

OUR PILGRIMAGE TO ROKITNO

by
Ala Gamulka

Background

My husband, Larry Gamulka, grew up in Rokitno, a small town in Volyn Province, western Ukraine. However, he was born in Kovel, a larger city in Volyn, on Purim, 1934, in the home of his paternal grandparents, Manya and Yerucham Gomulka. Larry was named Aryeh, Leibl in Yiddish, after his maternal grandfather. Larry spent an idyllic childhood as the only child of loving parents, Gitel Burko and Jonah Gomulka. They lived in a house in “*the halles*” (possibly an inner courtyard) across from the train station. Their small grocery store was located in the front of the house. It had previously belonged to Leah and Leibl Burko, Gitel’s parents (Jonah’s aunt and uncle; Gitel and Jonah were cousins).

Rokitno is only 115 years old. It began to develop at the turn of the twentieth century due to the founding of a glass factory and the construction of the Kovel-Kiev railway line. A lumber industry was established to sustain the railroad.

Jews from surrounding villages moved to Rokitno for economic reasons. They soon built synagogues and schools. Many Jews were store owners and tradesmen. The youth were educated in a Zionist-Hebrew atmosphere within the many movements available in Rokitno. Many young people made Aliyah.

In 1939, World War II broke out and the Soviets took over the town. Life was difficult, but not dangerous. Since private enterprise was no longer permitted, Jonah worked for the local authorities in the tax department. He was later drafted into the Soviet Army.

In 1941, the Soviets retreated and the Germans were in charge. The Jews were forced to wear a circular yellow patch and eventually they were all herded into two small crowded ghettos. On August 25, 1942, 1,631 Jewish men, women and children were ordered to assemble in the market square for a roll-call on the following day. The Jews stood six abreast, women and children under thirteen on one side, and men and older boys on the other side. The fear was palpable. Suddenly, a woman’s voice was heard: “Jews, they are going to shoot us! Save yourselves!” (The woman was very tall and was the first to see the German and Ukrainian police). Sounds of shooting and screaming filled the air. Hundreds of people were killed or wounded. Others, including Gitel and Larry, managed to escape into the forest. All others were put on cattle cars and taken to Sarny. They were killed there with thousands of other Jews from nearby villages.

Decades later, Larry felt a need to see his childhood hometown, and I knew I had to go with him. We were fortunate to join a group of Israelis with roots in Rokitno. They consisted of survivors, their spouses, children and even grandchildren. This has become

a yearly pilgrimage organized by the *Association of Former Residents* (and their descendants) of *Rokitno and Its Surroundings*.

Arrival

We arrived in Kiev in July 2003, a day before the Israeli contingent, and we spent the first evening in Kiev with relatives of a close friend. The next morning we met the Israelis at the airport. To our great surprise and delight, our eldest son, Daniel, who lives in Jerusalem, joined the group. Our reunion was emotional and sweet. The trip thus took on an extra meaning. The rest of the group included our close friend Haim Bar Or. He had spent eighteen months hiding with Larry in a small dugout in the forest during the war. His wife, three children, son-in-law and oldest grandson were with him. We knew most of the others from other meetings in Israel. We soon boarded our bus for the long ride to Rokitno. There we were welcomed by Nina Ivanovna, former vice-mayor of Rokitno and a dear friend of the Jews, and by the hotel manager, Luba Antonovna.

We began walking the streets of Rokitno almost immediately. Haim found the location of his home. Slava searched for her house. We wandered off to the market square, the scene of such bloody happenings. Larry was apprehensive about going back there. However, it looks completely different. There are many permanent stalls now. We walked to the train station. It had been destroyed and rebuilt. Larry's house used to stand diagonally across from the station. All the houses on his block had been burned down by the Soviets as they were retreating in 1941. The day that the Soviets left, Larry burned his foot by stepping into burning paint. His mother carried her seven-year-old son daily, for six weeks, to Dr. Anishchuk to change the dressing. There was no real medicine available then. Somehow everything healed. The doctor's house still stands across from the market square.

