

Swimming in the Sea of Azov

Barry Gaines

For the first and only time, my wife sent my father a letter. I have since retrieved the letter and have it still. It is two deckle sheets neatly typed on the electric portable I received for graduate school. It was June 1976, and I was planning a trip to visit my mother and father in Houston on Father's Day. Janet wrote instead of phoning because, although I did not know it at the time, she sometimes had trouble understanding my father's thick Russian accent.

He had been born Grigori Ginzburg in the tiny town of Genichesk in what is now Ukraine, still part, in 1976, of the vast and forbidding Soviet Union. The purpose of Janet's letter was to ask my father to tell me the stories of his life in the Old Country, his family, and his travels to America in 1923. She chose her words carefully: Barry "hopes to spend the evenings talking with you about your early years in Russia and recording your recollections on a tape recorder. Although this would by no means be the primary motivation for the trip, I am writing to urge you to allow these 'interviews' to take place. . . . I know that you have opposed our previous suggestions on this topic. It is nonetheless my most fervent hope that you will reconsider."

My father called to say that he welcomed the chance to share his past—my past—with me, and I prepared my tape recorder and my questions. Five days before my scheduled visit, however, my father, at age sixty-eight, died, and I sadly exchanged my ticket for an earlier flight to his funeral. There, many people told me how much he was looking forward to my visit.

I do not believe that my father purposely tried to hide the stories of his early life from me; like many immigrants, he saw the past as full of sorrow and pain, and he wished instead to look to the future. Still, he told me certain stories again and again. How his beloved father had magically pulled live fish out of the sea and how my grandfather had drowned when

my father was but eight years old. Of his beautiful mother—whose bright eyes and aristocratic profile are captured in a photograph he kept all of his life—who died nursing victims of the typhus epidemic when he was twelve. How his cousins tormented him because he was an orphan and did not have a parent to protect him. How at sixteen he was sent to America with a distant relative because he was a handful.

I, however, wanted more. At my father's funeral, we recited the *Kadish*, the ancient Jewish mourners' prayer, a glorification of God that, strangely, says nothing about death. It begins, *Yitgadal veyitkadash shemei reba* ("Let the glory of God be extolled"). As the familiar words rose from our mouths, I found myself remembering another story from my father. When his father, Joseph, drowned, his grandfather, Lazar, recited *Kadish* with nine other Jewish men of the town. My father listened to the prayer; and with anguished tears, he demanded to know what the men were saying. When someone translated the words for him, the eight-year-old boy got angry. "Where is the mention of my father? Where is the explanation of death?" he questioned. My great-grandfather, suffering from the grief of burying his son, struck my father with his walking stick. That blow ended my father's faith in organized religion, although he always considered himself a Jew.

After my own father's death, in an effort to satisfy my yearning to learn more about him, I searched for what documentary evidence I could about his past. At the National Archives, and later at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, I found the ship's records of his arrival and his application for and certificate of naturalization. And so things remained for many years.

Then in 1983, my daughter celebrated her *Bat Mitzvah*, the Jewish coming of age celebration at a young woman's thirteenth birthday. We dispatched invitations to the ceremony to relatives I had not seen for years. Much to our surprise, many of them came to Albuquerque to share in our joy and pride. After living at least a thousand miles away from any family, I found it surprisingly pleasant to have family share in our *simcha* (celebration). The event awakened within me a desire to get closer to more family.

Janet and I had traveled to the Soviet Union as part of a group in the summer of 1976, just before she wrote her letter to my father. This was the era of the "refuseniks," Soviet Jews who'd requested emigration to Israel or the United States and thereby lost their job and their status, and we'd

enjoyed the many honorable and courageous people whom we met: a former general stripped of his rank and medals, an accomplished opera singer with time to serenade us, a world-renowned scholar of ancient China. That trip was wonderful; but after the Soviet Union disintegrated and Ukraine became a separate nation in search of hard currency, I thought about actually visiting my father's village. It was theoretically possible to go to Genichesk where my father was born.

