

Trip to Crimea

June 29, 2007, Congregation B'nai B'rith, Rabbi Stephen Cohen

Three of my four grandparents died before I was born, so I grew up only knowing my mother's father, Ephraim Eidlin. Grandpa lived fifteen minutes from us in Rochester, and he came to dinner at our house every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. He was a large burly man, who spoke with a heavy Russian accent. Grandpa was physically very affectionate with us, but terribly shy and rarely spoke much. My visual memories of him are split between the suit and the sleeveless t-shirt. Outside of his own apartment, I never in 22 years saw Grandpa wearing anything other than a suit and tie...including at our family dinner table. But then when we would drop in on him at his apartment, we would find him dressed in a sleeveless t-shirt, his hairy torso and arms exposed. I was fascinated, and will always remember him in those two very different ways. In all the 22 years that I knew him before he died, I never once heard Grandpa tell a story from his life, which seems so strange, because the story of his life is epic.

Grandpa was born in 1901 in Simferopol, the capital city of the Crimea, in the southernmost part of Russia on the Black Sea. He was the eldest of three sons of Mark and Dora Eidlin. Mark—also known as Morduch—grandpa's father, my great-grandfather, was the publisher and editor of a Russian language newspaper called Krim, which means Crimea in Russian. He was a Zionist leader, and was elected to the city council in 1919 on the Zionist party ticket. Thirteen years earlier, in 1906, he had been arrested and jailed for a year for printing an article urging people to protest and boycott the elections. So Grandpa came from an influential family; he lived in a big house in the center of town, and was raised by a governess.

In 1918, Grandpa Ephraim and his two brothers left Simferopol, not to return for over fifty years. The three boys traveled to Istanbul Turkey, where they spent a year in a Zionist training camp, and then arrived in the land of Israel—Palestine at the time. There Grandpa worked as a laborer, in a brick factory, contracted malaria, in the hospital fell in love with his stunningly beautiful nurse—my grandmother—and eventually enrolled in the first class in the Technion, where he earned a degree in Civil Engineering, and went on to do the engineering for many building projects in the early Jewish settlement of Israel. In 1938, Grandpa and my grandmother and my mother came to the States, intending to stay for a year, and never went back. So when I knew Grandpa, he was an immigrant twice over—having left Russia for Palestine in 1918, and then coming to America after twenty years in Palestine.

I did not hear any of this directly from Grandpa, but from his daughter—my mother. And she also told me that Grandpa's fondest memories were from his childhood, growing up in the Crimea.

Just about one month ago, my mother called to let me know that her brother—my uncle Fred Eidlin—was organizing a family trip back to Simferopol. Uncle Fred is a political scientist, specializing in Eastern Europe and Russia, who spends much of his time over there and is married to a Russian woman, Yelena. Obviously, to go to the Crimea with Fred and Lina was a golden opportunity, since they could serve as both guide and translators, on this journey to a place of no English...and, to be honest, of fear. This is Holocaust territory, of course, and part of the Former Soviet Union, that evil

empire. But even with this golden opportunity, my initial reaction was “I wish I could...but I just can’t get away so spontaneously.” And I owe a debt of gratitude to Cantor Childs, who when he heard that said, “Why not? It’s a great time to go!”

So it was that I found myself on Wednesday June 13, in line at the Tom Bradley international terminal at LAX—a long line, in which as far as I could tell I was the only American together with about 250 Russians, who all looked much different from me, and somewhat frightening. Especially the two big guys in front of me with shaved heads. The line was barely moving and people kept joining the line ...in front of me...from every direction, and I remembered the note of concern in Andee Gaines’ voice when I told her I was flying Aeroflot (I think that was when she took the opportunity to push me to buy the Medical Evacuation insurance) and not for the last time, I stood there wondering if I was making a huge mistake.

By the time I reached the ticket counter, after an hour and a half standing in line with those Russians, I loved those people. I had been watching them laughing with each other, taking care of each other, waiting with just the right mix of patience and irritation, and they began to remind me more and more of Israelis, and of my own family, and it occurred to me that this was the whole point of the trip. I come from Russians—Russian Jews—these are my people!

The love affair came to an abrupt end at the Transit desk in Moscow. Our twelve hour flight from LA came in an hour late, so I knew it would be a little bit close to get to my final three hour flight to Simferopol. I arrived at the desk, and the woman standing there looked at my tickets and said “Unfortunately you are late. You will stay in the hotel.” I tried to protest, pointing out that my connection didn’t leave for another hour, and she glared at me: “You will stay in the hotel. Sit down please.” She then left, with my full set of tickets, which I didn’t see again until the next day. A few other delayed passengers and I spent the night in the airport hotel, where they took our passports from us, put us each in a single room which we were told not to leave. I felt myself slipping into the Gulag of Soviet Russia, and wondering if I would ever see any of you again! I only started feeling better the next day when I got my passport, tickets and a special escort to the plane and a seat in business class. They were actually trying to take special care of me...but for whatever reason, did not want to explain that to me. To all my questions, the answer was always: “Don’t worry.”

