

October 13, 2009

Anatoly Gritsenko for President

by Richard Fellman

Uzhhorod National University dismissed all politology (political science) and related classes this afternoon (October 13, 2009) so students and faculty could listen to Anatoly Gritsenko, a candidate for president of Ukraine in the January 17th election.

The experts claim that Gritsenko is not among the favorites and not likely to win, but he is the favorite of the nation's intellectuals, and thus the same experts predict he will not be one of the two in the eventual run-off election which will be held in mid-February.

Currently he is chairman of the National Security Commission of Ukraine and thus a Deputy in the nation's parliament, the Rada. As a member of what was called the Nasha Ukraina party, meaning "Our Ukraine," he helped that party merge into the party now called "Our Ukraine, National Self Defense."

In his present capacity, he traveled to the United States last winter, spoke at the Air University in Montgomery, Alabama, gave a lecture at Harvard, visited Offutt Air Force Base in Bellevue to study the strategic and combined forces stationed there..."oh, but the weather was cold in Omaha," he told me, and then went on to Hawaii..."it was really nice and warm there," and he smiled...to study the defense in the Pacific.

In his nearly hour long talk, where he was never interrupted by applause, as is the custom in this country, he explained that Ukraine is a nation of 46 million people, with a total of 800,000 in national defense forces. Of those, he said, only approximately 200,000 are actually in military service. The balance, he argued, were in some form of internal security. "We look more like a police state than we should," he said.

He also presented reasons for modifying the years student spend in school, discussed Ukraine's relations with NATO and the European Union, both of which he favors and wants expanded, and the question of nuclear arms. "There are three good reasons we do not need nuclear arms," he argued. "They are expensive, you can't use them, and they don't prevent war. Look at Israel," he pointed out. "They have nuclear weapons, and they've had constant warfare."

To this American observer, the presentation seemed more like a college lecture, which is Gritsenko's background (he taught university from 1984 to 1994 in Ukraine and speaks English easily) than a political rally. He stood behind the speaker's podium the entire 50 minutes plus the additional half hour of questions and answers, there was neither applause nor any other response from the audience (which I was told is normal), and he had no visible staff, no banners or posters, in fact, no signs of a political campaign at all.

Maybe this was due to his lack of campaign funds, maybe his style, or maybe it is just Ukraine; however, other presidential candidates, especially the current prime minister who many think is now in second place but will be leading by the time of the election, Yulia Timoshenko, the strong lady with the dominant blonde braid in her hair. She, the experts argue, can stir the crowds up and forcefully state her positions in a way that tends to unite this nation of two differing halves, east and west, the one favoring the Russian language and softer relations with the dominant nation to the east, and the other, in the west, favoring the Ukrainian language and stronger relations with the west.

The coming election is the first presidential contest since the Orange Revolution reversed the election just before that event. But after two successful and honest parliamentary elections, this presidential contest has begun in earnest.

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October 2009

Babi Yar
by Richard Fellman

Today the Metro in Kyiv runs right to Babi Yar, and past it, on one of the three major subway routes in this capital of Ukraine, but in 1941 Babi Yar was on the outskirts of this city of some 150,000 Jews. Local lore claims that Jews constituted some 20 per cent of the city's total population.

By late summer 1941, the German army had conquered the western half of Ukraine, nearly two-thirds of the Jews of Kyiv ("Kiev" in Russian) had left the city and moved to the east, across the Ural mountains and to the safety of the industrial area of the Soviet Union where war goods and materiel were being produced, and the advancing German war machine captured and occupied Kyiv.

In September the Nazis issued orders directing all Jews to take their personal possessions and gather at Babi Yar, then as now a heavily wooded park some three or four blocks square, with walking paths and benches and play areas and most importantly a large and deep ravine running in a "v" shaped diagonal through its length. The sides of the ravine were then, as now, steep. The long ledge like crest of each side of the ravine formed a sharp drop to a depth of some thirty or forty feet.

In the highly efficient manner of the Nazi military, the forces known as Einsatzgruppen, the units of the German Army charged with the responsibility of the mobile killing forces which decimated the Jewish population of Eastern Europe but was nearly unknown in the west, all before the end of 1942 and the creation of the "more efficient" killing operations of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and the like, assembled a roster of the Jews at Babi Yar, so today we know that exactly 33,771 men, women and children were killed that 29th day of September in 1941.

They were told to bring with them their personal possessions, which were later confiscated. They were ordered to form a line immediately in front of the ravine.

And then they were shot. Men, women, and children. Gunned down by the Nazi firing squad. Bodies fell backwards into the ravine.

One wonders today what Ukrainians in the neighborhood thought then.