Day Two

We went to the Rokitno Jewish cemetery. There we found several newer gravestones and many old ones. It is a fenced in area with a gate. The new gravestones are of those Jews who remained in Rokitno after The War and have since died. As I walked through the old section, I froze and began to scream. I found the grave of Larry's maternal grandmother, Leah Burko, who died in 1933. Everyone was excited and congregated around us. We lit a memorial candle and Larry recited *Kel Malle Rachamim* (remembrance prayer of mercy for the soul of the dead). We sobbed and hugged each other. We now had a connection to the past. The only Jews still left in Rokitno are the dead ones. It was a thriving Jewish community before The War. We searched for the grave of Larry's grandfather, but we were unsuccessful.

There is a mass grave of those who were massacred in the market square. It had been moved there in 1958 from its original location. A large gravestone commemorates the fallen. We held a memorial ceremony. Our son, Dani chanted a special *Kel Maale Rachamim*. It was a truly meaningful moment. The Israeli flag was draped over the gravestones and a special *Kaddish* was recited. Moshe Trossman spoke about his father,

who was buried there in 1944; and Benny Shapira played a haunting Yiddish song. We all dissolved in tears.

We went to Okopi, a Polish Catholic village which was completely destroyed by the Ukrainians. Only the cemetery remains. This is the area where Larry and Haim had hidden in the nearby forest. Some of the local peasants had fed them. The local teacher, Mrs. F. Massajada, was very good to the Jews and was killed for being so. Haim was instrumental in obtaining for her the title of *Righteous Gentile* awarded by Yad Vashem. He is still in touch with her son, who lives in Warsaw. The local priest was also helpful in not stopping his parishioners from feeding Jews. At the end of The War, Haim lived in Okopi with the Romanewich family.

We were joined by Larissa, a teacher from the village of Borovey. She took us through the village of Netrebe to Okopi. She knew a local man who remembers where houses once stood in Okopi.

Larry was frozen in time. Netrebe is where he, his mother, and six others were denounced and caught by the Ukrainians. They lined up parent and child in order to save bullets. The others were shot; and it was Gitel and Larry's turn. Gitel reached into her clothing and threw several strands of pearls at the militiaman. He was distracted and they managed to escape into the forest.

Once more Gitel saved her child's life.



Gitel & Larry Gamulka

We were invited by Larissa to her home for lunch. A wonderful spread was on the table — *varenikes* (dough with filling, typically potatoes) filled with blueberries! What memories for those who grew up there. On the way back to the hotel we stopped at Moshe Trossman's childhood home.

Day Three

We rode to Sarny. This is where eighteen thousand Jews from surrounding towns and villages were murdered. It is located forty kilometers from Rokitno and is a larger town. The last Jew, Feldman, had recently died. Technology is wonderful – the cell phones were working again. We got off the bus near a football stadium. It was built over the Jewish cemetery. We crossed the train tracks and followed the road our people had walked to their mass grave. They were made to undress there. We heard the story of two people who managed to escape, either by hiding in the piles of clothing or by just running.

There are three memorials at the mass grave site. At the largest memorial, which the *Association of Former Residents* had recently refurbished, we held a memorial ceremony. Once again, our Dani chanted the *Kel Maale Rachamim* and *Kaddish* was recited. The original mass grave was just a pile of bones covered by earth. Haim read the names of his relatives who were killed there. I added the names of Pessach and Sarah Burko, Gitel's uncle and aunt, and the names of Larry's aunts, uncles, and cousins. They are the children and grandchildren of Leah Burko, whose grave we found the day before. Benny read a famous poem by Bialik. As we prepared to leave, Haim found a bone. We all gasped and sobbed. Moshe and Haim buried the bone. We visited the other memorials. They are all next to a heavily-guarded military camp. Larry went into the forest to be interviewed by Avi Bohbot, a film maker from Israel. He will be making a film for Israeli television.

On the way back to Rokitno we stopped at the ancient Jewish cemetery of Osnitzk. There are many old, broken-down gravestones. The cemetery has not been used since 1920 and shows signs of a Jewish presence in the area several hundred years ago.

We returned to Rokitno and walked to the old Tarbut School. It is now a geriatric hospital. The Tarbut School was a wonderful day school with outstanding and dedicated teachers. All subjects were taught in Hebrew. Larry's mother was one of the first graduates of the school and spoke Hebrew well. Haim, Moshe and Slava had attended the school.

We celebrated *Kabalat Shabbat* (part of the Friday evening service that inaugurates the Sabbath) in our dining room. The women lit the candles, Dani recited *Kiddush* (blessing over the wine for Shabbat) and we all sang and told stories. It was amazing and yet sad. We were a good group!

