

Signs

For 21 years an urge to connect with my Heimat remained strong. Although I was born in North Dakota, the Heimat of my dreams was where my grandparents' cradles rocked. Ukraine/Russia was a constant draw.

In 2005, the dream came true! Filled with uncertainty about such a long trip, I embarked on what, to me, was to be a pilgrimage. The spirits of my maternal and paternal great-grandparents and ancestors must be waiting for me, or so a small voice so often said to my heart and soul.

When I arrived in Krasnoe, Ukraine (formerly known as Krasna, Bessarbia, Russia), the cemetery, with its small church-like chapel, instantly drew me. Late one night, I chose to walk around the level cemetery, a sad looking space with no grave markers at all. The sky was clear! The same stars, which I so often see in the skies in North Dakota, also sparkled and twinkled so brightly over the Ukrainian skies. Although there are no streetlights near the cemetery, it was not difficult to walk the cemetery at night. For an hour or so, I meandered the sacred ground. So often during this spiritual time, a sense of a presence pervaded my soul. Hairs on the back of my neck on occasion would stand up. Goosebumps were on my arms. The flowers I picked seemed to extra pungent. Among the spirits, which were out that night, most certainly were those of my maternal great-grandparents and ancestors.

My maternal grandfather and I had a special bond. We spent much time together. A love for him, who he was, from where he came, gave special meaning to my time in the cemetery at Krasna, the village in which he was born. There was a peace, yet an unsettling peace, in my soul, while I walked the cemetery there. Yet, I treasured my time with my spirits.

Then it was on to Sulz, Bersan, Ukraine, where my paternal great-grandparents and ancestors used to live.. The bus driver eventually found the way, across steppe and fields, to the town site. A local fisherman guided the way. As we approached the gentle valley, I was in no way expecting what I did not see. There were no buildings, or even remains of buildings at the site. There were only clumps of weeds over an area the size of ten or so city blocks. What a disappointment to me! The fisherman eventually found the mound of soil, which was all that remained of the church. As we stood on the site of the church, he pointed across the gently sloping hillside, across the gentle valley, to the hillside on the north side of the town site. "There," he said,

pointing with three of his fingers, "is where the tile factory used to be. The government came in here and bulldozed all of the buildings in only three days. They wanted the town gone for the land is located on a military reserve."

A sense of sadness started to creep into my mind. The fisherman eventually found the corner stones, which marked the boundaries of the cemetery. As I stood on a larger stone in the center of the cemetery space, I could see only depressions in the ground. No grave markers could be found, only pieces of stone lying carelessly around. Occasionally a piece could be found near one of the depressions. He stooped over and picked up what appeared to be a piece of stone about the size of a brick. Carving could be seen on it. It was a piece of a grave marker, which had been chipped off a corner of a gravestone. No lettering was found on it. This piece of stone had marked the final resting place of some poor soul! (This fragment now lives with me!)

We wandered the cemetery site for over an hour. Only the sound of the grass rustling as we walked could be heard. There was little wind, only warmth from the bright sun. The fisherman walked the quarter mile back to the bus. I held myself back. I didn't want to leave. I stood on the northeast boundary stone and surveyed the sad sight. Tears slowly came to my eyes. A feeling of sadness began to grow within my heart, for the gentle souls whose bodily remains lay in this holy spot. I cried. Gradually, my mind began to fill with peace. I turned to step off the corner stone. As I did so, from the cemetery space, as if on cue, came the sounds of hundreds of bird chirping and singing with, what sounded to me like, joy. The sounds were sounds of happiness. It was as if the air was filled with hundreds of voices happily saying "Thanks for coming to visit us in Heimat!"

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