Later, others were killed at the same place in the same manner; dissidents, Communists, Romas or Gypsies, and then more Jews.

Today Babi Yar is quiet again. Mothers stroll with baby carriages. Elderly men and women sit on the benches quietly visiting. Young men and women do what young men and women do in every park wherever it might be in the world, and busy men and women dash through the park after work from the bustling street with the Metro stop through the trails in the park to the many large apartment buildings which stretch block after block in the Soviet style. They are derisively called Kruschevkas after the USSR premier who led the creation of housing for the masses. These five to ten story two to three block long buildings are today falling apart, crowded, and as cramped to live in as they were when they were designed. Few who pass by seem to give much attention to the deep ravine, its haunting memory, or the monuments memorializing the Nazi horrors.

Developers recently asked the city of Kyiv for a permit to build a motel at Babi Yar, in anticipation of an international sports tournament coming to Kyiv in a few years. The City Council approved the permit. Opposition formed around the world, and Jewish groups protested. The mayor vetoed the council's approval. No motel will be built.

Two massive monuments stand today in Babi Yar.

One, a menorah, a seven branched candelabra, stands at one side of Babi Yar, and the other, a massive statue depicting those who were killed, with a mother holding a child in her arms at the top, stands at the vortex of the deep ravine, with inscriptions in three languages, including Hebrew, at its base, and long rows of steps, each tilted and at an angle, make it difficult to climb to the top from the foot of the monument.

Visitors placed bundles of flowers here and there about the monument, and Jews followed an ancient custom and placed small rocks along the steps leading to the top, giving proof that those who died have not been forgotten by those who visit Babi Yar.

We stood in silence. I began to silently whisper the memorial prayer, the Kaddish, but even silently I found myself shocked and unable to complete the first sentence.

Dusk came on. We walked to the street. Among the crowds we found a cab. We drove away and the ravine remained, graves to the innocents who might have been us.

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October 2009

Impressions of Ukraine

by Richard Fellman

Sunday afternoon. Start of second week in October, eighth week in Ukraine. Raining. Raining all day, light but steady. Plans to take bus across Slovakian border to Sobrance dropped. Too wet.

Cats scampering across rolled metal roof on garages behind flat. Three or four cats. Arm hanging out third floor window throwing food to cats on the tin roof. Cats grab food, run to window sills above garage level, out of rain, with food. Largest cat of the group leaves shelter on other side of room, crosses over searching for something himself. Finds nothing. Returns to shelter.

Even cats stay home this Sunday in Ukraine.

But there is more. I recall visiting a Jewish museum in Paris about World War II and reading reports sent by a Nazi commander in Ukraine to his commanding officer in Berlin explaining that it "was October and the rainy season here. Not able to kill anyone today." Signed with his name and rank, but in place of "sincerely" or "respectfully" it said "Heil Hitler." The weather hasn't changed much. I suppose there were cats on tin roofs in 1941 just as there are in 2009. I wonder what the Ukrainians thought about in 1941 when it rained and the Nazis halted the killings for a day and until the weather cleared, which the commanders report I was reading in Paris said took place the next day. Shootings began again, and the next report gave the number of those executed. That was long ago.

So far Ukraine has been sunny. And Ukrainians, pleasant and nice.

Young women dress beautifully and provocatively, much more so than in the States and showing much more skin. They seem shapely. I wonder what happens to them between their youth and their years as matrons. Doubtlessly, babies and beer.

Beer seems to be a soft drink in Ukraine. High school kids drink it everywhere with a straw. Men drink it everywhere, often with vodka. Some men remain thin, and others show the effect of the beer without the benefits of pregnancy.

Everyone smokes. Everywhere. Does cancer not affect Ukrainians, or have the tobacco companies had freedom to do as they please? I'd guess the latter.

Dogs and cats run about here, not really wild but with no obvious owner. No licenses around their necks. All about the same size. Mixed breeds of every variety, but few if any purebreds as we have in the U.S. Same with cats. Each seem to have their own territory. They all take naps in the sun on a warm day. Street people can be seen feeding the dogs and cats, sometimes even through fences where the person themselves dare not enter.

Children are wonderful. Beautifully dressed. Gorgeous baby carriages. All out walking on every day but today. Told that every mother gets \$1,000 in Ukrainian money, of course, when a baby is born, and most go out and buy a new baby carriage from among the countless varieties in stores for infants and children and the discount houses.

Haircuts are cheap. Cuts are close. Mine hasn't been this short since Ft. Benning, Georgia, many years ago. And she handed the tip back to me. Tipping is out of style, almost forbidden. Everyone works for a salary. Carry over, I think, from Soviet days.