Then, in the summer of 1994, things came together. I had a sabbatical semester that I planned to spend in England doing research in Stratford-upon-Avon; I was invited to attend the International Shakespeare Institute and join a seminar on Shakespeare in the former Soviet Union; and extending my trip from London to Kiev was not overly expensive. So I began to make plans, although not until after I completed my trip did I understand that I'd been able to manage the pilgrimage only by the most incredible luck.

Several months earlier, on a trip to the Galapagos Islands, I met a fascinating and generous man who was vice president for quality control for Coca Cola worldwide. Alex became interested in my Ukraine plans and followed my adventures. When I arrived in Kiev, I found that Coca Cola of Kiev was supplying a driver and van for me. Every time I arrived by airplane or train, I was met by the smiling Coke man and his Ford Ranger 4 x 4. Air conditioned! Never was a vehicle more welcome. And there was always a can of Coke (albeit warm) waiting for me in the back seat.

Alex also provided the name of the woman in Ukraine who made my trip possible. Dr. Bronislava Vlasneva was a Deputy Minister of Health responsible for sanitary inspections and the prevention and treatment of communicable diseases in Ukraine. She used the power of her office to convert my dreams into reality. She arranged for a woman in the Ministry of Health, Zhanna Tsenilova, to be my interpreter. Zhanna was a graduate of Kiev University in English philology and literature who was taking her vacation in August and wanted to make some extra money. She worked out well as my translator.

On my arrival in Kiev, I was greeted by Zhanna and the Coca Cola driver and taken to my hotel. The next afternoon I had lunch with Dr. Vlasneva (she wanted me to call her Slava) in the deserted dining room of a major hotel. The only other party was a trio of couples at the next table. The men all sported silk suits and massive gold jewelry, and the ladies wore tight dresses and too much make-up. They drank boisterously, and I

realized that the stereotypes of the Mafia were applicable even in Kiev. Fortunately, that was as close as I came to crime during my stay in Ukraine.

I ate chicken Kiev in Kiev and accompanied it with Ukrainian champagne, an auspicious start to my journey. Later that evening Zhanna and I boarded a train to Kherson, the principal city of the *oblast* (region) where Genichesk was located. The train trip lasted about fifteen hours, and we slept in our compartment. Tea was available, but people brought their own food for the trip.

When our train was met in Kherson by four health officials of the region, Zhanna explained to me that Dr. Vlasneva had told everyone I was a high-ranking official of the World Health Organization (WHO) who must be treated with the highest regard. Our driver took us to breakfast with the local health officials, whose broad smiles revealed the stainless steel crowns typical of the Soviet era. We had the entire dining room of the best hotel in Kherson to ourselves for a massive meal (which I hesitate to call breakfast since it included *shashlik*, or lamb on a skewer).

When I was asked the first question about WHO and its economic impact on Ukraine, Zhanna assured me that she would make up appropriate answers. It was like a Woody Allen movie; I would say anything I wanted to Zhanna, and she would provide meaningful dialogue. We tried to change the subject as quickly as possible; still, Zhanna was a nervous wreck by the end of the meal. Although it was not yet 11 A.M., a bottle of vodka appeared and toasts were made. When one is responding to a toast, it is protocol to finish the small glass in a single gulp. When I hesitated, one of my hosts said, "You don't drink like your ancestors!" It took a while to grow accustomed to the practice, but I did. When a bottle of vodka appeared, it was always finished. We toasted everything imaginable, and I can see why people employ drivers.

