



Belarus

A journey to the past

Wednesday, June 30 - Minsk

After having received the research results performed by Maxim Mill, genealogist in Belarus, about my ancestors, the Wlodawsky family, I finally decided for a first hand experience and to travel to the historic places of my ancestors in search of my roots.

My wife Marita and me arrived in Minsk early morning to be greeted by our driver Ilya Mikhalkov, a warm-hearted person and experienced, professional driver with whom we could easily communicate in Hebrew. He took us to the Hotel Minsk in the center of Minsk, right in Independence Square. Since I had no idea what to expect I was pleasantly surprised by the first sights of this fascinating city, the capital of Belarus; clean, neat, orderly streets, well tended parks and the grandeur of beautifully restored and well kept buildings of the various periods. After some hours of rest and in anticipation of our first poignant meeting in the evening we decided to take a stroll on Niezalieznasci Street with its interesting sites like the Red Church, Palace of the Republic, KGB building, Maxim Gorki Central Children's Park along the river Svisloch or the modern mall underneath Independence Square. Just around the corner stands an impressive building of the Russian Drama Theatre. Unfortunately, it is not mentioned that this once was the Minsk Choral Synagogue.



In the evening we were invited to my newly-found relative, Yuri Wlodawsky who is a sixth-grade cousin, whom I had located with the help of my researcher. It was a very touching family reunion. I always thought that I am the last living member of the Wlodawsky family. All close relatives perished in the Holocaust. But, if there are no other close relatives around, a sixth-grade cousin becomes a close relative! We both discussed our family ties and were delighted to realize that we both knew some of the same stories. We enjoyed a very nice evening together with his mother Nelli, his wife Irina and their sweet 4 year-old daughter Maria who immediately accepted me as her uncle. Communication was made possible with the help our translator Olga.



Thursday, July 1 - Brest.



At 9 am. our driver Ilya picked us up for a 4-hour drive to Brest, a city with a population of approx. 315.000, in southwest Belarus on the Polish border, and the capital of the Brest Province. The drive was pleasant in fine summer weather and we enjoyed the beautiful landscape with its large forests of mainly birch trees, rich greens, plenty of water and fields with corn, wheat and potatoes.

In Brest we met Bella Velikovskaya, our tour guide. Bella is a most lovable, sociable woman with a vast knowledge of history, a good sense of humor and a true Jewish heart. After lunch we started the tour of the city.

Brest is situated on the rivers Bug and Mukhavets and is one of the oldest cities in Belarus. It was the first Belarus city to receive Magdeburg rights in 1390, when Jews started arriving there and quickly turned it into one of the commercial centers. In Yiddish it's

called Brisk which is the origin of the widespread family name "Brisker" as well as a synonym for the Soloveitchik rabbinical dynasty. Compliments to Regina Simonenko for her honorable job in putting up a small museum displaying retrieved Jewish artifacts. Of course we went to see the hero monument of World War 2, located in the Brest Fortress where the first resistance to the Nazi invasion took place. The old Jewish cemetery has been completely destroyed and removed.





A huge pile of the original tombstones can be seen discarded in a chamber of the red brick castle walls. Plans exist to erect a monument using these tombstones on the site of the former cemetery but due to lack of funds it is still unclear if this mission will be completed one day. Brest had a large Jewish population, at times comprising of up to 70% of the town's inhabitants. Menachem Begin, former Prime Minister of Israel resided here.

My forefather, Zalman Wlodawsky was from Brest. Not much is known about him except that he was born in the first half of the 18th century and he lived in Brest. He had 2 sons, Peisach-Leiba (1765-1827) and Chaim (1770).

Friday, July 2 - Kobryn

Kobryn - my main destination and major focus of attention, the city where my forefathers lived and were active in all fields of life for an extended period of time. According to the 1806 revision list of Jews in Kobryn, Peisach-Leiba Wlodawsky, son of Zalman, moved to Kobryn from Brest in 1801, and had a large family of 7 children. Family members at that time were mostly petit bourgeois.

