Overview of locations.

This map shows the general location of my trip, which was southeastern Poland and adjacent areas of Ukraine. Three areas of attention are numbered in the order we visited them.

Area 1: Western Ukraine towns and villages, including Dobromil, Khyriv, Staryi Sambir, and Nanczulka Mala. These are all associated with my Reisner ancestors (my father’s mother’s family).

Area 2: The Polish city of Rzeszow and villages of Lezajsk and Przeworsk. Rzeszow also relates to the Reisners; the two villages are connected to my sister-in-law’s ancestors.

Area 3: The Polish village of Jodlowa and the slightly larger town of Biecz (Beitch in Yiddish), both associated with my Maurer ancestors.

The highlights of the trip occurred in four places: Dobromil, Nanczulka Mala, Jodlowa, and Biecz, so I will limit my account to those and mention the other places briefly, if at all.

I will begin with the final destination, Biecz, which was responsible for the timing of the trip. Tuesday, Aug 21, was the 70th anniversary, on the Jewish Calendar, of the day the Jewish community in Biecz was destroyed. One of the few survivors of Biecz, Ira Goetz (the one without the beard in the picture), organized a commemoration. My family has known Ira for many years. It was as much to support him as for any other reason that I wanted to make the trip. To be clear, my direct ancestors had long since emigrated to America by WWII, or were already dead; the only family members from Biecz caught up in the Holocaust, that we know of, were a sister of my grandfather, and her
son. Of course, any loss under those circumstances was tragedy enough.

The gathering in Biecz included myself and 7 other Maurers: both of my brothers and their wives, two of my nephews and my niece. There were a dozen others, not related to me, but connected to Biecz. They came from across the globe: US, France, Israel, and even one from Australia. Our language skills got a workout! Here we all are at dinner on the eve of the commemoration.

That’s my older brother Steve with his chin in his hand. My younger brother’s wife, Eileen, is in the foreground.

The commemoration took place at two sites: First, some brief speeches at a school auditorium, and then the continuation at the remains of the Jewish cemetery. Local people (non Jews, obviously), were invited to the commemoration, and perhaps 50 or so came. This show of solidarity was much appreciated. Ira’s remarks were most memorable:

In Memory of our Martyrs of Nazi Cruelty in Biecz and Elsewhere (Ira Goetz)

With deep sorrow in our hearts we are gathered today to commemorate our loved ones; to honor the memories of our sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, children and grandparents, relatives, friends, and neighbors, of all those who perished, perished most horribly at the hands of the sadistic nazi barbarians in the frightful years 1939-1945.
In those years, such a short time ago in memory, six million innocent people of all ages, from the youngest infants to people of most advanced age, were turned into ashes. Six million human beings were destroyed simply because they were born Jews - Juden. Six million souls were immolated on the altar of man’s inhumanity. And among the six million were those closest to us - our families, our own flesh and blood.

The most horrible of those years was the year nineteen-hundred and forty-two. A year that shall go down in history as the lowest point in man’s degradation; as the nadir of nazi bestiality. In that mournful year Beitich, like practically all other Jewish communities in Poland, ceased to exist.

All we are left with are memories, memories of caring families, smiling children striving to learn and to grow into adulthood, of doting parents and loving grandparents - a myriad of memories of our way of life with its joys and hardships, hopes and promises. Gone, gone is all that, gone are the people dear to us - destroyed, shot, starved, gassed, burned, often buried while still alive!

A cruel and wicked hand pressed the life out of our people and swept them into the flames. From the first day of the German occupation of Beitich on September 7, 1939, we were systematically and mercilessly forced into a horrible abyss. First it was forced labor, then the crowding into an ever smaller area of the town, the establishment of a Ghetto, the confiscation of property, and the removal of the strong to labor camps. And always with sadistic abuse. Still we persevered. We were brave in our passive resistance. We had leaders who sacrificed themselves in our struggle for survival. But we could do nothing against the guns and the gas used against us by the bloodthirsty Germans and their cohorts. We could do nothing to save ourselves or our loved ones. The pitifully few, like myself, who escaped the ring of fire, did so through mere chance and the occasional help of a few gentiles of conscience and good will. [Here, Ira departed from his prepared remarks to acknowledge and thank a couple of Poles in attendance who were family members related to some of these heroic Poles, including one who was killed when he was betrayed. The presence of these individuals was deeply affecting, as I am sure you can imagine.]

