

Travel to Sorooca (Soroki), October 22, 2011

Marla Raucher Osborn

We first arrived in Sorooca the evening of 22 October 2011, on our way by car from Mohyliv-Podilskyy and Kamianets-Podilskyy (Ukraine). Sorooca had been the birthplace of my maternal grandmother Mollie and her family (surname BLEKHER/BLAKER/BLECHER, later changed to HELLER in Chicago and Los Angeles). The family had immigrated to America in waves, beginning in 1909 and continuing unbroken every year thereafter with the departure of the next oldest brother. The final batch departed in 1914 and included Mollie, her next oldest brother Artur, and her parents Yankel and Chaïke BLECHER. Mollie was six years old. The BLECHER family - a total of nine - was finally reunited in Blue Island, Chicago in late January 1914.

This was my first visit to Bessarabia, and my first border crossing from Ukraine into Moldova. We had departed from Lviv the day prior, where my husband and I have been living on and off for about 5 months. We were accompanied on this trip by fellow Lviv researcher (and friend) Alex Denysenko and his driver Vitaly. Both speak Russian, Ukrainian, and English, as well as some Romanian. Alex had pre-arranged for us the following morning to meet Shimon Wexler, a Jewish businessman in Sorooca and member of the small surviving Jewish community there. I had learned of Mr. Wexler back in the late 1990s when I was then in contact with Miriam Weiner of the Routes To Roots Foundation.

We crossed the Moldovan border without incident and exchanged some Ukrainian hryvnas into Moldovan leu. We then proceeded to check into the nearby hotel that Mr. Wexler had graciously arranged for us when he learned we were coming. Mr. Wexler arrived at our hotel just before 10 a.m. the following morning and our day began.

Our first stop was to see the remaining (and still active) synagogue in town: a two-story white structure with a prominent Star of David on the gate leading to the side entrance and garden. Mr. Wexler explained that services were still regularly held here; regrettably, his key to the gate and building only admitted us into a small room downstairs where members would pray in bad weather, plus the upstairs portion formerly used only by women, today a dining and celebration hall. Although the main room of the synagogue was not open to us, Mr. Wexler explained that it housed several old torahs, a few of which had been saved from destruction from the other synagogues in town before the War. In the downstairs small room, Mr. Wexler pulled out a bound book of the names of those buried at the Sorooca Jewish cemetery - a cemetery that is still in use today - and which we planned to next visit. Together we ran down the Cyrillic entries looking for any variation of BLECHER. We found at least one. We also looked for surnames SCHWARTZ, SCHWARTZMAN and LEIBOWITZ - which may have been the maiden name of Mollie's

mother - and found several. Interestingly, too, there was a burial entry for surname combination LITINSKY-LEIBOWITZ. I was intrigued because the 1914 BLECHER group bound for America (which included my Mollie) had listed "Chaim LITINSKY/LIKINSKY" as "friend" back in Sorooca on the passenger ship manifest.



Sorooca, Synagogue, 2011

With Mr. Wexler, we then headed off to the cemetery. As mentioned, it is still active and fairly well-tended by Mr. Wexler and other volunteers of the Soroca Jewish (and non-Jewish) community. When we arrived, I could see an older woman burning excess brush. Facing us as we entered through the substantial iron gate was a large white memorial to the victims of the Shoah in Soroca and neighboring Bessarabia towns. Armed with the information from the synagogue's burial book, we set out to shoot photos of the headstones of the names we had found. I wanted to do this, even though I have no information that any of these people are actual family relations.



Soroca Cemetery, 2011



Monument to the victims of the Shoah, noting the towns where they died.

As with the cemetery at Mohyliv-Podilskyy, which we had visited the day prior, there was great variation in the design and size of the headstones in Soroca's cemetery. Some still had the black and white porcelain oval photos on them; others had the more modern 3D etched images of the deceased that are commonly seen in Ukrainian cemeteries today. Many of the graves in this cemetery had ornate iron gates surrounding the small plots. Many plots were very overgrown and it was difficult to pick our way through the narrow rows; in the end, however, we were able to find all the graves we sought and shot photos. There was also a second memorial to the Shoah, which Mr. Wexler showed us. I saw no fallen

headstones in the sections we visited. The cemetery is quite large. Before departing, we made a cash donation to Mr. Wexler of approximately \$50 to go toward cemetery upkeep.

From the cemetery, we planned to drive to the bridge where about 40 Soroca Jews had been shot during the Shoah and their bodies thrown over the side. En route, we stopped for Mr. Wexler to show us several of the very ornate and elaborate "gypsy" mansions that have sprung up around the City, visible even when looking across the Dnister River from the Ukrainian side. Unlike the gypsies (nomads) most commonly known in America and Western Europe, the "gypsies" of Soroca are a permanent fixture of the community and maintain a very strong physical presence on the landscape with their elaborate palaces. They are not nomadic. As we walked around and Mr. Wexler guided, we were approached by several local gypsy men who knew Mr. Wexler and were curious about our presence. One man wanted to invite us into his home, but because we were already worried about the growing lateness of the day (and what was to be a very long drive back to Lviv that night and uncertainties about the border crossing from Moldova back to Ukraine), we declined. Nonetheless, we were introduced to Arturo, the "Baron" of the gypsies - a wealthy, eccentric man known throughout the town for the two Russian limos he has parked in the front garden of his exceedingly palatial mansion. Arturo is the self-designated head of the Soroca gypsy community and an ambitious businessman who has been working with UNESCO and other organizations seeking funding to build a gypsy university in Soroca and a gypsy museum of culture. He spoke not only Russian, Romanian, and Moldovan, but also French, which permitted me to finally participate in the conversation. Arturo invited us into his palace to show us his extensive of porcelain miniatures and statues. One of his teenage daughters looked in several times on the curious group being led by her father: two Americans (me and my husband), two Russian/Ukrainians (Alex and Vitaly), and a local (Mr. Wexler). Arturo played the piano and sang us a song before we bade farewell to him and Soroca.

It had been a full day. We returned to Lviv about 11:15 p.m. that night.

Here is some useful information for those wishing to travel to Soroca and/or pursue research or projects:

Contact info for:

Alex Denysenko: tuagtuag@gmail.com

Shimon Wexler: sunik1962@rambler.ru

Here is the link to photos we have posted from our visit to Soroca:

http://www.pbase.com/nuthatch/111023_md_soroca

Any of these photos can be enlarged (and then downloaded) by clicking on the individual thumbnail.

Warm regards,
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