As soon as we landed in Simferopol, I realized that I had not pictured it properly. I had not realized that it was sub-tropical—the taxi-drivers crowding the entrance to the airport (I later learned that they are all part of the Mafia) were dressed in white and cream-colored slacks and short sleeves. And I had really not thought through the fact that no one here spoke English. I am used to traveling in Israel, which is a foreign country, but English is everywhere. The signs in the Simferopol airport are in Russian only.

So I wished I had learned a little bit of Russian before leaving...or at least bought a phrase book! In five days there, I fell in love with the language. P’zhalsta—which means “please,” but like the Hebrew word b’vakasha, it means both “please,” and “you’re welcome.” Spaciba, meaning “thank you.” I had many wonderful exchanges with waiters, salespeople, hotel people, etc in which I would say “spaciba” and they would respond “p’zhalsta!” Chorosho—which means “good,” and when used carefully can make it seem like you really know what’s going on...enough to declare something “chorosho.” “Dosv’danya” means “goodbye,” “nichivo” means “it doesn’t matter,” and

I learned at least one of the staples of modern Hebrew that comes from Russian—“nu?” meaning “so?”

I could have found no better guide and traveling companion than my uncle Fred who constant approaches complete strangers, and with his little hand-held video camera running, begins to ask them “who are you? where are you from?” Your family? What is your work? How do you feel about the mood in the country right now?” and so on. Everyone we stopped to talk to was perfectly happy to tell him all about themselves. What we found was that, a bit like here in Santa Barbara, very few of the people had actually been born in Simferopol. Their stories, however, often included family decimated by war, parents, and grandparents forcibly uprooted and relocated by Stalin to Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan. I had never really considered what it meant that the Soviet Union lost twenty five million people in World War Two.

Two weeks ago, on the Friday night of our trip, we visited the small Progressive Jewish synagogue in Simferopol. I had been in touch with them by email ahead of time, but had no idea what to expect. We were greeted warmly by a kindly man in short sleeves, Anatoly Gendin the Executive Director of the synagogue, who speaks no English at all. Services were led by a seventeen year old wearing a Bob Marley tshirt. The first five or six rows were filled with women in their sixties and seventies, singing at the top of their lungs. And in the back of the room were fifteen or twenty teenagers—the youth group. This is a small group. Most of the Jews of Simferopol perished in the Holocaust. But Synagogue Ner Tamid is alive and thriving, and it was obvious that both the older women and the members of the youth group...including the teen who led services with poise and confidence...they clearly all believe that they have a future there.

My mother remembered that Grandpa used to mention a place called Bakhcheserai as one of his favorite places...so we went there. Before Catherine the Great conquered the Crimea for Russia in the 1790's, Crimea was part of the Ottomann Empire, and dominated by Muslims called Tatars...and ruled locally by a king called the “Khan.” Bakhcheserai was the old capital of Crimea, under the Tatars, and we went to visit the palace of the Khan—something right out of the Arabian Nights. A breathtakingly beautiful, oriental complex with fountains, gardens, a harem, and a feeling of timeless magic. It began to rain while we stood in one indoor courtyard with a partially open roof, and the rain came down before our eyes and ran into a drain in the stone floor...it felt like we were standing inside a waterfall. I sat in the garden, and imagined grandpa coming here as a young man, and drinking in the beauty, and the quiet.

Nearby, we visited an Orthodox Russian monastery built into the cliff wall of a huge canyon. The setting was immense and awe-inspiring, and I was particularly fascinated by the young Russian priests we met along the way. Young men, in their 30's and 40's, each of them intelligent, dignified and charismatic. Fred insisted on introducing one of them to me—I was embarrassed at first, standing there in my American short pants face to face with him in his impressive beard and long robe. But the conversation quickly opened up. He told of how so many people are coming back to religion after the long years of Communist suppression. I asked whether he was teaching the old religion or a new form of the old, and he said “no, we are trying to do it the way our grandparents did. You know, Orthodox.” Fred asked him “are you resisting modernity?” and he replied “not at all, we're Orthodox, but not fanatic.” Throughout the conversation, by the way, he had to stop every couple of minutes, to give a quick blessing

to one person or another who silently approached him, and stood there, head bowed, while he touched them on the forehead and said a quiet word of blessing. At the end of the conversation, which of course was completely in Russian, with Fred translating back and forth, I asked Fred to thank him for what he is doing for the people there, and he smiled at me and said in English “Don’t mention it!”

On day three of the trip we visited the state archives in Simferopol, to see the files about my great-grandfather Mark/Morduck Eidlin—the newspaper editor. After much haggling about who could go in, and for how long, and where, and what we could actually see, we found ourselves in a reading room, looking at the actual documents from the court case in 1906, including two copies of the issue of the newspaper for which he was arrested. The file also contained a copy of the election poster from 1919 when he was elected to the city council. This was the closest that I came physically to my great-grandfather on this trip, and it was far closer than I ever imagined I would come in my lifetime.

