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Dear Family,

Report on trip to Ukraine and Azerbaijan, April 20 - May 2, 2015

We had a head start for this trip with the help of three branches of the Fayneberg/Feinberg family: Judy Taback from the Berg family, Gary Pokrassa from the Pokrassa and Feinberg families and U.S. leader of the Zolotonosha community for JewishGen.org; and Janet Billig from the Pokrassa and Boguslavsky families...all united by descent and marriage from the original trio of Abraham, Rachel and Anna Fayneberg/Feinberg who were born in Zolotonosha, Russia, now Ukraine. Judie Fein's nostalgic and lively "The Spoon from Minkowitz" fully displays her deep talents as a travel writer extraordinaire and her encouragement of our trip was welcome and delightful. The trip simply could not have been made without these expert researchers, networkers and family pillars. Thank you!

This report is more than anyone might wish, but we have divided it into five sections so consider it a buffet of your choice:

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About Ukraine

Vivian (Lowery Derryck), my wife, and I had been invited to Kiev to attend a conference celebrating the contributions of young people to the new Ukraine and its civil society, academic and business leaders. The aim was to underline the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy..such a good theme for citizens of any democracy. It was stirring to see the amazing optimism and hopes of the 400 or so people there. It was organized by the Bohdan Hawrylyshyn Foundation of Geneva. Bohdan is a board colleague of an international policy group. At age 89 and a former dean of a famous Swiss management school, he is active and highly honored in his country.

Ukraine is in a small set of countries that has had an almost constant history of misery and oppression. After a few months of genuine independence in 1917, the Ukrainian People's Republic was in military contention until 1922 when the Red Army conquered it and Ukraine became an integral part of the Soviet Union. During that same period pogroms killed an estimated 100,000 Jews.

Civil war, economic dislocation, Lenin's attack on all organized religion, the arrest and the death/gulag of 5,000 intellectuals in 1929 all was capped by Stalin's cruelly imposed famine in 1932-3 that led to greater losses of life in Ukraine than in any other part of the USSR. No clear records were kept because death was everywhere, but it is estimated that 6-7 million died in the Ukraine (around 25% of the population) in breaking the back of Ukraine's agricultural system. A weak recovery ill prepared the country for the 1941 occupation by Germany that lasted for two horrendous years.

The first killing of Jews and others by the Germans was of the intelligencia, an echo of Lenin and Stalin. Ukraine lost more people in WW II than any other country..some 7-8 million out of a pre-war population of 40million. The holocaust in Ukraine took a huge loss. Estimates range from 850,000-900.000 to 1.4-1.5million Jewish lives lost. In addition some 3 million non-Jews were murdered and some 2 million Ukrainians were taken to Germany as slave labor. Military conquest and Stalin's policy of destroying anything possible as the Nazi's moved forward left the economy at rock bottom.

Better times occurred after World War II, particularly when Nikita Khrushchev (former head of the Communist party in Ukraine) led Russia. Ukraine became an industrial and scientific center, backed by a strengthened military, and built on expanded social services. The Chernobyl disaster of 1986 was a major setback with lingering regional consequences.

The core economy in the Ukraine was based upon state run corporations, a house of cards once real independence in 1991 took place. The better state corporations were picked up by quickly enriched oligarchs who were/are talented in graft of all kinds. Indeed many of the very richest are still quite influential in a government brought to power by an amazing outpouring of the West and Central Ukrainians in late 2013 – early 2014 centered on the Maidan (Independence Square) in Kiev. The current rich froth of politics is featured by popular idealism that encourages romantic and innovative thinking, while underneath the old system simmers. Of key importance are some very impressive new leaders (such as the president..a reformed oligarch..and the US-raised Minister of Finance, whose policies have steered the country through difficult economic times, but whose ministries have little depth. Now with Putin exercising the kind of disruptive politics he has mastered in all his former Soviet neighbors to keep them off balance and beholden to him, the East of the Ukraine is now in contention while the rest of the country seems to show few signs of the war. The signs of war one sees in every town and village are the Soviet monuments to the Red Army and to local population losses, and, most interestingly, to those lost in the popular uprising of 2013-14.

Trip to Kremenchuk, home of Abraham and Pesha Feinberg 1880? to 1921.

After our sad visit to Zolotonosha we went by car further south, first through about 30 miles of incredible potholes.



(The obstacle course South from Zolotonosha)

Each oblast must handle their own road maintenance and the road maintenance folks in Cherkasy oblast must pocket roughly 100% of their budget.

Alex had arranged for us to stay overnight outside of Cherkasy in the luxury resort, Selena, alongside the west bank of the Dnieper. We had an “executive cottage” that was quite nice and the dining room was quite good. A training seminar was going on. Alex said that USAID grantees come there for training. If I were still running the evaluation work of USAID, I would mention this to the auditors. Our stay certainly was nice.





