

Cherkasy Journal

Our Grandmother's Birthplace and Childhood Home

March 23-26, 1971
Jesse Heines with Evelyn McKay

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Tuesday, March 23, 1971, 9:50 PM

We are in a real Russian hotel — as opposed to an Intourist hotel, which is for foreigners — in a luxurious room for just 12 rubles (about \$15) per night. There is no restaurant in this hotel, but there are many cafes on the street.



Hotel "Cherkasy" — "City Department of Municipal Authority."

In the two short hours or so that we have been here so much has already happened.

I asked the woman who brought our bags up to our room if she knew any of the names that Bubba had given me. She does! When I said "Balin," she asked if he is a tailor. Bubba told me that he was, so I was happy to reply "Yes!"

This woman, named Anna, is going to take us to meet him tomorrow when she gets off work. Could we be any luckier?!?

I also found out that the old street that Bubba told me about is now named Ulitza Gagarina (Улица Гагарина), after the Russian astronaut Yuri Gagarin (Юрий Гагарин). ("Ulitza" simply means "street.") Anna said that there indeed did used to be five synagogues on that street. Tomorrow we will find this street and I am sure that we will walk by Bubba's old house even if we can't identify anything.

Evelyn and I can't get over how nice the people have been to us. When the taxi dropped us off at this hotel the receptionist was initially quite perplexed about what to do with us. At first she told us that she didn't have a reservation in our name and that she didn't have any rooms available. I was insistent that we had a reservation and she asked me to show it to her. I gave her our official

travel papers and she practically flipped out. She asked for our passports and I gave her our diplomatic cards. I guess she had never seen such cards before.

She was quite confused and served others, but then she came back to us with extreme patience and gave us forms to fill out. I translated them and Evelyn and I filled them out in English. When we had finished the woman came over to us again and I translated what we had written into Russian. She also made a mistake and charged us 10 rubles too much, which I noticed upstairs in our room. She quickly returned our money when I pointed out the mistake.

We found out later that there are two hotels named “Hotel Cherkasy” (Отель Черкаси). One is an Intourist hotel, which is probably where our real reservation was. The second is a standard Russian hotel, which is where we are. I guess that since I spoke Russian with the taxi driver and asked that he take us to “Hotel Cherkasy,” he must have assumed that I was from one of the Soviet bloc countries — with my accent he certainly wouldn’t have assumed that I was Russian — and took us to the Russian hotel rather than the Intourist hotel. An interesting development, but one that turned out to be fun and to our benefit.



View of Cherkasy center from our hotel room.



Central Cherkasy square with statue of Lenin.



Cherkasy residents.



Lenin (spelled with an I in Ukranian) statue in the main square. “Glory to the KPRS.”

KPRS is Ukranian: Комуністична партія Радянського Союзу.

KPCC is the equivalent Russian: Коммунистическая Партия Советского Союза.

Both mean: Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Wednesday, March 24, 1971, 3:05 PM

Anna took us to Balin's old house, but we found that he no longer lives there. However, a neighbor told us where he lives. She had an address, but didn't know the apartment number. She sent us to a kindergarten where she knew that Balin's daughter-in-law works. Anna went into the school to try to talk to Balin's daughter-in-law.

The daughter-in-law came out to speak to us as the schoolchildren had fun with the two foreigners and their camera. She said that there are many Balins. When I mentioned Cherna, she lit up like a light. (Bubba had told me to say that I was the grandson of Schlaime Benchick Balin's relation, but I can't remember now what relation that was.) She confirmed that the address the other woman had given us was correct, and she told us which entrance to use and what floor to find them on.



Schoolchildren.

Anna took us there, which turned out to be right near our hotel. She rang the bell, a man answered it, and Anna quickly left us on our own. I had to explain myself as to who we were. Once I did that we were welcomed into the apartment and cordially invited to sit and talk. (All of our conversations were in Russian, of course.)

Here's what we learned.

The man who answered the door was Benumen Balin. He is a cousin of Schlaime Benchick Balin and is 75 years old. By then Schlaime had passed away. Schlaime had two daughters and three sons. One daughter lives in Cherkasy and the other in the US. Evidently, contact with the one in the US has been lost.