My great-grandfather Aron-Leib was a Rabbi and board member in the great stone synagogue on Pinskaya Street. I have found following relevant entries in the Yizkor Book of Kobryn:

1. Rabbi Shaul founded a charitable society in Kobrin. After his death the leaders and the charitable people of the town of Kobrin, Shmuel Solovietzik, Aharon Leib Vladavski, Leib Zaliaznik took over the society. They gave it a new name and called it "Shaul's Deed" for the founder, Rabbi Shaul, the head of the Rabbinical court. With reference to the death of Aharon Leib Vladavski in 1866 we found an interesting column in the "Hamelitz" from 1903 (42) . The person that signed that column, by the name of "A Good Person," says there: "One of the pillars of Kobrin has died. His name was Rabbi A. L. Vladavski. He founded an old people's home and built a new hospital. He was a religious person, a learned one, and an all around fine man. Every writer that came to our home town was invited to his home. Every person in need was welcomed to his home. Also he had answers to difficult questions for everyone."



2. The synagogue in Kobrin on Pinsker Street was fenced on the east and north by a brick fence. On the west the synagogue's yard bordered the lot of the Pole Frankovski, and on the south the border was the river "Kabrinke" over who's bridge you crossed to Horodnikas Street.

In the synagogue's yard was also the old "Gass Beit Midrash", and according to the old people they used to pray there at one time Sephardi style.

Many years ago the synagogue's yard housed in it also the municipal bath and Mikveh that belonged to Herschel and Frieda Kamanietzky (later, when there was not a trace left of that bathhouse, people continued to call Frieda the bath attendant). The external appearance of the synagogue was in the old Polish style. It had three gates and they were all on the west side.

Through the gate you entered the great entrance (Falish) and through the third entrance you climbed wooden stairs to the "Women's Gallery." From the entrance to the inside of the synagogue led a double door, wide and painted dark brown, and above it was the verse, "This is God's Gate. The Righteous Shall Enter It."

You went down 12 stairs and you were inside the synagogue where there was a floor made of bricks, wide and exceptionally clean. Four big and thick columns supported the ceiling and one of them was not finished as a remembrance of the destruction.

Every worshipper had his regular place and his post. The more respected among the landlords, even from the far away streets, would come to the great synagogue on Saturday and definitely on holidays. For tens of years R' Aaron Leib Vladavski was a sexton of the synagogue. After his death the sextonship passed to R' Meir Tenenbaum.

The history of this synagogue dates back to the middle of the 15th century, when a wooden structure was erected. It was destroyed in a huge fire in 1863. The Kobryn Jewish community raised money and constructed a new brick synagogue with a capacity of 1,000 people. According to descriptions in the Yizkor Book, the inside must have been magnificent with very special drawings on the ceiling and walls. Chaim Berlin, one of the most respected Rabbis in eastern Europe and chief Rabbi of Moscow was chief Rabbi in Kobryn at the end of the 19th century.

After WW II the building was used as a grain storage and later a local brewery was established there. In 2004, the building was returned to the Kobryn Jewish community in a desolate condition and in desperate need of renovation. Donations are essential to avoid the threat of having to return the synagogue to the authorities. I strongly believe it should be a duty for every Jew with ties to this place to help and restore this important building. Plans exist to turn it into a multi-purpose Jewish center and museum.

THE KOBRYN SYNAGOGUE MUST BE SAVED!



Kobryn is a small, dreamy, pastoral town. The annual Harvest Festival was held there in 2009, and president Lukashenko came for a visit. For that occasion, the whole town was thoroughly cleaned up, houses were renovated. You can see many modern buildings now. However, there still are the old pre-war wooden structures, and if you walk along Pinskaya Street where mainly Jews used to live, also my great-grandfather, you can still get that feeling of the old times. I imagined this street, vibrant with Jewish life, the marketplace near by, horse carriages, children playing..... The building of the old Jewish hospital which Rabbi Aron Leib Wlodawsky had founded, is situated just a few meters away from the synagogue. We talked to some of the older residents there who still remembered the hospital. We also saw the place where the old-age home once stood. It is documented that Malka, my great-grandmother owned a 6 room hotel in Kobryn; however, we were unable to locate it.

After having payed a visit to the local museum Yuri Kaplan, the head of the Jewish community of Kobryn which counts approx. 100 members, accompanied us for a very interesting and also heartbreaking sightseeing tour.



First of all, there is the old Jewish cemetery, a huge, open field, not fenced. Parts of that field have become swamps. A few broken tombstones are lying around, scattered. Its really an eerie sight. One has to hold his breath and wonder, how come this cemetery has been left to get into such a desolate situation?