Our driver set off for the town of Genichesk, where my father lived his first sixteen years. It was a three-hour trip toward the coast of the Black Sea. I felt a wonderful calm as we approached the first of my goals. (Of course, it might have been the vodka.) In Genichesk we were taken to the chief sanitary doctor of the Genichesk subregion, Valerie Ivanovich. While Valerie Ivanovich was anxious to please the Deputy Minister of Health, he (Valerie is a man's name in Russian) was also, I believe, genuinely touched by my story. He personally arranged much of my stay in Genichesk. Rather than have us stay in the town where he felt the hotel to be unworthy, he arranged for us to stay in a "rest home" (a better term

than “resort”) on the *Arabatskaya Strelka* (Fortress Arrow), the narrow strip of land that connects Genichesk with the Crimea.

The area was considered beautiful and attracted vacationers from Ukraine and Belarus, but it meant a thirty-minute, twelve-mile drive over a sand road each time we traveled to and from the town. Our “rest home” was a series of two-story buildings housing families of workers on vacation. No American had ever visited (although I was told that there had once been a Pole and a Rumanian). We were fed all of our meals in a special dining room, often with the directors of the “resort” (and the inevitable vodka toasts), for the trifling price of about two dollars a day. Once we were settled into our rooms, I told Zhanna that I would see her for dinner. I then put on my bathing suit and sandals and headed for the water. At last I could swim in the Sea of Azov, the small arm of the Black Sea where my father had frolicked as a child and where my grandfather had drowned seventy years before.

Genichesk is a town of about fifteen thousand. It had been, at the turn of the century, a prominent port, but it now has no real importance. It is very poor but representative of similar size towns throughout the country. Although it had been occupied by the Nazis, much of the town remains as it was when my father lived there. (The joke in Kherson was that when the party official who had been in charge of Genichesk for forty years retired, he was congratulated for returning the town *exactly* as he had received it.) The first guide we were given provided the usual history, but she was not a native, nor did she know much about the Jews of the town.

Then we found Vitali Mikailovich, a young physician who had become the informal town historian with special interest in the Jews of Genichesk since his sister had married one. Vitali provided photographs of Genichesk at the turn of the century, including a fascinating picture of the class of students at the gymnasium around 1915, just at the time my father might have been in such a class. I wish I could say I definitely recognized him in the picture, but I didn't. He probably attended a Talmud Torah school instead.

Vitali took us on a tour of old Genichesk. When I explained that my grandmother, Klara Yompolska, had died while nursing others during the typhus epidemic of 1920–21, he took me to the building where typhus sufferers had been quarantined and thus where my grandmother probably died. I took photos and silently recited the Kaddish. On a happier note, I also saw the movie theater where my father described seeing silent films

projected on a sheet and the old lighthouse that has remained unchanged from the turn of the century. Last, we visited where the synagogue and Jewish school, destroyed by the Nazis along with the Jewish cemetery, had stood. Vitali showed us the only remaining building that had relief decorations of Stars of David. I later learned that the house belonged to a local poet who was half Jewish. She told me that, when the authorities offered to remove the stars, she told them, “No, this is part of our history.”

We then returned to Vitali’s home, shared with his parents, wife, and three children. Considering themselves honored to have a visitor like me, his parents brought out their best samovar and wine. The mother told me how important her Jewish friends had been to her as she was growing up, and the father played a mandolin-like instrument (*domra*) and sang old folk songs. It was a memorable day.

Vitali has yet another talent—he is a fine artist. He showed me watercolors he had made of local sights and scenes, and I bought a watercolor that I cherish of the Genichesk lighthouse. He was reluctant to sell me the painting. “It is like a father losing a child,” he said. I replied, “For me it is a child gaining a father.”

My father had dropped the “burg” from Ginzburg and somehow come up with “Gaines” during the Depression when he was living in Salt Lake City, trying to find work as an upholsterer. I was naturally interested in looking at local records to find references to the Ginzburg and Yompolski families. At the vital records office, the clerk told us that the director was away for the day and that we’d need permission from Kherson to look at records, as well as written assurances that there was no classified material in the records. This was the old Soviet bureaucracy that I had feared. One call to Valerie Ivanovich at the health office, however, and we had an appointment with the head of the Town Council. Within half an hour we were sitting in front of three town officials telling our story. The head of the group granted our request to see the records and wished me success. He gave me a set of Genichesk postcards and a book of poetry on the town. I took a photograph of the group, and one of them said in smiling English, “New York Times.” By the time we returned to the record office, however, it was closed, and we postponed our visit there to the following day.

