic, etc.), had two children born there, Yitzhak Meer (born 1910) and daughter, Sluba Liba, born 1909.

We went to the only synagogue in the city, very small, sad looking (about 20 men there, maybe one or two women.) They hadn't started Shabbat services yet. They had a very simple sukkah in the yard (Sukkot started Sunday night).



Beltsy.

Synagogue. A small sukkah to the left.

A contact of Natasha's, the keeper of the cemetery, took us there, but would not enter with us because it was Shabbat. Cemetery had opened in 1877. He had brought with him a list of names of people in cemetery and had looked up which one or ones that were Schechtmans.



Beltsy.

Studying map of the cemetery, near the gates.

Earlier tombstones carved in Hebrew; later ones (like Peter's) carved in Russian (Cyrillic alphabet).



Beltsy.
Driving in to cemetery.



There were two Schechtman tombstones: #10798 - Pyotr (Peter), son of Yitzchak, born 1921- died 1965. Doubt that he is a relative.

Dedication: To dear husband, father, grandfather. Memory of you always in our hearts. From: Wife, children, grandchildren, relatives.

He was one of the lucky to survive the Holocaust.

Another tombstone, in Hebrew, earlier, neither Arnold nor I could decipher because without the vowels, neither of us has an easy time reading Hebrew.

From the old part of the cemetery.



We were supposed to meet a 60 year old woman named Schechtman, Raise Korpel Schechtman, lives on Hotinskya #10, apt. 58, 0-231-603-11. Was told we could reach her late at night. But we didn't meet her.

From synagogue, we then met a friend of Natasha's, Paulina, who had been the principal of a high school and was now retired on a pension of about \$60 a month - very little, even for Moldova. She now also worked for a Jewish organization in town that provided money and food for Jews who had no means of support. Job provided additional support for her. Most of her family had made Aliyah - indeed most of Jews in Moldova and Ukraine had either left by then for Israel or US. She has daughter in Baltsi and so is reluctant to leave. Had lunch with her.

From Beltsy to Ataki.

After Beltsy, we left for Ataki (**Otaci**), another two hours. As we grew close to Ataki area, it was clear that it was very agricultural (as is most of Moldova, N. told us.)



On a way from Beltsy to Ataki

Corn stalks



Quite pretty fields, filled with acres of corn - by now, mostly all dried, piled together, waiting for pick up by horse-drawn carts. We also passed lots of sunflower fields, which really tickled me because I often saw my father nibbling sunflower seeds. Now I know where the taste for those seeds came from (and why I kept a jar of those seeds around for years, never eating them, but never throwing them out.) N. says they are best when fresh - that is from that season's sunflowers. Tried to pick them from our sunflowers this summer, but wasn't able to. Will try again next summer.



Farmers.

Saw many horse drawn carts in the fields, but no machines. Like from long ago. Can't make much money from agriculture that way.

Sign of Ataki in Russian Cyrillic and Romanian language



We had been told that Ataki was a gypsy town - told in a very derogatory way. As we approached the town we saw huge houses - mansions - in dreadful but expensive taste. Were told that outsiders believe the gypsies make their large amounts of money running drugs.

No Jews left in Ataki (town now of about 8500). In my father's time was 90% Jewish. Were lucky to meet a woman who works for the mayor and she took us about. She showed us where the old market was - now rather the center of town with trucks and various other vehicles. My father's brother Philip, the only other member of the family to come to US, and whom I had

interviewed in the 1980's, said the market separated the old Otick¹ from the new Otick, and they lived in the new Otick, fairly close to the Dniester River (which separates Moldova from the Ukraine). My father had told me that he used to skate across the Dniester to a town he called Molive (now called Moghilov-Podolsky, and now in Ukraine) to work in a fabric store. Uncle Philip remembers skating on the river too, but Charlie Klein (who I think I remember my father talking about) was the best skater. They also used to swim in the river in the summer.

Now, because a dam has been built up stream, no one swims (too cold they say) and the river doesn't freeze in the winter time (global warming?).

N. was reluctant to take photos of the gypsy mansions; Sasha said they would throw stones at us. There were a few houses from the Jewish times and we took photos of them. Uncle Philip had described his house in my interview with him, and seeing the old houses I could really visualize what my father's home had looked like.