2 more memorials are there to remind of the atrocities committed to the Jews of Kobryn by the Nazis. Around 8.000 Jews lived in Kobryn in 1941, most of them were murdered. Like in many other towns and villages in Belarus, the larger part of the Kobryn population were Jews, in some places Jews amounted up to 90%!

I received a book about Kobryn with beautiful pictures. Sadly, Jews are not mentioned there at all, not even one Jewish site is depicted. Most of my family members were murdered during the war and I have to live with that. But I certainly cannot accept the fact that today, in the 21st century, important history is being kept secret. Hushing up my ancestors is like denying my very existence!

In the evening we all had a very tasty dinner in very unique surroundings, at the restaurant for special

occasions run by Alla and Sergej, in a forest just outside of Kobryn where we were exclusively served delicacies from another world, a true feast for the senses.

It was an exhausting day filled with unforgettable sights and emotional experiences. We had a good night's sleep in the huge presidential suite of the Hotel Belarus in the center of town.

Saturday, July 3 - Pinsk

After passing through former shtetls like Antopol we reached our next stop - Pinsk, a city of about 130.000, where the rivers Pripyat, Pina and Strumen meet. It is today a fertile, agricultural center. Ships are being produced there. Pinsk has had a moving history suffering many attacks and wars and had a frequent change of ownership or government. Jews have played a major role since the beginning of the 16th century and until the Nazi occupation when Pinsk Jews were pushed into ghettos and were almost completely annihilated, 10.000 were murdered in 1 day. Before the outbreak of World War II 90% of the population of 30.000 were Jews. Outstanding personalities like Golda Meir and Chaim Weizmann lived here. Karlin, once a village on the outskirts, today a part of Pinsk, was once a hasidic stronghold. The picture below shows today's active synagogue, located in Karlin.



We were joined by Yosef Liberman, head of the local Jewish community, who was proud to show us around the synagogue, and the historian Edward Zlobin who handed me valuable information about the Pinsk branch of the Wlodawsky family. We were given much insight of the past Jewish life and heard many stories about the well-known and powerful families like the Luries or the Levins and their many businesses and legendary wealth. Thanks to its location at the crossroads of two important waterways, Pinsk attracted Jewish merchants and craftsmen alike. In Pinsk, as in the other places we visited, only very few memorials remind of the rich Jewish history.

Among the sites we toured, were the Karlin cemetery, the ghetto, the school where Chaim Weizmann studied and the old city center with its many former Jewish homes. We were even able to locate the beautiful two-storey house just opposite the synagogue where Velvel Wlodawsky (1898) used to live.



On our way back to Minsk we made a little detour and stopped at the historic site of Mir with its splendid late medieval Radziwill castle. In a pit next to the castle many murdered Jews are buried. Here is also the original home of the famous Mir Yeshiva which was founded in 1815 and operated until 1939.



Sunday, July 4 - Minsk

We decided to spend our last day with some more sightseeing of Minsk, from the historic center in the upper town with the former marketplace where once 2 churches and a synagogue stood peacefully in close vicinity (today the 2 churches are still there) till the huge Dinamo Stadium which was built exactly on top of the former Jewish cemetery. We managed to see the old Jewish quarter, the Island of Tears war memorial and the staggering site of the Minsk Ghetto until we finally met once more with my “new” relatives for a last lunch at the highly recommendable restaurant “Rakovsky Brovar”.

On the way to the airport we stopped at the impressive Khatyn WWII Memorial. On March 22, 1943 26 houses with their 149 inhabitants including 75 children were burned by German troops in the village of Khatyn. The population of 618 villages in Belarus was burned alive by the nazis. The following inscript makes one shiver:

"Good Folk, remember: we have loved life, and our homeland, and you. We have burned alive in flames. We plead to you: let our cries and grief turn into courage and strength, so that you can establish Peace and Rest on this Earth. So that nowhere and never life had disappeared again in a tornado of fire!"

My sincere thanks to Mr. Yuri Dorn, director of the Jewish Heritage Research Group of Belarus who organized this trip. I especially appreciate the information and advice you have provided. Your assistance has been invaluable.

Gerry Wlodawsky, Israel July 2010