Our next stop was the local museum, which appeared to be abandoned; but when we walked around to the back, found a door, and entered, we were greeted by Duana Aleksandrovna, the museum’s deputy di-

rector, who offered her help. She showed me more photographs of early Genichesk, then she brought out and examined a document of several pages.

“I may have some news for you, but it is sad news,” she said. She showed me the list of 244 Jews executed north of town by the Nazis in 1941. There was a Ginzburg couple on the list, a husband, age fifty-six, and his wife, age fifty-four. No first names were listed, but the ages would have been right for one of my father’s uncles. Another occasion for the Kaddish. I asked the librarian if anyone else had copied the death records, and she said no. I then explained the project at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, to bring together all the death records of the holocaust, and I asked permission to photograph the records. You must remember that there is no such thing as a copying machine in the whole town. Bravely, she agreed and provided me with the full description of the document from which the list came, so that it could be properly catalogued and acknowledged. The photographs came out, and I sent them to Yad Vashem and to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. This I did for the dead Ginzburgs and the others who died in Genichesk.

The next day I dressed in coat and tie to meet the Director of Vital Records, Svetlana Ivanova. Someone had obviously spoken to her about us because I did not even need to present my letter from the Town Council. She was more than happy to help! She explained that Jewish records had been kept separately from Christian records, and most had been destroyed. She did, however, have the book of births from 1908 to 1920, and she looked at every entry in that book, each written in a florid Yiddish hand as well as in Russian, searching for Ginzburgs and Yompolskis. My dad had been born in 1907 and his sisters were older, so I did not expect to find his birth. We did, however, find the birth records of two of his cousins, Aaron and Aleksandr Ginzburg, born to Boris Lazarovich Ginsburg and Haya Sara Aronovna Golshtein. I had been told that my great-grandfather had been named Lazar; these records confirmed the name and showed Boris Lazarovich to have come from Mistislavl in the Mogilyev region of what is now Belarus. It seems logical that this is the area from which the Ginzburg family came to Genichesk. We also found some other Ginzburg births, probably part of an extended family.

Svetlana Ivanova was not satisfied, however, simply to look in records. Knowing, as she did, everyone in town, she was determined to find someone who had known my family. She simply left the office and the

line of people waiting to see her to take me to meet the elderly of Genichesk. First we walked fifteen minutes to the home of a wonderfully elegant lady, short, with her silver hair in a neat bun, who told me that her home had been sold to her mother by a Ginzburg, perhaps the son of the Ginzburgs who were executed—he had fled to Moscow. The lady took me inside the old house that she kept just as her mother left it, and the two rooms were cool and soothing.

Next we walked to the home of an elderly Jewish lady in the same neighborhood. We called first to see that she was willing to talk with me, then entered the modern house, and were led into a light and airy room. A wrinkled old lady with piercing black eyes and virtually no teeth was supporting herself on a cane. When I came in, she exclaimed, “Oy, Ginzburg,” and started to weep. “I knew your grandfather!” She sank down on the sofa behind her. No documentary film could have provided a finer scene, but I believe that she may have been milking the moment for its emotional effect. When we explained that my grandfather had drowned around 1916, she admitted that she had known the Ginzburgs whose house I had just visited, but she maintained that I bore a family resemblance to them. They may well have been my father’s aunt and uncle or cousins. Perhaps I do look like them. It’s nice to think so. We talked about the Jews of Genichesk and the hardships of the war. She had been sent away to a concentration camp for three years and still receives reparations from the Germans. When she returned, she became a schoolteacher and had been Svetlana’s teacher. Now, one of her own grown sons was planning to emigrate to Israel with his family as soon as the paperwork came through. She marveled that I was living in the United States and that I had come to Genichesk: “We Jews are everywhere.”