Uncle Philip remembered three synagogues, and we visited the one they probably attended, the largest one. It was a total wreck. Had been turned into some kind of cultural center in Soviet times (no religious life had been allowed), and then was a big fire in the 1980's which burned all the supporting logs. Had clearly been two stories, with a front entrance and a back one (probably for the women.)



Synagogue – outside

And synagogue inside



¹ Otick the Yiddish version of the town name Ataki.



Asked my cousin Rochelle, who is a Hebrew scholar, to translate the one lettered part. She emailed me:

There are too many ambiguous letters in the first two lines after the painted word "Beit" for me to give a definite answer: you would benefit from more geographical and historical context for a building inscription. Even "Beit" may be another word like an abbreviation for "B' Yom Hahu": "in that day".

The other painted word, at left, regularly follows a date and is the abbreviation for "Of the Small Reckoning": "Le perek Katan".

On the third line, the second word from the right is Hebrew for "In the Year" : "B'shnat";so the remainder of the line, going left, spells out the letters of the year in a word-play acrostic phrase (Gematria is the style of abbreviation).

Alternatively, and possibly more logically, the "Gematria" word-play for the date is on the second line, immediately followed with the phrase "Leperek Katan."

It is probably a quote from scripture. ?

One of the Bronfmans (grandfather was born in Ataki) of the liquor billionaires declined to provide funds to rebuild synagogue. Since no Jews in town, thought it pointless.



We passed what is now a field near a more modern building, and woman told us it was where the Jews gathered to dance.

One gypsy woman (lots of gold-covered teeth), assuming we were Jews, said the Jews were gone, now gypsies there (nasty tone) but asked us in to yard of her not-too-large house. Rugs hanging on line in yard.

We then drove to nearby town of Volchinitz (my father's oldest brother Duvid had married a woman from that town) where the Jews from Ataki were buried. A couple, not Jewish, were paid to take care of it - though it was rather a shambles.

BUT, we found what maybe the grave of my grandfather. The couple had a list of names of people buried there - the list was typed in Hebrew, and handwritten next to each name was the name in written Cyrillic.

Hard to read the tombstone. We should have brought paper to make a rubbing. Tried with small sheets of white paper and one pencil, but didn't work. Below is what my cousin Rochelle could decipher from too sunny photo. In Hebrew typewritten it did say Yehudah Leib, but says son of Shimon, and Yehudah Leib was the son of Yisrael Fischel Schecktmann, so not sure if my family. But one other plus was that someone had painted on the tombstone 1922, and Yehudah Leib died that year. Talked to Rochelle about this and we figured that maybe the tombstone did have the year of his death, but not easy to read, so maybe someone (a government official) read the stone and wrote on it 1922.

She e-mailed me:

- 1 Here is buried
- 2 Married gentlemen
- 3 Yehudah Leib (honorific like: the great)
- 4 Schectman who died
- 5 Let his soul be bound up in the garland of life?

Rochelle tells me that this stone was carved in Art Deco or Art Nouveau letters, carvings that were used after 1900. Also thinks was done by an upwardly mobile stone cutter in a kind of stone that seemed fancier than bluestone, but which cracked.

It is confusing about naming in Russia (of Jews, at least).

Often a person's name was given family name first, then given name and then the name of that person's father. But, for example, we learned that someone called Srul might call himself Yisrael, because the word srul in Romanian (or Russian) means shit and of course Jews were sensitive to that.

So maybe we will find out that though the tombstone says Shmuel, it was really another way of saying Yisrael.

Also found another stone (blue stone, which lasted well - sturdy) which Nikolai (cemetery keeper) says was another Schechtman. Carved earlier, not in Art Deco. Rochelle says this one has a Jewish star and then reads:

1. Here is buried

2. the lady (daled lamed)
3. Wife of?..
- 4.
- 5.
6. Died
7. Let her soul be bound up in the garland of life?

Could this be my grandmother, Raise Schechtman, who died in 1917?

After visiting Ataki, we crossed the river on what had probably been a wooden bridge, but was now metal and the border crossing between Moldova and Ukraine. We had some info that some of the family moved from Ataki to Molive at the time of WW I. The wooden bridge was probably the one my father crossed in the summertime to get to work in the next town, which he called Molive, now called MOGHILOV-PODOLSKY.