Before the 14th day of August 1942, the day that marks the last day of the existence of our community, about 80 of our people were shot in Beitich and many more in the surrounding villages. They were shot in the streets, in the homes, on the cemetery, and in the sickbed. These shootings took place in ways too horrible to relate, and with each murder those of us who were still alive took on more and more of the ghostly character of people constantly faced with wanton death.

Then came the final day! At three o’clock in the morning of Friday, August 14, 1942, Beitich was surrounded by hordes of Gestapo and Ukranian auxiliaries. With shouts, kicks and shots our people were driven out of their beds and into the market place. There, crowded into a small area, most only half-dressed, the 1400 people then in the Ghetto experienced indescribable terror as the Germans and their accomplices robbed and murdered. Those who tried to run away suffered death from a bullet or rifle butt. Only a very few managed to escape. The rest were kept two days in a barrack a short distance from the cemetery and were then shipped in sealed cattle cars to their extermination in the lime pits or gas chambers of Belzec. Many died along the way; many more, especially the children, the sick and the elderly were massacred in the town square and on the streets and were carried by carts to the mass graves on the cemetery. No one knows precisely how
many victims occupy these mass graves, though it is generally believed that between 250 and 400 found their troubled rest there.

These are some of the memories which refuse to leave our minds. We cannot forget Beitch and Belzec. Nor can we forget Prokocim, Płaszów, Skarzysko-Kamienna, Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald, Schlieben, Mauthausen, and all the other camps in which our people, our Beitcher too, were worked, starved, tortured, and gassed to death. We cannot forget their sufferings before they breathed their last breath. We cannot forget the countless atrocities we were made to experience daily under the nazis. All these atrocities are branded deep in our hearts and minds. We cannot forget that all but a handful of our loved ones died unspeakably maltreated in the hellish world of the nazi system. No, we cannot forget and we cannot forgive.

Yet, let us hope that someday the conscience of mankind, hardly aroused in those years of the holocaust, will be mercifully awakened, and that the brutal and sadistic murder of six million innocent people, among them the Jewish community of Beitch, will at the very least stave off further disaster designed by many against man. In this hope lies the only sliver of solace we can find in the martyrdom of our loved ones. We are gathered here to honor their memory. We mourn for all who were taken from us. We grieve over our great and irreplaceable loss.

I delivered essentially the same speech on Sunday afternoon, September 20, 1953, to an assembled gathering at the Beitcher Society Memorial Service in New York. Regrettably, almost 60 years later the world has not yet drawn the proper moral lesson from the human sacrifices in the Holocaust.

With that, the formal portion of the commemoration ended and most of those in attendance proceeded to walk up a steep hillside to reach the Jewish Cemetery. That’s the deputy mayor in the suit. Behind his left shoulder are my nephew Leon (red shirt) and my brother Ed (blue shirt). The man carrying the camera equipment in front is Samuel Muller from Paris. His great-grandmother, Hinda Schnepps, was one of the 80 murder victims Ira referred to in his remarks.
As you may know, one of the humiliations imposed by the Nazis was the desecration and destruction of Jewish cemeteries. The fate of the Beitch cemetery, which almost certainly included the grave of my great grandmother, who died before the war, was typical. Every single monument was removed; only one has ever been found. The rest may have been used as common paving stones or, more likely, were just smashed into gravel. All that can be seen in the cemetery today is a monument to all the Beitcher dead, and six enormous concrete slabs covering the mass graves (left picture: plus a single grave of a woman who was reburied there after the war). Some of the Beitcher descendants had brought Yarzheit candles — traditionally lit on the anniversary of a death — and some of the Poles had brought their own traditional candles. We lit them all (right picture) and were led in prayers for the dead by the Chasidic Rabbi who joined us.

Also while at the cemetery, Ira recited the family names of the 80 victims (prior to the final liquidation) and spoke briefly about each of them. Some of them were among his closest boyhood friends; others he had not known or knew less closely so he had less to say. The overall effect was to bring these people back to life, at least for a few moments, and focus our attention on their individual stories, along with the collective fate of the Jews.

And then it was over and time for lunch. While the only decent food in town was at the hotel, no one seemed to want to be in a hotel at that point. Instead, we all drifted to the square, or rynek in Polish, in the center of town. The very space where Jews had been rounded up, where Ira’s grandmother once operated a shop, where my great grandfather Menasche took in tailoring over a century ago, is now a spacious, well maintained plaza where one can sit and enjoy a snack (pierogies, fries, or the Polish version of hamburger, literally a slab of ham on a bun). So on a warm and beautiful day that made it impossible to be somber for long, that’s exactly what we 20 Beitchers did. Sam Muller, whose English was not good enough to converse with, used Google Translate to communicate — he would type the French into his phone, then haltingly read the English which popped up. “This,” he said, spreading his arms to indicate the presence of our entire group, “proves the Nazis did not win. Today, we are not many families, but one family.” No one could disagree with him.