Benumin Balin.

Of the three sons, Michalatke and Chaimyonkle were both deceased at that time, but Arkadin was still believed to be alive and living in Philadelphia. Benumen thought that Arkadin would be at least 50 years old, but then he said that Arkadin went to the US in 1902, so he must be over 70 by now. The Balins here in Cherkasy have a picture of him in Philly, but contact with him has also been lost. They gave me their address in Cherkasy to give to Arkadin if I can find him in Philadelphia.

We also met Benumin Balin's wife, who said that she used to play with our Bubba. Her name was Yenta Stochtere Bromberg, and she is now Ruchel Balin. She is the daughter of Yitshok Bankuntz. She is now confined to bed from what I could tell, so we talked to her as she lay. She said that she has a brother, Terry Bromberg, who is also in Philadelphia. Terry should be 73 years old now, but unfortunately contact with him has also been lost.

Benumin Balin is the son of Velvul Balin, who was also a tailor. Benumen was in the army from 1941-1945. His two sons were killed while his two daughters fled to Uzbekistan. The two daughters, whom we met, are now back in Cherkasy. We also met Balin's grandson, whose

family name is Ruvenfeld. He invited us to come back at 6:00 PM this evening to watch a hockey game with him.

Balin took us to meet one of Bubba's cousins, Feige Vrotsky, the daughter of the Branen family. She asked if Bubba's siblings, especially Ladel, Bub's brother, are still alive. They all say that Bubba's house still stands, although all the synagogues have been destroyed. (This city was occupied by Nazi forces during the war.) They said that there are no working synagogues here at all, and that Jews pray in apartments. Feige asked how life is in the US and said that it is very good here. She illustrated this by saying that I can see that she has a very nice apartment and that Balin's apartment is very nice, too. To me they are typical Soviet-style accommodations.

We have not gone to the old street yet, but we will either later today or tomorrow for sure. As I write this I have ordered my telephone call to my parents and have now been waiting about 45 minutes for that. If it doesn't go through in the next 15 minutes or so I doubt that Mom or Dad will be home due to the time difference. I will have to try again late tonight.

Still Wednesday, March 24, 1971, 9:35 PM

The phone call didn't go through, so I have placed it again for 2:00 AM.

I went alone to Ulitza Gagarina (Gagarin Street) by taxi. No one knew the alley (or lane, переулок) that Balin told me to ask for, but we are going to meet him at 10:00 AM tomorrow and he is going to take us there. I may have walked on the right street, but perhaps I didn't go far enough. We'll see tomorrow.

I took a lot of images of old dwellings. I saw a building that looked like it may have been a synagogue and shot it, walking on private property. A young woman who lives there was working in the yard and was very nice to me. She called the dogs away from me and didn't question my presence at all. I asked her if the building used to be a synagogue, but she said no. She told me where there used to be one and I looked for it, but it must have been demolished because there was no outstanding building. I saw a lot of interesting dwellings, but I am interested to see the exact buildings where Bubba lived tomorrow.



Windows in old buildings.

We went back to the Balin's apartment at 6:00 PM for the hockey game on TV and took a cake. We watched Finland and Sweden play to a 1-1 tie. The final score of the USA-USSR game was 10-2 for the Soviets. Tonight the Soviets play Czechoslovakia at 10:00 PM. The Soviets should win easily, as the USA beat the Czechs 5-1.

We only stayed until 8:00 PM, and then we went for a very nice walk around the city.

Thursday, March 25, 1971, 2:30 AM

Names and people are spinning around in my head and I cannot sleep. I talked to Mom and she was very excited.

An interesting side story to this phone call is that when I called the hotel operator and said I wanted to place a call to the US she told me that it couldn't be done. I assured her that it could, and that all she needed to do was to get me to an international operator. As mentioned previously, the call didn't go through when I placed it earlier in the evening.