(“Executive Cottages”)

Then another 3 hours south brought us to Kremenchuk, the birthplace in 1900 of my father (Mordeicai/Mutia/Mark Berg, son of Abraham Fayneberg/Feinberg/Berg) and Pesha Eisler Berg. We believe that around 1880 (plus or minus) Abraham and his bride Pesha, moved to Kremenchuk at the request of Pesha’s family, to operate a flour mill the family owned there and to convert that mill from water to diesel power. Abraham has been variously described as an engineer and as a mechanic. Abraham and Pesha had six sons and a daughter in Kremenchuk. Two sons (Mischa and Ben/Yibsaka) came to America in 1905 after the pogrom and aborted revolution then..the later of which they participated in); two sons (Sam and Joe) came in 1913 to have a better future rather than staying and being drafted into the Czar’s army; and the rest of the family (Abraham, Pesha, Sonya, Mark and Gabriel) left Kremenchuk around 1921 after my father had been sentenced to death for treason (i.e., for criticizing Lenin’s policies of taking food from the people..Dad at the time was in charge of flour production in the area). When his parents sold their house so he could be bribed out of prison it was time for all of them to flee... pronto.



We know very little about where in Kremenchuk they lived. We do know that the city's pre-war population was about 50,000, of which up to 60% were Jews, and that a very large number of Jews were killed. We also learned that the Soviets had enough time as the Germans advanced in Ukraine to evacuate about 800,000 people out of the country to areas to the East, including a fairly large number of citizens of Kremenchuk, of which a number of Jews were evacuated. Below you will meet the Shamus of the city's synagogue whose family had been evacuated to Kazakhstan during the war.

Pre-war Kremenchuk had been a railroad head and seaport, but now is even more so, with substantial industrial enterprises. The city has many features of a vibrant secondary urban center..lots of stores, good public and private transportation. Lots of cars, fairly decent looking apartment areas, some impressive modern structures, and significant industry.



Shopping street, Kremenchuk



(Two of Kremenchuk's few McMansions)



(More typical neighborhood scene, Kremenchuk)





(Modern flour mill, Kremenchuk)





(Banking complex, Kremenchuk. Dnieper in background)



(former statue of Lenin, Kremenchug)

The town's current population is about 240,000 of which there are 5,000 Jews. (So the town had gone from 60% Jewish, pre-War to 2% Jewish now.) Jewish officials in the town believe about 1/10th of the current Jewish population is observant. To see for ourselves we went to what we believe to be the only shul in town. (Prior to WW II there were 34 shuls, mostly organized by trade guilds.) Visually we think that the impressive synagogue, below, was established within the last ten years..certainly no longer ago than 20 years ago. It calls itself "The Jewish Community of Kremenchug," at 3 Kyartainaya Street. It was established by the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, not unreasonably since their revered late leader, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson was born just 200 miles southeast of Kremenchuk in Mykolaiv.





(Study hall, Kremenchug synagogue)

At the temple we were met with subdued excitement by the shamus (a chap who looked like he could be a relative...I called him Tovarish and he was thrilled), and with some preparation (“please understand that the woman (Vivian) cannot shake hands with the Rabbi”) a very pale, scholarly looking man came out to meet us. Chief Rabbi Shlomo Salamon explained that he had been sent from Israel to head this community. He said that on holidays they have up to 500 people at the temple, and that 60-100 are in weekly study groups. He kindly presented us with a book published in 2014 in Hebrew and Russian on the history of the temple and Jews in the area. In it are photos of previous rabbis and synagogues going back to 1855.



The Shamus, Alex our guide, Rabbi Solamon presenting the book, and me

The Rabbi told us he had five children (four girls and a boy) and indicated he wanted more. He was held in great respect by the half dozen men then at the temple.

Rabbi Salamon wanted to know about me, making me feel a bit as if I were almost an ex-Jew. Was I observant? Alas, no. Was I bar mitzvahed? Happy to answer yes! Did I use Tiffilin? Oops, no. Had I ever used Tiffilin? Oy! No. Well, would I object if they put Tiffillin on me and we could say some prayers? So we did, and when I knew the prayers and said them along with the Rabbi, I think my soul was partly redeemed.



We asked about Jewish cemeteries and the rabbi asked his/our Tovarish/shamus to ride with us to show us. First the shamus proudly took us by the Rabbi's house, and then he took us past a couple of McMansions then along a winding dirt road past an area that had been a defense center (probably an arms depot) for the Red Army.



(Part of Soviet military camp, destroyed in WW II)

After the war the Jewish community found that Jewish headstones had been used to build the stairs in these buildings. It was impossible to find where the stones belonged, so the synagogue had merely respectfully placing them in a field.



(reconstituted Jewish cemetery, Kremenchuk, with small house over the tomb of the daughter of a major rabbinic figure.)





Alex found a solid rock cannon ball probably from the early 18th century in the cemetery

For the rest of our time in Kremenchuk, we merely wanted to get a feel for the place. Apparently the Nazis bombed the city so much that the entire port area (likely where my grandparent's flour meal would have been) was flattened. But the railroad yard was still there..a place where my father spoke fondly of meeting laborers when he was a young teenager, and how they would give him fruit, particularly large black cherries, to take home.



Old industrial area, worker housing, Kremenchuk



(Modern flour mill and port, Kremenchug)

We had lunch near our hotel and lo and behold the owner was a trained caterer of some accomplishment who was Jewish, a Mrs. Lurie.

On the way out of town we happened to see a new orchard being started..a rarity during our tour. To my joy it turned out that the farmer had planted black cherry trees.

