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ЗДЕСЬ ПОКОИТСЯ ДУША
СЕРГЕЯ СЕРГЕЕВИЧА
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THE JOURNEY HOME

TARASCHA

By David S. Rasner

Tarascha hasn't changed much in 100 years except there is no Jewish community. There is really no evidence of Jews ever being there or their culture. Today, it is a village of approximately 13,000 persons – which is about the same population as what it was in 1903.

However, in my grandfather's time, the Jews numbered about 5,000 people. Today, there are only seven. The village is largely rural – agricultural. It is about 60 miles south of Kiev; a two-hour drive. The streets are wide and lined with linden and chestnut trees. This is exactly as it was 100 years ago but today the dirt roads are paved. A few trucks, cars and old tractors with their farm implements attached ramble down the roads. The buildings that exist (residences and public buildings) are made of brick or masonry, painted white, with metal ribbed roofs. The public buildings are Soviet style – large, concrete and gray. The cultural center of the village stands on a fortified mound that once was the castle in a prior time. There are a few points of interest – the public school where the children come and go each day; and the post office, where the wife of our host, Vladimir, works. Vladimir is perhaps 44 years old, Jewish and is the head of this seven-member Jewish community. There are not enough Jews to form a minyan and they have to go to other villages when they want to hold services. The oldest individual of this seven-member congregation is almost 80. The village has a soccer field and small shops that sell cakes and homemade bread. There are no hotels, no restaurants, and only one shop selling pizza. The once-busy Jewish merchant center no longer exists.

It is now a public park. No buildings remain of that time reflecting a Jewish merchant class. The synagogue is a private residence. The Yeshiva is a bank. The Jewish cemetery is in the middle of a cow pasture overgrown with trees, weeds and high grass and is littered with cow dung. There are some well-maintained gravesites

but those are only the gravesites of Vladimir's family – his parents and relatives where he brings fresh flowers every week. There are old headstones in the cow fields. Monuments belonging to another time. Faded Jewish inscriptions on the stones – hieroglyphics marking some ancient civilization. The fire pits surrounding the cemetery are used by the farmer to burn debris. For me, it has another remembrance.

Deep in the woods is the Baba Yar of Tarascha. You walk down a small, narrow embankment into an open area that served as the collection space for Jewish extermination. Jews were told to undress and to relinquish all of their objects and possessions including their children. They were then led down an embankment until they were met by a German SS officer who had a selection of guns carefully arranged on a table. The Jews were told to squat before him. He then told them to kneel and systematically shot them, one by one, in the back of the head. Their corpses fell over or were pushed into the ravine below. Efficient, lethal, quick and grim. A Jewish memorial is now erected in the form of an obelisk written in Hebrew commemorating the tragic events. It is a small monument with words of regret and remorse to the dead of Tarascha. A long black slab with three members of the same family occupy the gravesite beside the memorial. As it turns out, the three



“Did you leave your village out of hope or out of despair? Did you leave because of poverty or because of perceived plenty? Did you leave because of adventure or necessity?”

individuals buried there are named Reznichenka – my Ukrainian family name. I don't know if these individuals were my relatives, but knowing that they were there was chilling.

I asked Vladimir about anti-Semitism in Tarascha, now. He told us that despite its tragic history, anti-Semitism does exist. Such expressions as “he’s Jewish” or “he’s different” persist. These words still resonate in our time.

The village is almost entirely Ukrainian Catholic. There is a church where the locals pray. There are Jewish catacombs under the streets in the main part of the village where the Jews sought refuge to escape the pogroms and other violent acts of the day. There are cave-ins on these streets where the tunnels exist, which have become

earthly black holes; footnotes to a not-too-distant past.

I looked into the faces of the people in the village but could not find any of my relatives. Mine is a round face. The faces I saw were angular. I have a large nose. The noses I saw were much smaller. I have a thick neck. The necks I saw were substantially thinner. I have round eyes, brown in color. The eyes I saw were narrow and blue.

For all the kindness shown me that day, it was a day of anguish and sorrow. As we left the village, the sun disappeared as the dark clouds took its place and a steady rain began to fall that followed us until the village was no longer in sight. What I felt during my one-day visit to Tarascha were the twin spirits of evil and good – of

another time and of this time. What I heard was the crying of my people and the persistent wailing of the dead. What I saw were remnants of a lost culture buried in ash and manure.

Grandfather: “Did you leave your village out of hope or out of despair? Did you leave because of poverty or because of perceived plenty? Did you leave because of adventure or necessity?” Whatever your reasons, Grandfather, a profound and much belated “thank you!” Mine has been a life of goodness and abundance, as a consequence. ■

David S. Rasner (drasner@foxrothschild.com) is a partner with Fox Rothschild LLP.

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The Dunn Group

100 Four Falls Corporate Center
Suite 200
West Conshohocken, PA 19428
Phone: (610) 834-3518
Email: Patricia_T_Dunn@ml.com
http://fa.ml.com/dunn_group

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