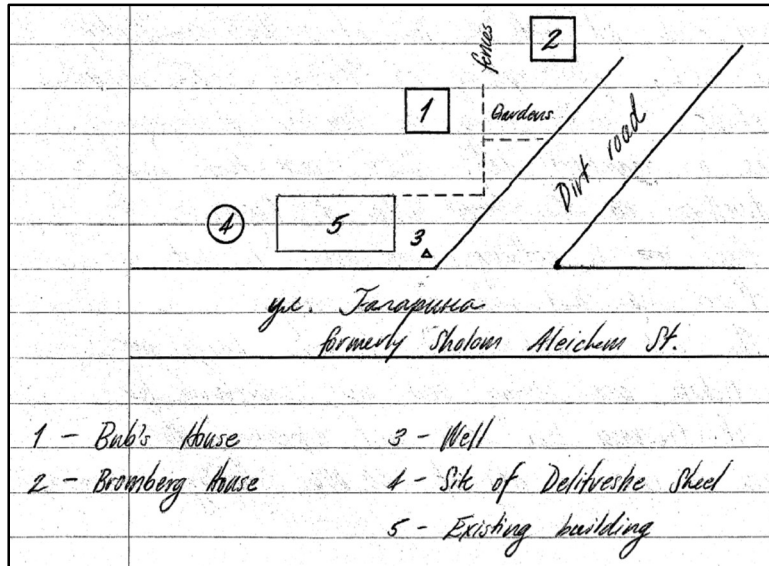
When it did go through I got a call in my room from the hotel operator/receptionist and she said that she couldn't transfer the call to my room phone, it would have to be to the phone in the hall. I saw no problem with that, so I said that that was fine and headed out into the hall. To my surprise, a lot of the hotel staff was there. I believe that they just wanted to see with their own eyes that someone could place a call to the United States. Everyone was smiling and friendly, and at 2:00 AM it was a bit of a party atmosphere.

Getting back to family history, it turns out that Feige (the woman that Balin took us to meet) and Bubba are cousins by virtue of the fact that their mothers are sisters. Feige also remarked that a revolution is needed in the US so that Jews will be treated better there! I asked Balin how life is for Jews here and he said "Good." He said that under Stalin it was terrible, but it had been very good under Lenin. He said that the Zionists don't know what they're talking about. My later reflections on this conversation suggest that the ones who complain may exaggerate, and then the police harass them and they complain more, which leads to additional repercussions. It's a vicious circle. Thus, what started as small truths can become big lies even though the initial cause is just. It's a sad state of affairs.

Friday, March 26, 1971, 8:00 PM

We spent ourselves yesterday in Cherkasy and I just couldn't write. Here's what happened.

We met Balin at 10:00 AM with another of his grandchildren, the son of Balin's daughter-in-law who works in the kindergarten. We went with the two of them to Gagarin Street, which used to be Sholom Aleichem Street. We turned left when we got to the Gagarin Street rather than right as I had done yesterday. It is about half a mile to Bubba's old house. Balin pointed out Bubba's house and his wife's old house and the site of the old Delitveshe Shul.



Map of where Bubba's house is located off of what is now Gagarin Street.

A large hill rises behind the houses. I forget the name of the street now, but I photographed the sign. ["Lower Kotovskovo."] We tried to find out who lives in the house now, but it was well isolated by fences and didn't look friendly. Smoke rose from the chimney.



Street sign identifying the modern name of the street where Bubba's house is located.



Bubba's house.

Balin didn't want us to stay there poking around and photographing, so we escorted him home by taxi and got out in the city. We immediately walked back, photographing all the way.



Balin chatting with a woman we met on the street near Bubba's house.

We walked about 5 miles along the Dneiper River taking pictures. It was a beautiful day. Balin said that there used to be dwellings on the river side of Gagarin Street, but there is nothing there now. I shot two full rolls there, and that will tell the story.



Shots of the neighborhood and Dneiper River near Bubba's house.



Shots of the neighborhood and Dneiper River near Bubba's house.

The rest is anticlimactic history: losing our plane tickets and buying new ones, searching for maps of Cherkasy that don't exist, learning that Cherkasy is now a city of 150,000 people, buying souvenirs, getting to the Kiev airport just in time, and falling asleep on the plane back to Moscow.



Old well that Bubba said she still remembered.



Jesse collecting a soil sample from outside Bubba's house.



Evelyn on the Dneiper River bank.



Evelyn with fishermen on the Dneiper River bank.



Jesse at the sign on the main road into Cherkasy.