

In Search of Felshtin

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Featuring photos by Steven Shaer and Robert Oksman

Finding Felshtin or Gvardeyskoye was much easier than getting there. In May 2006 my cousin, Robert Oksman, and I hired a car and a driver from Kiev, and we were fortunate enough to have my good friend Roman Terekhine, who speaks Russian, along with us for the ride.

The trip from Kiev is quite arduous. While the roads were in decent condition and all paved, there was no direct roads so it took us about 5+ hours to get to Chemelnitsky (the nearest big city) and another 20-30 minutes from there to get to Gvardeyskoye.

I think Robert and I both went with the expectation the Gvardeyskoye would be some sleepy village transported directly from Fiddler on the Roof with poverty, dirt roads and mud everywhere. What we found instead was a flourishing agricultural town with many school aged children, relatively well maintained houses, a recently restored church and neat and tidy farm fields. It was interesting to note that the church was not of a traditional Russian Orthodox style. It may have been Catholic.

Stunning Beauty

While we have all been subjected to the Bubba/Zeide



Jewish Cemetery in Gvardeyskoye, formerly Felshtin

Mintzas about how beautiful Felshtin was, we were unprepared for the reality of just how beautiful it really is. It has wide open vistas of truly stunning green rolling hills of cultivated farm fields. I think Robert and I both got a greater understanding of our grandfather's love of the outdoors and the forest once we got to see Felshtin. I must further add that in general (not just Felshtin), this part of western Ukraine is really spectacularly beautiful rolling countryside.

Before coming to the Ukraine I spoke to Rabbi Poupko whose grandfather was the last rabbi of Felshtin. Rabbi Poupko visited Felshtin a few years ago and told me that

the cemetery still existed and that it was currently a cow pasture but couldn't give me any greater description of its location. Rabbi Poupko now works for the Jewish Federation in Chicago and is responsible for Chicago Federation programs in Kiev, Chicago Federation's sister city, so he is actually in the Ukraine fairly regularly. Rabbi Poupko gave me no other specifics about the cemetery and knew of no other signs of Jewish life in Felshtin. We were setting out to see what we could find.

To say that there is little sign of the once flourishing Jewish life in Gvardeyskoye is perhaps an understatement.

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Felshtin Travelers' Tips

1. Even though Felshtin's new name is frequently written as "Gvardeyskoye," it is also written in the Latin alphabet on mapquest.com as *Hvardijs'ke*

2. The drive from Kiev is approximately 5 ½ hours each way and the road condition isn't terrible, but it isn't exactly the Jersey Turnpike either. If you want to do the trip in one day, it is possible (we did it) but you must make consideration of the distance and the driver's stamina. We imagine there should be some hotels in Chemelnitsky.

3. The Chemelnitsky near Felshtin should not be confused with another Ukrainian city called Kamenetz-Podolsk, which may be found in some tourist (Fodder's or Frommer's) books.

4. We don't think this trip is advisable without a Russian or Ukrainian translator with you. Particularly outside Kiev, there is very little accommodation for travelers who are non-Russian/Ukrainian speakers and the chances of finding someone in Felshtin who speaks English would be quite low.

Basic Instructions

Get to Chemelnitsky. From Kiev by road you will probably enter Chemelnitsky from the North. You need to get on the main road out of Chemelnitsky that goes West. I don't know if this road has a name but any map should show it.

Within 15-20 minutes, you will see a sign for Gvardeyskoye (the sign is on the right) indicating a left turn (south), and the town of Gvardeyskoye 8 km. There is a gas station on the left just before the turn.

Take the turn and head into town. The major landmark of Felshtin is a very nicely preserved church in the center of town. It is interesting to note that this church does not appear to be Russian Orthodox; it may be Catholic. If anyone finds out more about it (it



A church in Gvardeyskoye.

was closed when we got there), please let me know.

The church is quite close to the combination post office and municipal building. The people in each seem friendly and helpful, but not terribly useful!

Other information

1. Very few people seem to know anything about the Jewish history (or admit to knowing) of the town or the location of the cemetery. You will have the most success by talking to the oldest people you can find but even so it seems that all they know is that Jewish people once lived there and that is about it!

2. One woman we spoke to told us that there were three Jewish cemeteries in the town but that all but one had been built over. I don't know how credible that is.

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Armed with this little fact about the Jewish cemetery, we started asking people about it and any other signs of the Jewish community. When asking about the cemetery we got a range of information spanning from “I don’t know anything about it” to “I hear there were three Jewish cemeteries and only one remains but I don’t know where”. There was no other information provided about the Jewish community. Our inquiries took us to speaking to people in the town hall and post office where we (through our Russian interpreter) found very little information but seemingly helpful locals to random people on the streets.

I say seemingly helpful because we had to wonder if people weren’t forthcoming with information they had or really didn’t know. One has to speculate that perhaps they would not be particularly comfortable with strangers coming in and asking questions about some chapters in town history that outsiders might look upon critically.

Furthermore, since it is fair to guess that the properties once owned by our Jewish ancestors have been appropriated by some of the locals, the current townspeople might have a more real reason for discouraging Jewish investigators. On such a short visit (we were there just a few hours), it is impossible to gauge what people really know



about the Jewish history of the town and what artifacts actually remain (let alone, what artifacts were stolen and by whom).