We visited yet another elderly woman, but we had no more success. We left a Russian translation of the information I have on my father’s family with Svetlana Ivanova, who promised to continue to look in the records.

Virtually everyone I met in Genichesk was moved by my story and anxious to help me in any way. The editor of the local newspaper asked to interview me for an article, and I agreed since someone reading about me might have some information. I asked the editor how many Americans had visited Genichesk. “You are the first since the first World War,” he said. I left an extra passport picture for an illustration. Vitali also promised to tell my story in a television interview, and I wrote my reactions to

Genichesk for publication in the local literary magazine. I have since spoken to Vitali via telephone and translator, but I heard no more about those publications. I did, however, receive a copy of his book about Genichesk with a lovely inscription.

People in Genichesk also told me their stories. Sofia Vladimirovna, the poet laureate of Genichesk whose house has the Stars of David, had a Jewish mother and a Ukrainian father. She and her brother had been passed through the window to neighbors before the Nazis came. Her father had been out of town when the order to round up the Jews was issued. He returned and joined his wife when the Germans led her away. The Germans told him he was free to go, but he said he would stay. They shot him with his wife. Sofia Vladimirovna begged me to find a publisher for her story, but, unfortunately, her story is not at all unique and has been told by others.

I did not find any living Ginzburgs or Yompolskis, but I did find traces of them and saw a glimpse of their world. I was able to confirm the few stories that I remember my father telling me. The strangest was that his father could dive into the sea and come to the surface holding a fish. You can imagine the sense of wonder and pride in a youngster with such a magical father. "It is an old trick," said Mikail Averyanovich, Vitali's elderly father. Apparently a variety of fish called "bychok" could be picked up out of crevices or off the ocean floor at low tide. These details made my father's youth come alive to me.

When my father used to doodle by the telephone, he always wrote some Russian characters that he explained were the beginning of a letter that he never wrote to his family in Russia. I tried to deliver that letter.

My pilgrimage, however, was not yet complete. My mother's mother had also emigrated from Russia, so, after my week in Genichesk, I traveled by train—on an especially filthy, decrepit specimen—the nineteen hours back to Kiev. There I arranged for the next part of my journey, a visit to Vinnitsa, the *oblast's* principal city, population 400,000, from which Hasa-Bina Ochokoffska, my maternal grandmother, was born in May 1889. She departed for the United States with her two brothers in 1907. The drive took more than four hours, and once there we were housed at the sanitary medicine guesthouse. Again I was the WHO official, but by now I would simply say that my interpreter had answered questions for me so often that I would just let her respond.

People were once again most helpful. The sanitary doctors made in-

quiries, and I was taken to the city's only synagogue, a small house with no outside markings to identify its function. Sabbath services had just concluded, but two officials were still there. They marveled at my presence and told me of their financial woes. The town's Talmud Torah school was led by an American rabbi (the Chief Rabbi of Kiev was also an American—from Skokie, Illinois), and they wanted me to tell America that there were still Jews in Vinnitsa.

From the synagogue, we went to the Regional Natural History Museum where the deputy director (everyone is a deputy something) gave us a personal tour of the museum. The museum was exceptionally well designed with an impressive amount of information conveyed in Russian and Ukrainian. The director was a very expressive man who clearly loved the opportunity of showing off his museum to an American visitor who had ancestors from the town. Of special interest was the display of photographs and other material from the turn of the century, including several pictures of Alexander Street where my grandmother had lived. Also moving was the section on the Nazi occupation and the Stalinist purges. Hundreds of individual cases were on display to particularize the atrocities. At the end of our visit, the director went to his office and brought back a book on Vinnitsa and a pile of photographs of the old postcards that I had been admiring earlier. He wanted me to have them.