Cars are new and clean, with many older Lada still in service as taxis. Newer Ladas look pretty good. Old models, from the USSR, are tough and rough. German brands, especially Mercedes and Volkswagen, and Audi a distant third, are everywhere. Big, big black Mercedes. Wealth here doesn't hide. Every possible brand from Asia, both Japan and Korea, here in plentitude. So are French, Italian, Czech, Swedish and a few American cars, especially Chevy and Ford. Saw a Chrysler 300 last night. Seemed big and somewhat out of place.

Thursday afternoon at five is the English club in the town's library where everyone speaks English. Bev and I do especially well here. Like the Yiddish club at the JCC in Omaha and in almost every apartment complex in Florida. Its like a "lanslite" club only "they" are 'us.'

Groceries. First we go to the "green-grocer" for produce, bread, and cheese. Not quite an open air market, since it's in a closed building, but there are rows and rows of stalls, each with a peddler selling what he favors. A little bit of bargaining over price usually works.

Some twenty minutes on foot away is the grocery store with just about everything an American supermarket has, but the deli includes kasha, beet borscht, and the filet of chicken fried in crumbs that is a national favorite here.

Taxis are everywhere. Some arguing before entering gives an American about the same fare a Ukrainian would pay.

It's still raining.

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November 2009

The Map

A few weeks before leaving for Ukraine I pulled an old book down from an upper shelf of my library at home to skim through it and read whatever looked interesting. The book, simply entitled “Khrushchev,” was a biography written in the early 60s about the Prime Minister of the Soviet Union, and I was sure it would have a good deal to say about the Ukraine, since Khrushchev had once served the USSR as the principal Communist Party official in that Republic and had in later years assumed a strong identification with its people and its land.

But I didn’t get in to the book at all, for as I opened it an eight inch long card fell out, the type of card one places in the outer chest pocket of a man’s suit at a large charity dinner, the kind that says “hi, I’m so-and-so” and helps everyone “feel at home,” or so the theory of those cards goes. This one had written on it the name of a man I barely knew, though I did remember him, and I recall the dinner printed on the card, “B’nai B’rith Charity Sports Stag, Omaha” which I had attended annually for many years.

The back of the card, however, was why I saved it; and it was why I had placed it in the Khrushchev book which I must have been reading at the time. And Khrushchev, the Ukraine, and that small card all had a lot in common.

The card was dated February 28, 1962, almost 50 years ago.

And in what I could clearly see was my own handwriting, in the upper corner, the card said “Rough map of USSR---Ukraine—area west of Kiev, drawn by Abe Gendler- 2/28/62—Omaha.”

There, in Abe’s handwriting, was a simple sketch of the central area of western Ukraine, and in the middle of it all, the village of Lechovitz, the village of his birth and early years, and the home of the Fellman family, my own paternal ancestors.

Abe Gendler, A.B. Gendler as he signed it, was born in the late 1890’s in what was then Lechovitz but is now Biligoria, as it has been since the late 1940s when the Soviets renamed it. He came to America a few years before the First World War and, according to the story he told me, lived with Esther and Harry Fellman for a number of months, sleeping on a cot in their kitchen, until he could get himself oriented and settled. Both Abe and Harry came from Lechovitz, and were “lantzman” (sp Yiddish??) so it was natural for them to take care of each other and want to help each other, just as earlier immigrants had given help and received help from those who came at an earlier time and came from the same area in Europe.

Abe served in the U.S. Army in the First World War, married Frieda, and prospered in his business, first a coal yard, then “coal and oil,” then just oil, and ultimately real estate and real estate development with his two sons, each of whom graduated from Yale. His daughter, a Wellesley graduate, married a doctor. In every respect, Abe achieved the American dream.

But he never forgot Lechovitz, and he never lost a strong Lechovitzer accent.

That 1962 evening at the B'nai B'rith stag I recall sitting next to Abe, just by accident, and I began to ask him questions about his childhood and the village of Lechovitz, for my own grandfather had died many years before and I had no chance to ever ask him much, though my father had told me many stories he had heard as a child from his own parents, themselves immigrants from Ukraine. As Abe began telling a few stories...it was a tiny village, the Jews and the Gentiles generally got along well, Harry Fellman's mother ran an inn and tavern...I asked him to tell me exactly where Lechovitz was.

Abe picked up a "name tag" which was randomly left on the table in front of us, and began to sketch a map of Lechovitz and the area around it, and as he did, I recall asking him to place it in relation to the other towns in the vicinity.

