

MY VISIT TO CRIULENI - JULY 3, 2013

BY GLORIA SCHWARTZMAN GREEN

Back in April, an opportunity appeared out of the blue for me to visit Moldova and the Ukraine, staying in two different cities with the family of friends in Indiana. I frankly never expected to be able to visit the country of my father's birth (Bendery, Bessarabia). I jumped at the opportunity, curious about where my father came from. Jacob Moses Schwartzman, a young man with barely any education, came on his own to America at age 18. He became an opera singer and then impresario for over 40 years in Cleveland, Ohio. With just six weeks to plan, I arranged a trip to Kishinev, Odessa and Bendery, using resources recommended through JewishGen.

I retained Alla Chastain, a researcher in Kishinev, the Moldovan capital, to look for traces of my SCHWARTZMAN family. In June, two days before leaving on my trip, Alla sent me an email.



She reported having some success looking through the State Archives and Bendery Rabbinat Records.

From the genealogical chart I had provided Alla from my original research, she found what she believed to be the birth record for my father's oldest sister, but NOT in Bendery – in Criuleni! The record showed the 1879 birth of a daughter – Ghitlya – to 'petty bourgeois' Froim and Ghinda Schwartzman. Alla assumed they were my grandparents, Ephriam and Hinda, and one of their daughters, either Gaila or Gittle. Another Bessarabia researcher and friend told me it could be that the Schwartzmans were "registered" in Criuleni through the Rabbinat and that is why the records were recorded there. Or, perhaps the family had roots there and then moved to Bendery - a larger and more prosperous town.

So, here I am off to Bendery, with no specific information on where the family had lived, and the new Criuleni twist.

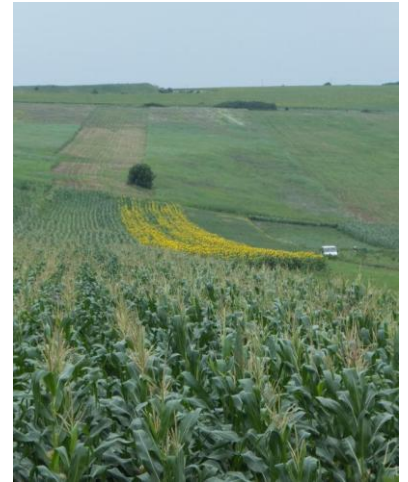
At my first stop, the History Museum in Bendery, I showed the front desk staff the 1907 studio picture of grandmother Hinda, her mother, and three of Hinda's daughters. The picture was taken in Bendery prior to their leaving for America. The three ladies insisted that the clothing worn by the girls and their mother indicated that the family was "petty bourgeois" - from a prosperous family, perhaps merchant class. To add to the mystery, Alla later wrote that she found in Criuleni records a married couple whom she believes to be the parents of Froim Schwartzman! A week later, Alla found an Isaac Schwartzman and his wife Feigha, 19, with a son named Froim (Ephriam) born in 1849. Isaac was the son of Gereshko (41 in 1849) and Tova

Schwartzman (34 in 1849). Alla is still trying to find further confirmation that these are “our Schwartzmans.”

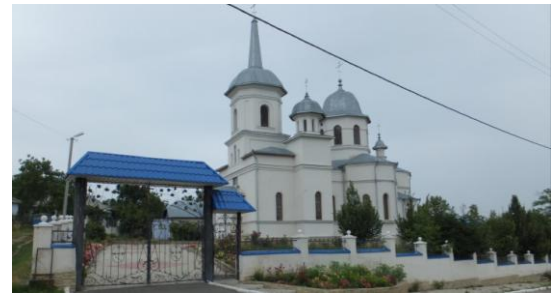
Since I was spending some extra days in the Moldova capital – Kishinev – I decided I would venture forth on my own to visit Criuleni and the Cricova Winery,



which is between the two. The trip to Criuleni turned out to be very special, even though I didn't gain any new information regarding my family. My taxi driver, a former officer in the Moldovan Army, was a “known quantity” – having already driven me and two friends to Odessa the previous week. While he did not speak English, he could dial up his dispatcher on his cell to translate whatever needed to be communicated.



Criuleni is located a short 16 miles North of Kishinev. Like Bendery, it is along the Dniester River and just outside the Transnistria border in that area. Criuleni is the seat of the “Criuleni District” which in January 2011 had a population of 73,100. The District Office administers the villages of Ohrincea, Zolonceni, Orhei Vechi, Cruglic, and Izbește.