Creating a Commotion

I must say that we created a bit of a commotion in Gvardeyskoye with people staring at us wherever we went. We were joking that we have given the town people something to talk about—finally! I am sure that this is not a town that is used to seeing western tourists.

At that point, feeling a bit frustrated, we went driving around the town looking for something that might be a cemetery that might be in or near a cow pasture. This was like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. After unsuccessfully checking out a few fields, we headed back to the center of town. On our way

back, we happened to pass an older man walking by the side of the road. Instinctively, I asked our driver to pull over and asked Roman to ask him if he knew of the Jewish Cemetery—yes, he knew it and gave us general directions up an unpaved road that upon further reflection might have been the original town road but is no longer a main thoroughfare.

We drove on, stopping to check out one possible field until we saw yet another older gentleman (I say gentleman because he was wearing a suit!) a few hundred yards down the road. We jumped back in the car and drove after this man to press our inquiry--“right here” he told us and he pointed! Literally, we had stopped him about 10 yards from the cemetery.

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The Cemetery

This was not what we expected, but I am not sure what we should have expected. There was a field of about a third of an acre with no fence or even remnants of a fence and a handful (maybe only a dozen or two) of grave monuments tossed about. There was more evidence of cows grazing there recently than that this was ever a cemetery. Looking at it from the road, it just looked like a pasture with a few lumps. Robert and I were pretty much in a state of shock, and we each wandered around the field separately lost in our own thoughts. One positive thing I would like to add is that it is in a lovely bucolic setting.

There are no flat tombstones at all, there are no “cut down in the prime of life” cut tree-shaped monuments, what few monuments that were there, were of all of a very large type that might have lied on top of the grave and had a small flat section at the foot where there was an inscription, probably in Yiddish, which is rendered with Hebrew characters.

We couldn't understand how there could be so few monuments, in fact there weren't any noticeable fragments of monuments that might indicate the result of weather, war destruction or other vandalism. While we weren't looking specifically, we didn't remember seeing a single piece of stone that had a smooth edge such that it might have been a piece of a broken tombstone or other monument.

Was it possible that the tombstones or broken tombstones were buried under a layer of soil? Had this been something we thought of while we were there we might have probed around a bit but there were no obvious hard lumps on the field. My suspicion is that the stones were stolen and used as building material or for some other functional purpose by the local people but I readily admit that this is purely conjecture.

We further speculate the stones that remained were both too large to easily move and not as useable (or reusable) a shape to be valuable as a



building material than something flat would be. My cousin Robert and I have differing perspectives. Robert thinks it is more likely that they were knocked down, broken and buried under a layer of soil, but who knows?

In a sense, our trip to Felshtin was successful and unsuccessful. Certainly successful in that we found it and found a tiny piece of our Jewish heritage there. Unsuccessful in that it asked a few more questions for me than it answered.

Unanswered Questions

- What happened to the cemetery monuments? I hope future visitors will look around the field to see if there is any indication that the tombstones or fragments of the tombstones are buried under a layer of soil.
- Are there other cemeteries than the one we found in town? I am curious why the cemetery would be on the outskirts of town rather than in a more central location.
- Does the town hall have any old maps of the town that might indicate other Jewish sites? I have been kicking myself that I didn't think of asking about this when we were at the town hall.

I hope in the future we Jewish Felshtiners (and we, the ancestors of our beloved Felshtiners) can keep adding to this information and answer some of these questions.

Many more photos and video may be viewed online at:

<http://steve70638.multiply.com/>

Felshtin Travelers Tips

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3. What I found curious was that the cemetery seemed outside of the settlement of the town really out in farmland. I would have guessed that the cemetery would be closer where people lived.

4. The cemetery was quite a shock. There were so few stones and it has been regularly used for cattle grazing (at least the grass is short!). There are no flat style headstones remaining nor were there any “cut down tree” style monuments one often sees in Jewish cemeteries and the only stones that are there are probably still there because there are both too large to move and not a good size and shape to be used by vandals. There are no noticeable stone fragments, so I don’t think they just broke down through weathering. Our first impression was that we were amazed there were so few gravestones at all! We imagine that the flat tombstones have been stolen and used for local building material by vandals.

5. On the way back in Chemelnitsky there is a well preserved Jewish monument and cemetery just east of the center of town. As you drive back from Felshtin, stay straight past the center of town and you will see a large back stone monument with a menorah and Jewish star on it on the right. About 100 meters past it, you will see a Jewish cemetery. It was worth going a few minutes out of the way to see it.

Directions to the cemetery from the church

Go past the church (we forgot a compass, but if you are facing the church, you are going right) .8 of a kilometer

Turn right onto an unpaved road (unpaved as of 2006). The road is a very steep hill up with big ruts. Go .7 of a kilometer and the road will fork with the main road bending left. You want to go straight onto a smaller dirt road



along the side of a grove of trees that will be on your right. There is a broken down brick building on the right just before the fork.

Proceed another .3 of a kilometer from the fork to the cemetery. From the fork, you will have the grove of trees on your right. The cemetery is just after the grove of trees. If you get to a farm house or a pond on the right, you have gone too far. Please review the pictures—there is no fence, and the few stones that there are knocked over or of a type that don’t stand up so it is not obvious at all that this is a cemetery. We were incredibly lucky to have found it because we stopped a person walking by the road 10 yards from it to ask directions and he was able to point us right to it.