The visit to the archives gives me an opportunity now to tell you about the two other members of our Crimean delegation—my two cousins Michael and Gary. I mentioned earlier that there were three brothers who group up in Simferopol and who left in 1918. One was Grandpa, Fred’s father. Michael and Gary, who rounded out our quirky little band, are each the son of one of the other brothers. Three brothers left as teenagers in 1918 and one son of each of the three returned on this trip in June 2007, together with me...one of the grandsons.

I had only met Michael once before in my life—briefly at a wedding—and Gary only once also—I think it was at Grandpa’s funeral in 1979. Being in Grandpa’s childhood home together with the sons of each of his brothers added a fascinating, and confusing layer of complexity to my experience. First of all, there we were—all having traveled an enormous distance, all for the same purpose, all of us descended from the same man and woman, and we were struggling to comprehend each other.

For one thing, Fred and Michael are both Christians...it’s a long story...but the bottom line is that they have become Christians...and of course my sister and I are both rabbis! The five of us would sit down to dinner on our trip typically at about 11PM, after a long day of walking and visiting and interviewing innocent bystanders...and open a bottle of wine and start trying to tell each other who we are, and what we believe, and all five of us struggled mightily to understand how one man and one woman one hundred years ago could produce such vastly different offspring. And it’s really not just our careers and beliefs that are different---it’s our personalities! Fred is an absent-minded professor. Gary is a hot-headed, high-powered East Coast Jew, who loses his temper easily, constantly interrupts mid-sentence, and wears his heart on his sleeve, and Michael is reserved, conservative and mild-mannered until something gets to him and he starts swearing.

One night it was one o’clock in the morning, we were still eating, drinking and discussing religion, and belief in God, and Gary shouted—really sounding angry—“I don’t believe this! I never have these conversations!”

And it was Gary who, when we went to the archive, really wanted mainly to know about great-grandfather Morduck’s wealthy father-in-law, and where all the money had gone. When we visited the home where Grandpa and his brothers grew up, Gary exclaimed “Now I’m feeling better! This is an impressive house! I like the

neighborhood! I feel much better!” The secret of the family fortune didn’t mean that much to me, but I was very happy to meet this cousin...who grew up in the same town as I did, but we never knew each other because my grandmother—who died before I was born—and Gary’s mother has been sisters-in-law, and enemies.

So what did I find on this trip, this pilgrimage back to my roots?

I think that part of the answer begins with a line from the beautiful Thornton Wilder play Our Town, which they just performed at Dos Pueblos High School last month. Near the beginning of the show, as the Stage Manager is introducing us to the little town of Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire in the year 1901---the same year, incidentally, in which grandpa was born, half-way around the world—the Stage Manager points out the town cemetery and comments: “The earliest tombstones in the cemetery up there on the mountain say 1670-1680—they’re Grovers and Cartwrights and and Gibbises and Herseys—same names as are around here now.”

In that single, simple statement, Wilder describes an entire world as it used to be, in which people grew up surrounded by the stories and memories and the graves of their forebears. It used to be that everyone knew who their great-grandparents were, and could actually see their markers bearing their names...from 100 or 200 years earlier. When the Torah says that someone reached the end of their life and then “slept with his fathers”...it meant it literally, they were there in the ground sleeping together.

But we live in a very different world, and I grew up without knowing much or anything about my ancestors. When I meet someone here in Santa Barbara, I often will ask where they come from, and where their parents and grandparents lived, and more often than not the answer is: I don’t know. What was their name? I don’t know.

This trip was my attempt to do my part to reconstruct a lost past—to help to tell a story that is almost forgotten, but which I want to know, and to tell and to pass on to my children and grandchildren.

On the last day of the trip, we visited the Jewish cemetery in Simferopol. I even have a photograph that Grandpa carried and passed on to my mother of his mother’s tombstone...there in the Jewish cemetery in Simferopol. The writing on the tombstone is in Russian, with a Jewish star at the top, and the text on the stone is a poem. The words are too faint to make out, except for the last line, which says in Russian, “Goodbye my friend. And his name, Mark. To find this stone, to stand at my great-grandmother Dora’s grave and to tell her about myself, and the family, about my mother and my daughter and my son...whose middle name is Eidlin...that would be the crowning moment of the whole pilgrimage.

The Jewish cemetery in Simferopol, however, is completely desecrated. We arrived there at about 6PM, and found a huge open hillside, with scattered broken stones...with fading Hebrew letters, and difficult to read names and dates. A poor family was sitting in the field, with their goat grazing nearby on the thistles, as they cooked their meal on an open fire. I was wearing sandals and the thistles stung my feet as we trudged through the field, hunting—without much hope—to find a stone with the distinctive shape and star that are visible in the photograph. In the end, the closest I was able to find was a fallen and broken stone of another Jew of Simferopol who died—it was marked clearly—in 1922, the same year that my great-grandmother Dora died.

Gary was angry at whoever had desecrated the cemetery. I couldn’t tell what Michael was thinking or feeling. As the sun dropped lower and lower, I noticed that

wildflowers had begun to cover over the broken and tormented stones in that place. And I wondered at the power of family and history, that had reached out across the years and the vast distance, and grabbed the four of us, and drawn us together and brought us back to the place of our beginnings.