Dobromil (accent on the second syllable). The other destinations on my trip had to do with my family ancestry, rather than with the Holocaust — although evidence of the Holocaust was everywhere and impossible to escape. Dobromil, a town in extreme western Ukraine, was associated
with Nusim Reisner, my father’s mother’s father. As best we know, Dobromil was Nusim’s residence during his first marriage, up to the time my grandmother was born. Nusim’s first wife died in connection with my grandmother’s birth. We know Nusim remarried and probably left Dobromil. According to one theory, he moved to Khyriv. At some point he was in Nanczulka Mala; this could have been his residence during his second marriage, or it was his boyhood home. We just don’t know.

These towns are all located perhaps 50 miles southwest of Lviv (where we were staying), which turned out to be a 2+ hour drive each way. Feel free to ask me about driving in Ukraine, but I won’t take up space here. Luckily, we had hired a guide and a driver so we didn’t have to deal with it.

In Dobromil, we had my father, Ely’s report of his 1987 visit as our “Rick Steves” guide. We saw what he saw, plus more. Ely had not found a synagogue, but Alex, the guide, knew that the site of the synagogue was now occupied by a movie house. We found it right away as it was on the main square. It no longer functions as a movie house (everyone has satellite TV these days). Alex tried to find out if there was anything to see inside. He spoke to a man who happened to emerge from the building, who turned out to be the caretaker. There was nothing inside, but he did confirm that the structure was built on the ruins of the destroyed synagogue, which had been over 200 years old when the Germans demolished it.

This fellow turned out to be a big help in other ways. He knew the location of the house once occupied by the Gestapo chief, who had defiled Jewish burials by paving the driveway with grave stones (a common Nazi humiliation, as mentioned in the Biecz section). He led us there, and we saw the driveway and met the current owner of the house. He had been there since 1984 and had some recollection of Ely’s visit. It’s sad of course, to see the gravestones this way, but I also felt for the owner who doesn’t like living with these stones, but has no resources to do anything about it. He said visitors come and go, and talk of doing something, but nothing every happens. Our visit may be another such, but I’m hoping we might be able to do something to get the stones removed and properly memorialized. Anyway, we’ll see. The picture on the left is the Gestapo chief’s former house. On the right, part of the courtyard of the house. All the “flagstones” you see are actually grave monuments. Alex is on the right; the fellow on the phone was the movie house caretaker. The current owner of the house is half hidden behind him. My brother Ed is in the distance.
Then, an unexpected development - our local man knew of a professor from Lviv University who was in town who, he thought, might know more of the history. We were taken to his house, where Prof. Michael Kril (left in this picture; my brother Steve and Alex, the guide, are the others) introduced himself. He was a 50-something whose (deceased) parents were born and lived in Dobromil. He was there to help tend to his parents property. Turns out he has written a 1200 page book on the history of Dobromil and the surroundings which is in galley proofs, so he had a lot of information in his head (all his papers were in Lviv). He indicated the existence of records in Lviv that he has reviewed, etc. Lots of interesting and exciting stuff that we shall have to follow up in due course. He warned us that the book would be expensive, but when we learned the actual price (equivalent to $15), we had to advise him of the reality of book prices in the US! I have to say that our guide, Alex, was especially skilled at questioning the locals and unearthing gems like prof. Kril.

We also visited the cemetery hill where the Jewish cemetery once stood. No trace of it now, thanks to Nazis, but pretty views into town (picture at left) and off to the distant farmlands and hills. Nusim’s first wife undoubtedly buried here, somewhere.