Uncle Philip (and probably my father) went to cheder in Ataki, but said he crossed there to go to what I thought (from audio tape) was Karelitz school. Turns out that the word was probably Cyrillac school - so the family sent Philip there to learn to read and write Russian.

Border crossing took us a couple of hours - which is quite usual, we were told. It is now said that many people preferred to be part of the USSR instead of being independent because of so many ways in which independence is a problem. Had good health insurance under USSR, none of the border problems, etc.



Ataki, as seen from Moghilev Podolsky, across the Dniester river.

Came into M-P (which I will now call it) to office of Leonid Shmuelevich Brechman, who is in charge of all things Jewish in M-P. Probably around 250 Jews in a town of around 28,000(?). Jews live among gentiles, no longer ghettoized. He was born in the ghetto in M-P in the 1940's, and his mother escaped with him. Most Jews have left for Israel or US, but he feels he has a responsibility to stay for those that are still there. His office is very clean and organized. Walls of photos - some of people who were killed fighting the fascists, wall of photos of those who survived the Holocaust.



Citizens who survived Holocaust

His office was on a street (Vladimir Stavsikaya) which used to be called Melnikoff St. Research shows that in 1926, a man named Elia Schectman had a hardware store on 72/2 Melnikoff Street. This Elia may have been one of my father's younger brothers. He lived (as of 1926) on 17 Bazarnaya Street, which was and is the market street. Uncle Philip said that Elia had married a woman from Molve and we assume he may have moved there from Ataki. But, research shows an Elia Schectman had two children born in Baltsi (Yitzhak Meer - 1910, and Sluba Liba - 1909), so have to think this through and figure out when this Elia left Atkai for Baltsi and then for MP.

Also on Stavsikaya St. was a textile building that was built in 1909 (the year my father arrived in NY), but where an earlier textile building had stood in which my father probably worked.

We also walked on a street which had been called 1st Pozharnaya Street, which meant First Fire Street. Records show that on this street lived a Chanah Schectman, daughter of Yosif, who maybe married Srul (Yisrael) Schectman, who was son of Duvid Schectman. Srul operated a bakery shop on next street (parallel to First Fire Street), and also lived on the street the bakery was on.

Another piece of info says that a Duvid Schectman, born in 1862, in M-P, was a baker, and lived on Andreev Street (which no longer exists). So we have to put all these Schectmans together in some way after we get back to NY.



Leonid took us to the synagogue - no service going on- old and crummy, but well kept. Separate room with cloths on tables, which is where women sat during service.

Entrance to synagogue



Leonid took a Torah out of the ark (there were two in it) and let me touch it with a sidur which I then kissed. Outside was a simple but attractive sukkah (succot was to start that evening), decorated with Israeli flags and draped red paper of some sort.

Walking through town, Leonid showed us various memorials - to those who died in the ghetto during WW II, soldiers who died fighting against the fascists (among which were names of many Jews, a Schectman, although it was said no Jews fought against the fascists.), Christians who helped save Jews, etc.

We walked through a large and interesting market and then drove to the 400 year old cemetery.

There, we saw the grave of Srul (Yisrael) Schectman, Davidovich (son of David). He was the baker whose street we walked in M-P. He had 12 children, one in Israel. He loved pigeons. His tombstone reads in

Cyrillac: Our dear father, your memory will always stay in our hearts. Your children and grandchildren. May 28, 1906-Sept,19,1968. There is a small stone for Tzalgig, son of Srul. Stone for Chava Schectman, daughter of Tzalgig, June 20, 1905-Aug. 13, 1965. "Beloved mother, we will always keep your bright memory. Mourning husband, children, grandchildren, relatives". Clearly Srul's wife, who predeceased him.

David Schectman, ben Srul, his son, aged about 70, who was born in M-P and now lives in LA , comes back to see the town and the tomb of his father. He was director of a hardware store in MP. He calls Leonid about once a month and Leonid will put him in touch with me. He may be the one living descendant I was hoping to find. There was another Schectman grave site, but Leonid says when David comes, he does not visit that one. But maybe that one IS a Schectman we are related to???? Also, David was in touch with some Schectmans in Israel whom he decided was not part of his family, but Leonid will try and put me in touch with them.

We were then supposed to drive to Odessa, but it was a very long drive from M-P, so we decided to drive back to Kishinev and leave for Moscow earlier.

That's about it.

If anyone wants to know more, feel free to call or e-mail.

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