The only Jew remaining in Rokitno is Weiner. He has converted to Christianity, but he looks the stereotypical Jew. His son is completely Ukrainian. He will be building a new fence and gate around the Jewish cemetery. He will also repair all old gravestones. We appeal to his Jewish ancestry to do a good job. Since my Russian is quite good, I became involved in the actual contract! I was also asked to solicit funds to pay for this project.

Day Four

Our fourth day of this memorial trip is *Shabbat*. Some people went to a memorial in Brezov and to Moshe's maternal grandparents' house in Glinna. The Bar Or and Gamulka families retraced childhood memories. We returned to the location of Haim's house. His house had been destroyed during the war. There is a large garden and a small kitchen and an outhouse on the grounds. The lady of the house invited us to visit. She was out of town when we came on the first day. They own two neighbouring plots of land, filled with flowers and vegetables. Suddenly, Haim looked at the front of the house and announced: "This is Bella Krychman's house!" Bella is Larry's cousin and lives in Montreal. Larry and his mother lived there in the ghetto (April-August 1942). We were invited to enter, and Larry immediately found the room in which they slept. Nothing has

really changed. At the front door we saw an outline of nails which must have anchored the *mezuzah*! The present owners are warm and friendly. They bought the property only twenty years ago. The house is crowded with three families, but is very clean.

We returned to the hotel, and I skimmed through a memorial book from Manievich. Rafi Shapira, one of our group members, was bringing it to the Historical Museum of Rovno on the following day. Manievich was a resort town closer to Kovel. I found two pictures of Devorah Burko, the daughter of Gedalyah Burko, Gitel's brother. Our daughter's middle name is Devorah – in her memory. Larry remembers her well. What a coincidence! If Rafi had not casually mentioned it, I would not have thought of looking through the memorial book.

Now, the impossible! As we sat in the tiny lobby of the hotel, a man approached and asked if anyone spoke Polish. Larry answered positively. The man lives near Warsaw and drives the Polish priest to visit the ten remaining Catholic families in Rokitno. This man was born in Rokitno and left in 1945. This is when the Jews and the Poles left. His father worked at a Jewish bakery and the Gitelmans (friends of our family) were his neighbours. It turns out that he attended the same Russian language kindergarten as Larry. He actually used to speak Yiddish, which he learned from his classmates. He and Larry reminisced about their teacher whose name they had both forgotten. They remembered the large tree put up by the teacher for the New Year. It was beautifully decorated. What next comes to mind is the Russian soldier who came to entertain the children with magic tricks. He came only once and chose two boys for a special trick. He gave them a glass of milk to drink, but he then collected all the milk under their chins in a glass. The Polish man and Larry were those two boys!

The Polish man remembers the day of the massacre in the market square. He was swimming in the river when shots rang out. He ran home ducking the shots overhead. We walked to the railroad tracks to look for the bridge over the river. It was where Larry swam in the summer and skated in the winter. In his memory, the bridge was larger than the George Washington Bridge. The Soviets had drained the river and it is now a small stream. Local residents use it to wash their cars. The bridge is still there, but it is quite small.

At the market square we tried to recreate that horrible day. Dafna, Haim's daughter began to run when Haim imitated the shouting woman. She quickly ran out of steam. We wondered how they all ran away on that fateful day. An adrenalin rush due to fear must have propelled them.

After dinner we sat outside on the porch. It is part of a café with music blaring and much dancing inside. A group of university students who are home for the summer was interested in the reason for our visit. They did know about the market square and other Holocaust events. They were impressed that we wanted to come and to bring our offspring, and encouraged us to continue to do so.

Day Five

This day we split up. We were all originally slated to go to Rovno to visit the Jewish Community there. However, the Bar Or and Gamulka families once again felt the need to return to Okopi. This is not only the place where Larry and Haim had hidden, but it is also where Haim's mother and sister died of dysentery. Larry clearly remembers helping to bury them in the forest. Larissa, the teacher from Borovey, joined us. A local peasant and his family took us by horse and wagon into the forest. The peasant knows that there are some graves inside the forest. Haim and his family went deep into the woods and felt they have reached some closure. The Gamulkas remained behind since the ground was almost knee-deep in rain water. We ate lunch on the ground, where it was dry, and we then returned to the hotel.