Once, Dobromil had been majority Jewish. There were still traces of those days. We saw a couple of houses on the main square that had wrought iron balconies with stars of David in them (probably wealthy Jewish owners), as well as the house that was either the rabbi’s house or the Jewish community house, with the letters JH (German for Jewish House) on the pediment and the front doors. I came away with, I thought, a pretty good sense of the town.
Nanczulka Mala (NM) - In the birth records of two of Nusim’s children from his second marriage, this place is listed as the "mothertown" and "fathertown". I’m not sure if those entries mean the town where the parents were born, or where they were living when the child was born. My first inclination was towards the latter, but once I saw the remoteness of the place, I found it hard to imagine what would have drawn him to this place after living in Dobromil, the big city by comparison. In any event, the place is not on current maps, nor does Google recognize it. I had to look at prewar maps to find it and locate it relative to present landmarks. I imagined that whatever once existed was gone and that we might find nothing there today. To my surprise, however, the locals still used the name and were able to guide us to the place (it is now officially absorbed into a larger unit called Voloshnya). NM was at the remote end of a pretty valley along a stream, 15 or 20 miles south and west from Staryi Sambir. The stream is actually among the headwaters of the Dniester River, which runs about 850 miles through Ukraine and Moldova to the Black Sea. The valley was horsey country and seemed to us prosperous on the whole, but our guide scoffed at this and asserted that this was the most depressed region in the country. The people owned horses because they could not afford a car. After asking around to pin down the location of NM, we found ourselves in the company of a family of farmers named Bydnik, horse and bull breeders, who also ran the tiniest of stores out of a log cabin. They were gracious and invited/insisted that we sit a while on their porch around two large tree stumps that served as tables, while they plied us with coffee, cookies, and cognac. Those of you who have seen me drink coffee or cognac can appreciate how my social skills were tested! We talked for an hour or so, with Alex translating. Although they were too young to have known any Jews, they had stories told by their parents. In their yard we could see the outline of the foundation of a one room building that, they said, had once been the synagogue and later a school where the man had gone to school. Nusim must have been in this very spot many times.

The Bydniks’ log cabin store (left). Sitting on the Bydnik’s porch (before the arrival of treats).
Jodlowa – To the best of our understanding, this town was the origin of the Maurers before they dispersed to other areas such as Biecz, Gorlice, Tarnow, America, and perhaps elsewhere. We believe that my father’s father’s parents, Shimon Maurer and his wife Perl, lived and died here (well before WWII), and would have been buried in the local Jewish cemetery. Thus it was of great interest to read that the cemetery was not disturbed by the Nazis, although after the war, sadly, it was occasionally vandalized by local Poles. Gradually, the site was overgrown by forest, which, ironically, largely protected it from further destruction. I was very interested in being taken to
this cemetery. In my attempts to locate someone who could lead us there, I eventually came upon a fellow, a Polish gentile named Zbigniew (Zbyszek) Nizinski, who ended up doing a lot more than that. Zbyszek has made it his life’s work to preserve and restore evidence of Jewish life in Poland. For the most part, that means locating and researching the unmarked burial pits of Jews killed by Nazis (i.e. mass murder sites) and turning them into proper memorials under Rabbinical supervision. Equally, it includes the preservation of Jewish cemeteries. When he learned of the Jodlowa cemetery and its overgrown condition, he contacted the Jodlowa mayor and enlisted his help (i.e., city workers he donated) to begin the cleanup and restoration. In the few weeks between our initial contact and our arrival in Jodlowa, more than half the cemetery has been cleared of weeds and other growth, and about 100 gravestones were exposed. Almost nothing is standing up; the vandals knocked over what they couldn’t carry off. The work is continuing, and Zbyszek has plans, in the fall, to bring out some Jewish studies students to turn over the stones that are now face down and make a record of all the inscriptions. In our own examination, we did not find any Maurer ancestors, but I remain hopeful that as the work continues, something may yet turn up.

Nizinski has a foundation through which he tries to fund his work. If you have any interest in looking at his fascinating (mostly) English language web site, it is here:
I think he is a most remarkable and unusual person. In addition to carrying out the cleanup, he also drove 5 hours (each way, from Warsaw) with his English-speaking daughter, just to meet us in Jodlowa for a few hours and show us the cemetery and anything else we wanted to see. At his insistence, we met with the town Mayor, who was quite friendly and plied us with cookies and coffee or juice. The discussion was soon joined by a priest who was knowledgeable about the history of the town and, of course, was in the process of writing a book. He, too, claimed to have located vital records, which we have never found for Jodlowa, so we have some following up to do with him as well.

Clockwise: me, mayor Robert Mucha, niece Carolyn, Nizinski, brother Steve, nephews Aaron and Leon. All seated in the mayor’s office.
View towards Jodlowa from the trail that leads to the cemetery. In its day, there would have been much less tree growth. Mostly likely, there would have been a similar vista into the town from the cemetery itself. Today, though, the cemetery is surrounded by tall trees.

Nephew Aaron examines a grave stone while mayor Mucha looks on.