That afternoon we had a strange excursion. After Vinnitsa was occupied, Hitler ordered thousands of slave laborers to build an elaborate system of bunkers outside of the city. After the bunker was finished, he executed the workers to ensure the secret of the location and layout. We drove to that bunker. Most of it is underground and has not been excavated; but over a wide area, outcrops of concrete reinforced with iron bars had been pushed to the surface by explosions below. I found it amazing that the rebar made by Krupp Works was still so strong. I had not been aware of such a Nazi headquarters in Ukraine, but I was told that the direct phone lines to Berlin are still in use. Most bizarre was the swimming pool that was built for the Führer and his mistress Eva Braun. It stands deserted with plants growing in it. I did not know exactly how I felt at this place, but I picked up a piece of brick from the site. It sits next to my piece of the Berlin Wall.

The next day we went to the vital records office. Unlike in Genichesk, one could not go to the shelf and take down the appropriate volume in this office. At the synagogue I had been advised to see the Di-

rector of Genealogical Research, Faina Abramovna. Of Jewish origin herself, she had given a talk at the synagogue about Jewish records. She explained the difficulty of finding records, but she and her assistant assured us that Ochokoffski was an unusual name and that any encounters were likely to be my family. We left all of the information translated into Ukrainian (which is generally spoken in preference to Russian in this part of the country) and paid a search fee. Months later I received a group of documents relating to the Ochokoffski family—birth records, land transfers, and voter lists.

There was one more place to visit, Belilovka, the home of the Chernitskii family, my mother's father's family. We had thought that Belilovka was in the Vinnitsa region, but it was just across the border in the Zhytomir *oblast*. We had, therefore, to drive two hours to Kazatin to pick up the health official from the Zhytomir region to make our way to Belilovka. The Zhytomir health officials also wanted to demonstrate their regard for the Minister of Health.

It was not at all easy to find the turnoff to Belilovka, and there were no signs. However, the officials had done their homework well. Soon we found the turn and came to a bent and rusted metal sign proclaiming the village of Belilovka. Few residents remain. On what passes for the town square stands a two-story wooden Russian Orthodox church painted blue, the only structure of any consequence in sight.

Oldtimers told us there were no more Jews in Belilovka; they had either died or gone to Israel or America. They pointed out where the Jews had lived, where their market and synagogue and school had been. But everything had been destroyed long ago. We were led to the remains of the Jewish cemetery. The stones were overrun with bushes and trees, but the Hebrew lettering was still clear on many. A boy of about eight saw us poking about and volunteered to lead us through the underbrush to more headstones, including ones with the Star of David and one stone with an unusual crocodile-like creature spread out over it. Again it was time for a silent Kaddish.

There was one more melancholy monument to see. We were told that outside of the village was a memorial to the more than eight hundred Jews from Belilovka whom the Nazis had executed. We went looking for the memorial, but the directions we had received were poor, and there were no signs. I must say that my hosts were diligent and wanted me to see this memorial. When it seemed impossible to find, a young man suddenly

appeared in the wood and took us to the place. His mysterious appearance in the middle of nowhere gave the moment a fairy-tale feel. Finally, we found a black obelisk overgrown with plants. On it was an inscription in Yiddish and Russian. The English translation is: "We must never forget these people whom the German fascists murdered September 10, 1941, in the village of Belilovka. Erected by relatives and friends." We were told that in the past on the anniversary of that date, a group of Jews from nearby Berdichev would come to remember the village and tend the monument. It was a sad and somber conclusion to my visit to my grandfather's birthplace.

Genealogical study has many appeals and uses; but when such studies are combined with travels to ancestral villages and homes, the results can be both edifying and moving. My visit to the world of my ancestors was powerfully meaningful for me. Not only did I confirm the early settings of my grandparents' and my father's lives, but in some way I confirmed my own. I walked the streets that my ancestors had walked and smelled the smells my ancestors had smelled. I did not essentially change, and yet I did. For a few days I joined my father and his father and his father's father and swam with them in the Sea of Azov.