

Chapter 9

Minkivtsi

Wednesday, August 9th: What an amazing day! This day alone made the entire trip worthwhile. We left the hotel early since we were going to Minkivtsi and Kamenetz Podolski, at least a two hour drive. We've been calling it Minkovitz, or Minkowitz, but now we know this is incorrect. (The accent is on the "IVTSI") These are the first two places we learned about when we started working on our genealogy almost four years ago. We couldn't believe we were finally going to see them.

Minkivtsi is where the Bekelman family lived. Our great grandmother, Fannie Bekelman, had a brother Yankel (Yakov) who married Frima Dyen Stein. They had six children: Sam, Morris, Abraham, Joseph, Frieda and a baby who died. Frima died and Yankel married Esther and had two more children, Luba and a son who died during the war. Apparently Esther didn't like Yankel's first family and Frima's children went to live with her sister Miriam Siegal before emigrating to the United States. Yankel and his second family stayed in Minkivtsi. Minkivtsi was the last place our grandfather Louis Maschtalier (Brautman) lived before emigrating to America in 1902.

Gradually, as we drove, the terrain changed. There were more hills, steeper hills, fewer farms and more forest. The towns we passed through had houses with more decoration. Some of them were quite ornate.



We entered Minkivtsi from the top of a hill. The view was breathtaking. We saw farms, forest, a river and a few houses. It was very peaceful. It is difficult to describe the change and why we thought this area was so particularly beautiful. We don't know if it had anything to do with our feelings of closeness to this place. No matter what the reason, we thought this was the prettiest place we'd seen yet.

We asked Alex to take a photograph of us in front of the sign with the town's name on it.



Minkivtsi is a very small with only a tiny center. We continued to drive, thinking we would find more town. We crossed the Smotrych River (pronounced phonetically) and immediately began to climb a steep hill. Before we knew it, we were at the sign telling us we were leaving Minkivtsi. Across the road from this sign, there is a pipe leading out of the hillside, with water flowing out of the pipe and a large mosaic wall behind it. As we stopped to admire the scenery, which was even more spectacular than from the side where we had entered Minkivtsi, people stopped their vehicles to drink from this pipe or to fill receptacles with the water. We believe the water comes from a natural spring.



We were so interested in the mosaic wall that it took several minutes before we realized there was a statue of an elk in the hillside behind the wall. On the right: Some of the amazing scenery from the top of the hill across from the mosaic wall.



Two typical vehicles on the road, often one right after the other.

We decided to turn around and go back to the village. As we descended, Bobby asked Alex to stop on the side of the road next to an unpaved street. She wanted to walk down the street to see what was there. She must have been led by divine intervention. Before we knew it, we were at the water mill our Bekelman ancestors used to rent. Three men who had been working in the mill came out to speak with us. Alex asked if they had ever heard the names Maschtalier, Broitman, Bekelman, but they hadn't.



The mill in Minkivtsi where our Bekelman relatives once worked.
The man in the photo on the right took us to the Jewish cemetery.

We asked if there was a Jewish cemetery here and they told us about a mass grave in the area. There had been what they called a massacre. The site of the mass grave was inaccessible and about three kilometers from where we were. They told us there is no marker, so we decided it would be too difficult to find. We asked if there were other Jewish cemeteries and one man told us about a cemetery on the side of a hill nearby. He offered to take us there. We followed him for about half a mile.



Two of the houses we saw on our way to the Jewish cemetery.

Some of the time we walked on the road and some of the time we were on a pathway and then we started climbing through the woods. We finally came to a small cemetery of about 20 or 30 graves. The weeds were very overgrown but had not yet completely encroached on the tombstones.

These graves were fairly modern. Each was sitting on top of a cement or stone foundation of about three feet in height and each foundation was surrounded by an ornamental, painted, iron fence. The stones were mostly written on in Cyrillic and most of the deaths

had occurred in the 1960's or 1970's. Several stones had ceramic or porcelain discs on them with a photograph of the person on it. In some cases, the person's likeness was engraved on the stone. The whole place was a big surprise.



The Jewish cemetery in Minkivtsi.

The next surprise came when we found there was a woman up there with us. She told us she had heard kids had been up here vandalizing the place and she wanted to check it out. Although she now lives in another town, she once lived in Minkivtsi and her father had been the caretaker of the cemetery. She felt it was her responsibility to make sure everything was in order. She told us there were many more stones in the woods next to where we were standing but the woods had so completely regrown that we couldn't see any of them. They were completely inaccessible. She showed us a different path through some people's yards and before we knew it we were back on the unpaved street to the mill.

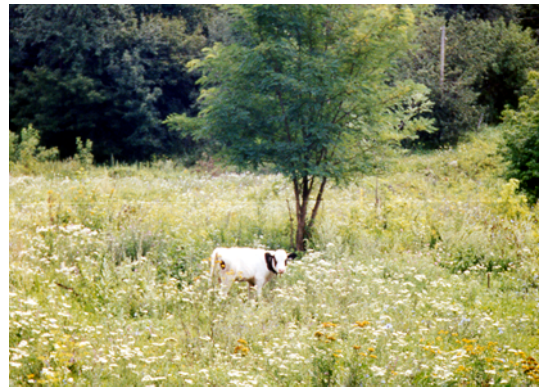


Some houses we saw on this street. People didn't care that we walked through their yards on the way to and from the Jewish cemetery. In fact, we never saw any evidence that people in Ukraine have a sense of personal property or a need for privacy.



More photos of the scenery on our way back to the mill. On the left: The Smotrych River that flows behind the mill and must have been used for water power. Now ducks and geese swim lazily in it.

On the right: A sled in its protective “garage. The sled is probably used in the winter instead of the hay wagons with wheels.



Walking back to the mill from the cemetery.



More of what we saw on the way to the mill from the cemetery.

Once back at the mill, the workers told us the mill used to be a water mill but it was now run by electricity. There are plans to convert it back into a water mill again. They gave us a tour of the mill and told us they are currently grinding corn for cattle feed but would be grinding grain for the people next. One of the workers was standing in a bin, with his shoes on, moving the flour around as it fell out of a chute. In another area, the flour was falling directly onto the floor. We were glad bread is baked in a very hot oven and that we didn't have to eat the product of this mill. We tried not to think that whatever else we ate might have been treated in a similar manner.



At the mill. Note the mound of flour on the floor in the photo on the right.

The workers suggested we go to the town center and ask some of the older people there about our ancestors. There wasn't much of a center, but we found it, parked the car and started to walk around.



Even Alex was amazed when we saw this fuel oil tank being used as someone's house. This is the center of Minkivtsi.

Note the fuel oil tank on the right of this photograph. The building in this photograph seemed to be some kind of community center.



The only store in town.

A typical style house, but not “Minkovtsi” blue. Note the unusual designs scratched into the façade. We saw many houses with beautiful decorations like these all over Ukraine.



