

Trip to Bilky
by Eli Yardeni, Israel
16 May 2011 - 21 May 2011

(All photos contributed by Eli Yardeni.)

In May, 2011 Eli Yarseni, great-grandson of Mechel Elias, flew to Ukraine and visited Bilky.

My name is Eli Yardeni. I live in Rosh Pina, Israel. I was born in 1955. My mother was born in Iash, Romania, and my father was born in Bilky, Czechoslovakia (today Ukraine). My father was born in 1921 and his last name was Elias (Elyovich).

Last January I decided visit Bilky and also his school in Munkach. I made a lot of research; I talked to anybody who could help me, especially Dr. Moshe Avital, who wrote books about Bilky. Mr. Pinchas Neuman, Ms. Bina Feldman, and Rachel, daughter of Idy Reisman (all from Bilky) also helped me. I spent hours on the internet and in Google Earth until I felt I was ready.

Until 1918 the region belonged to Hungary. In 1919 it was given to Czechoslovakia and in November 1938, after the Munich Convention it was given back to Hungary. Life under Hungarian rule was bad and many Jews were deported and later killed.

In 1944 Germany conquered Hungary and sent all the Jews to Auschwitz. All the family of my father died there except two sisters who survived. My father fled Europe to Palestine in 1938 and thus survived.

The easiest way to go to that region (Zakarpatia) is to fly to Budapest. From Budapest it is possible to take a train or drive 4 hours, not including border crossing, which takes time. We decided to do the trip through Kiev since we wanted to see that city.

On May 16 I flew with my wife Dalit to Kiev. In Kiev I visited the synagogue, Babi Yar, the statues of Shalom Aleichem and Golda Meir, and some other tourist attractions.

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Kiev Synagogue



Statue of Shalom Aleichem (Kiev)

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Babi Yar

Then we flew from Kiev to Lvov (Lviv). We drove four hours from Lvov to Uzhgorod, crossing Galicia and the Carpathians from one side to the other. The landscape of Galicia is very beautiful. We saw villages that in the past had big Jewish communities. In 1941 when Germany attacked Russia, the Nazis entered Galicia and killed all the Jews.

Our driver and guide in that region was Baruch (Bayloo) Hoover, a Jewish person who lives in Uzhgorod and knows the area very well. He speaks Russian, Hungarian, and English. He is a very nice and kind person.

The next day we drove to Bilky. We stopped at the center of the village. The infrastructures are very poor. I found the stores that belonged to my family but the house no longer exist. Next to them is the market. I took many pictures there. Many houses that belonged to Jews were destroyed and new houses were built instead of them. To say the least, it is very not modern.

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Bilky - entrance



Bilky - entrance

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Bilky center - Klein and Feldman Houses



Bilky center - store

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Elias store



Elias store and the Market

Then we went to the cemetery. The cemetery is very neglected and it is impossible to read anything on the tombs. The weather destroyed the writing. There are three new tombs. Two of them are renewals by family members and the other one is that of Adolph Shmiovitch, the only Jew who lived in Bilky after the Holocaust. He died three years ago, and his son Sasha was with us in Bilky. Adolph knew a lot about Jewish families in Bilky but his son does not know much.

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Bilky Cemetery



Bilky cemetery

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Matzevah of Adolph Shmiovitch



Renewed Matzevah

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Renewed Matzevah

From Bilky we drove to Munkach. We saw the synagogue, the entrance to the Ghetto, the Star Hotel (a very nice hotel owned by Jewish people), and then we went to Hebrew Gymnasia (school) where my father attended high school.

The building was built in 1924 by the Jewish community. Today it is a school of commerce. The building was preserved in its original shape with the unique entrance. It is a very beautiful building.

We went inside and I was very excited while imagining my father as a student there 73 years ago.

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Former Hebrew School (Munkach)



Former Hebrew School (Munkach)

We went back to Uzhgorod. We saw the synagogue which is today a music center. We walked through the old city where we saw houses that belonged to Jewish families.

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Former Synagogue (Uzhgorod)

We also visited Chabad House. The Rabbi Menachem Taichman showed us the complex with a synagogue and a Mikve. He also showed us a guest house he built for Jewish visitors.

In Uzhgorod we stayed in Hotel Uzhgorod, an excellent inexpensive hotel. The next day we drove to Lvov. We stayed in the middle of the old town, in George Hotel. The hotel was built in 1901 in the Austro-Hungarian time, and was renovated while keeping the original architecture. It was wonderful experience.

We took a local English speaking guide who took us for a two hour walking tour in the old city. We saw the remains of the synagogue and the Jewish quarter. A very nice and interesting city.

We flew from Lvov to Kiev and then to Tel Aviv.

--Eli Yardeni, May 2011