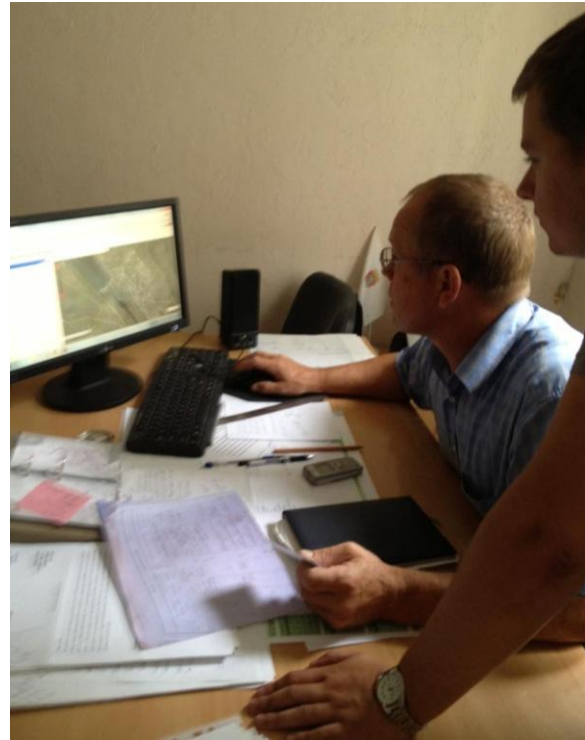
As we entered the Criuleni city limits, my driver got directions from locals on two cemeteries. Checking them out, we found only Christian burials. On the main street we found the Criuleni Regional Administrative Offices – an interesting, impressive structure for the area, with modern offices and outdoor demographic displays.



Staff there recommended that I go to the Mayor of Criuleni's office – just down the street. There, I asked if anyone could speak English. My hope was to have someone direct me to any remaining Jewish cemetery.



I was led to the office of the viceprimar (Deputy Mayor), Alexandru Iarovoi, where I was treated with great respect. Alexandru and his assistant, Igor, do not speak English. Alexandru indicated for me to sit down while Igor called a friend who could speak English. Then I was asked to wait 10 minutes for the friend to arrive - - easy to communicate in sign language!



The friend, Semion Chizihin, arrived. He lives in Criuleni, sem_kp@bk.ru Semion explained that the Jewish graves in Criuleni had been moved to Dubasari, just over the border in Transnistria. Semion said he has a friend whose Jewish grandfather had recently died. Through this grandfather, the friend knew about an unmarked Jewish cemetery. Semion said that he and his friends had been trying to keep the graves cleared and offered to take me there. My taxi driver, Semion, the Vice Mayor, his assistant, Igor, and I headed off in two cars.



We followed Semion, driving on the road towards Dubasari. After going past the border crossing into Transnistria (along the Dniester), we parked alongside the road. We jumped a 3 foot gully and went down a slope into a heavily overgrown area. Pushing aside branches, Semion showed us huge rectangular grave stones laying flat on the ground. The carvings did not seem to have been done by a professional stone cutter.

We assumed these stones were left behind due to size and weight when the rest of the graves were moved to Dubasari, about 4 km distant. Access to take the pictures was extremely difficult - I had to duck under overgrowth to take the attached pictures. There was no way to easily determine how many stones remained in this area because of the overgrowth. There may be about a dozen, but it was hard to determine. Alexandru brushed mulch into the engravings in order to make them more readable.



Irina at the Kishinev Jewish Museum later confirmed they are Jewish graves. Apparently these burials date to around the 1970s, and are not readily identifiable by me as possible relatives. However, I am hoping the Jewish community will take note of this small graveyard and do something to protect or transfer these graves. One grave (left below) has already been vandalized and the contents removed. It is likely the road construction around this burial ground made the cemetery virtually inaccessible. Irina in Kishinev said she would look into it.



SUMMARY: No Schwartzman graves found in Criuleni. Most Jewish graves were moved to Dubasari. I didn't have the gumption to do the border crossing into Transnistria again (once into Tiraspol/Bendery was enough) to look into the Dubasari cemetery.

In Criuleni, some very caring, non-Jewish citizens went out of their way to be of assistance. The Vice Mayor copied my Criuleni Rabbinical records of Froim and Ghinda SCHWARTZMAN and volunteered that he would continue to look for my grandparents and family.

The difficulty of finding traces of Jewish history in Moldova goes to prove that the work of JewishGen (with its many facets: databases, JOWBR, Bessarabian SIG, Kehila pages, etc.), is vitally important in order to rescue Jewish life from the "dustbin of history."

As well, the work of the American Joint Distribution Committee to revive and support Jewish life in Kishinev and other communities in Moldova is admirable and should be supported.