Memorial Plaque

Early that evening we attended a special ceremony to unveil a plaque put up at the entrance to the Rokitno market square. It commemorates the events of August 26, 1942. The inscription (“*In this market square the Jews of Rokitno and the surroundings, may their blood be avenged, were murdered by the Nazis and the fascists on 13 Elul 5742. May their souls be bound up in the bond of life.*”) is in Ukrainian and Hebrew. Speeches were made by Haim in Hebrew and Russian and by the present mayor of Rokitno. The youngest members of our group, Yonatan and Gal, placed flowers and did the actual unveiling. As we began our gathering, an intense rain began to fall. We felt the heavens were crying as our fallen are remembered. We invited the mayor and his wife to dinner. We all spoke about the trip and its meaning to us. The Vodka flowed as toasts were made.

Avi, our filmmaker, who is of Moroccan heritage, said he, at last, understood what the Holocaust is all about and what it means to be a Jew. He actually cried with Haim inside the forest earlier that day.

Day Six

We visited the cemetery on our way out of Rokitno. Nina promised to take care of Leah Burko's grave. She will also plant, in her garden, the seed sent to me by Lora Hull.

Lora's grandfather came from Rokitno and she was instrumental in putting out my English translation of the memorial book on the Internet. Lora's grandfather had given her the original seed and she has planted it many times since. Two old peasant women spoke to us at the cemetery. They remembered the piles of Jewish bodies being trampled by pigs.

After returning to Kiev, and before arriving at our hotel, we visited Babi Yar. It is a grand memorial to those who were massacred in Kiev. There were at least 40,000 Jews thrown into the river and into ravines. Babi Yar represents the end of our attending memorials and visiting cemeteries — at least as a group.

Day Seven

Larry, Dani, and I left the group; the latter stayed to tour Kiev. We were driven to Chernigov by Sergei, our friend Nat's grand-nephew. The reason for our visit is that Larry found out only a few years back that his father had died there. Jonah Gomulka was a soldier in the Soviet Army and was taken prisoner by the Germans. When his unit was asked to identify the Jews, he and others stepped forward. They were immediately shot. Someone who did not step forward lived to tell the story.

I had made contact with the Jewish Community of Chernigov through Martin Horwitz in New York. He is the Executive Director of the *Jewish Community Development Fund in Russia and Ukraine*. He e-mailed the Jewish Community in Chernigov, and they were prepared to meet us. We were warmly received at *Hesed Esther* of the Jewish Community Center by Irina, the director. We met a group of elderly people doing crafts in the center. There is also an active children's program. The center has a choir and a prize-winning theater troupe. There are over 4,000 Jews in Chernigov and surroundings. Irina and Victoria, a non-Jewish archivist, took us on a tour of Chernigov.

We visited the memorial to the partisans who died defending the town. There were two Jews among them. We then went to a memorial to the Jews who were massacred in a mass grave. Larry recited *Kel Maale Rachamim* for his father and we lit a candle. We cried together, but we felt some closure. We visited the old Jewish cemetery, which is now being cleaned up and repaired. Prior to 1939, 40% of the population were Jews.

We returned to the Jewish Community center where we met Semyon Bellman, the director. He spoke to us about his work and told us about the efforts to maintain Jewish life. They are so proud of their work. Since the fall of the Soviet Union many younger people have left for Israel. We saw the small synagogue which is used constantly. He told us that even when he was in the Soviet Army he always knew when *Yom Kippur* fell so he could fast! They are also preparing a memorial book to contain the names of all the Jews who were killed during The War. We gave him details about Larry's father. We

also gave a donation to help in their projects. Larry felt he has finally buried his childhood!

We returned to Kiev and took a cruise on the Dnieper River around the city. It is magnificent.

Departure

We met in Haim and Haya's room to talk and to say good-bye. It was very difficult to let go. We have cried and laughed with the group for the past week. We hugged and we kissed and we promised to see each other again. We left Kiev early the next morning. As I write these words, we have been back home for several weeks. We are happy that we traveled to Larry's childhood home and that we were able to see signs that Jews had once lived in this small town. When Larry speaks about his childhood, I truly understand and can visualize what he is describing. We know that we will return, even on our own, with other members of our family. It is our history!