

Marcel Drimer
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TRIP TO DROHOBYCZ

My "pilgrimage" to Drohobycz started a few days after the Holocaust Days of Remembrance, my own First Person interview and talks to High Schools students and synagogues about the Holocaust. This turned out to be a kind of preparation for the exhausting, moving, and emotional trip that awaited me.

After 13 days in Israel it was time to begin the most exciting part of our trip. In the late evening of May 31 we met at the Ben Gurion Airport with members of the Drohobycz-Boryslaw group to participate in a "Roots trip Drohobycz, Boryslaw and Vicinity." The plane took off at midnight and landed in the Lviv (Ukraine) airport at 2:30 AM. Our wake up time was 7 AM. I could not sleep, being both excited, and at the same time, anxious, wondering what the next few days would bring. I left Drohobycz in December 1945 as an 11 years old child and was coming back as an 82 years old man.

Our group was not a typical tourist group, and the sightseeing was strictly limited to sights of Jewish suffering. In the group there were four survivors, many children of survivors (second generation), and even some third generation. Milek, the oldest survivor at 87, showed the group the still existing house of his grandparents located near a forest where many Jews were murdered. Yael, the youngest survivor, was born during the war. She was saved by a Polish (or possibly Ukrainian) woman and remembered only her first name: Jadwiga. She hoped to find Jadwiga or some members of her family to thank for saving her, but was not successful. After the war Yael was given to a Jewish couple for adoption and later to an uncle in Israel where she now lives. The other two survivors were my sister Irena and myself.

It rained all day while we walked through the narrow streets of Drohobycz, still familiar to me from my vague memory as well as my reading of Bruno Schultz's* stories of places connected with Jewish life before the war, the Jewish suffering and murder during the Holocaust. Unfortunately, the monuments to the victims did not identify the Jews, the largest group of victims. The sky appeared to be crying the first day, matching our mood. Later, we participated in the opening of an exhibition called "The Holocaust in Drohobycz, Boryslaw and Vicinity" in the Synagogue. Photos of Ania and me were **part of** the exhibition. The synagogue was built in 1726 and was the biggest in Eastern Galicia. Its facade was recently renovated but the inside requires a lot of work. There, with great excitement, we greeted Marya, the great-great-granddaughter of Jan and Zofia Sawinski, who saved my family by hiding us in their small farm. Marya found my name on the Internet and invited all of us to Drohobycz. She was waiting with

her younger brother at the entrance to the synagogue bearing gifts. There was applause when the organizer of the exhibition introduced Marya and she was given a bouquet of flowers. The seemingly reserved young lady appeared touched.

Next day we were invited to talk to Marya and her classmates, teachers, and some people from the town. The University, from which Marya recently graduated, is located in a building erected in the 1920s as a Jewish orphanage. It was one of the best orphanages in Poland. The mother of one of the group members was brought up there. There is still a Star of David above the entrance. Irena and I offered to talk to the students in English or Polish. They chose Polish because the Ukrainian language is similar to Polish, especially in Western Ukraine, which used to be part of Poland until 1939.

Talking about the Holocaust where the atrocities actually took place seemed strange. While talking in the United States, it was about "there", thousands of kilometers from "here". In Drohobycz it was "here"; the ghetto was only a few blocks away, the Sawinski's farm and my grandparents house, where I was born, just a few kilometers away. When I mentioned my grandparent's neighbor who picked up our family photos from the mud after the pogrom, I was told that the neighbor was Mrs. Sawinski's brother. A graduate student, present during the talk, showed me a document from before the war listing donors to a charitable organization with my father's name on it. Irena and I loved and admired our father. It was good to see that in addition to being brave, he had also been a generous and good hearted man.

Marya's professor mentioned that the History department would like to establish a Judaic Studies or Holocaust Studies program. USHMM has a contact and helps the Taras Shevchenko University in Kiev on this subject, and I suggested to contact the Kiev university.

There is a great need to educate the Ukrainian public about national heroes and their treatment of the Jews. The biggest heroes in Ukraine's history were Bogdan Chmielnicki, a 17th century leader of Cossack and peasant uprising against Polish rulers. One of his goals was the eradication of the Jews. He and his bands murdered about 100,000 Jews. The other hero was Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist, a Nazi sympathizer, who helped the Germans fight the Russians and kill both Jews and Poles during World War II. Monuments of these two men are in every city and town, streets, and even car washes are named after them. Some dishes in restaurants are named after them, like the "Chmielnicki Salad" or "Bandera sausage" (!). In order for Ukraine to look objectively at the Holocaust history, it may be better for the Ukrainians to have other heroes.

After the talk at Marya's university we went, with her extended family, to the cemetery where Mrs. Sawinski is buried. We laid flowers on her grave. I had waited for this particular moment for a very, very long time. It was a modest thank you for saving my life. The cemetery is located

on a hill in Mlynki Szkolnikowe, where I was born in my grandparents' house, and **saved at** the Sawinskis farm. Marya's family sung a prayer. I had tears in my eyes and said a quiet Kadish for this brave woman who put her and her family's life in danger to save ours. Visible from the cemetery were the remnants of the oil refinery Galicia, where my grandfather was a foreman. Uncle Bumek Gruber worked there as a butcher and smuggled food to the Sawinski farm where we and other Jews were in hiding.

From the cemetery we were invited for a delicious lunch to Marya's parents' apartment. Extended family and friends attended. One of them was Marya's grandfather who was Sawinskis' grandson and remembered them. We looked at the family photos and listened to stories. We exchanged gifts; they gave us books, albums about Drohobycz, chocolates and vodka, and we gave them a generous gift.

The remaining time we spent with the group traveling by bus and walking on muddy roads to places of mass executions. At the Bronica forest, where eight thousand Jews were murdered, Irena and I remembered our uncle's wife Blimka and their little daughter Liba who had been murdered there. Someone said Kadish, we lit candles, placed an Israeli flag on the memorial and sang Hatikva, the Israeli national anthem. It was indeed heartbreaking. This ritual was repeated at several other places. We heard stories of mass murder as well as individual miraculous survival. One member told a story of her ten-year-old cousin, who fell into the trench that was a mass grave. At night this child was able to get out from under the dead bodies and survived. Another person eulogized his little sister while standing at the station from where, a long time ago, she was taken to Belzec extermination camp. We all cried.

We also visited three cemeteries of which one became a bus station. Another was a housing development, where only small plaques indicated that they were once Jewish cemeteries. The third one was overgrown with grass and wild bushes. The last burial there had been in 1970. Several former synagogues had been converted to churches with a Star of David above the entrance and mezuzahs on the door frames. I mourn the loss of a rich Jewish cultural and religious community that will never come back.

It was an unforgettable trip; I will always remember the loving reception of friends and family in Israel, the places of death and destruction of my family and fellow Jews in Drohobycz. But most of all I will remember the emotional meeting with Marya whose great-great grandparents allow me to live this good life.

* **Bruno Schulz** (July 12, 1892 – November 19, 1942) was a Polish writer, [fine artist](#), [literary critic](#) and [art teacher](#) born in Drohobycz to Jewish parents. He is regarded as one of the great [Polish-language](#) prose stylists of the 20th century. His prose is translated into many languages. Both the Poles and the Ukrainians claim him as theirs.



Marya Vurlovska



Drohobycz Synagogue



Marya's family and guests



Mrs Sawinskis grave



Bronica forest memorial