And he did. He drew...Lechovitz, in the middle. Warsha, Poland, to the far west. Zerslov (now spelled Iziaslav) about ten miles to the east, and Shepetivka about 20 miles farther east. Zhitomir was off farther east, some 60 miles, and Berdychiv somewhat south, with Kiev off another hundred miles and marked with a hundred thousand population. South and east of Lechovitz was Bilorodka, some fifteen miles. The railroad train was in Sheptivka, according to Abe's sketch, and it took "two days by rail from those small towns to Kiev.

Years went by, from that evening in 1962 when Abe Gendler drew that sketch until my own trip to Ukraine where I was going to teach in Uzzhhorod. I took Abe's sketch with me to Ukraine and arranged for a student at the university who spoke both Ukrainian and Russian, English and a little Hebrew, to drive with me in his car to visit the home village of the Fellman family, Biligoria. We traveled by car from Uzhhorod in Trans-Carpathia, the farthest west one can go in Ukraine, east through the mountains and across the western Ukraine, land much like the mid-west America, land with rich and fertile black soil.

It was late October, 2009, and we drove to Shepitikva, and then took the road from Shepitikva to Lechovitz, the same road Abe Gendler described, the road Harry Fellman must have taken to board the train that took him out of what he called Russia and to America.

As I traveled down the road Abe Gendler had sketched, I held Abe's map in my hand, placed inside a clear plastic envelope, with a detailed standard road map of central west Ukraine neatly folded behind it, so I could flip the two back and forth as we drove.

Abe was off on distances, and sometimes off on spelling. Transliteration from Yiddish to English is not simple, especially when the original is actually in Ukrainian, though Russian was the language of the area when Harry and Abe lived there. So today one deals with the names of towns in four languages, creating constant confusion.

But though Abe was off a bit in distances, and in spelling, he was nearly perfect in his placement of the villages and towns, in their relation to each other, and especially to where the railroad was located, for I drove by the railroad station in Shepitivka, a large station which looks much like rail and air terminals built during the Soviet years all over this large former Soviet republic and in use today, but to the rear and off to one side of today's railroad station sat an old building, built right against the tracks, now used for storage of equipment, which quite obviously was the station of years gone by.

The map I had saved for nearly fifty years, drawn by Abe Gendler, and showing the village of his childhood and that of my own grandfather's childhood, suddenly seemed to have a life of its own, an emotion to it, for it told a story that no one alive today can tell.

November 2009

The Violinist

It's mid-November now, and the days are cloudy and overcast. Most often it rains, light rain, all day, with puddles everywhere.

Almost everyone still carries an umbrella, folded up today, but opened when the drizzle begins again. Except for most of the men. It seems as if it isn't macho for a man to open his umbrella unless a real downpour is taking place. The men's umbrellas are almost always black, and the women's umbrellas are almost always a bright color or pattern.

Most of all, missing from his usual location, is the violinist. I never learned his name because I thought he would always be on the street playing, but then, one day, a few weeks ago, he wasn't there; and he hasn't returned since the weather changed in late October.

People said he once played in a major orchestra, back in the days of the Soviet Union, when many musicians had regular jobs with the many musical groups in the nation, but those days are gone. Today, musicians look for jobs, and it appears he failed to find one.

He always sat on a small stool, next to a building, on one of the streets the city of Uzhhorod closed to all automobile traffic, closing off the old center of the city, just as many of the larger cities we've visited have done, Prague, Bratislav, Lviv, and I'm sure, many others.

The violinist of Uzhhorod usually sat on the same street, on the east side in the morning and on the west side in the afternoon, thus avoiding having direct sunlight in his face. His head was uncovered, and he was bald, with a fringe of gray hair around his round head. He knew Jewish music, and I often thought he should be wearing a kippah. If he had, it would have left a circle of bare skin between the head covering and his hair.

He seemed short, but I didn't really know, for I never saw him standing; and he seemed a bit round, but I never really saw him well enough to verify that, either.

When the weather was warm, as it was when we first came to Uzhhorod in the middle of August, he wore a light summer shirt; and, as the autumn weather turned cooler, I noticed that he began to wear long sleeves, and finally, a sweater.

But his hands were always uncovered. His fingers were short, and they were chubby. I noticed, for he did not have the long fingers often associated with violinists and pianists.

But his fingers moved with speed and ease over the strings, as his left hand slid back and forth down the neck of his violin.

He played by ear. Always. I never saw a single piece of written music in front of him. He had a rather old cd player at his feet, and now and then, between pieces, he would put on reading glasses, carefully look at the index it seemed he had prepared for himself, and choose a series of selections for background to his own playing.

His repertoire seemed limitless. The classics...symphonic, operatic, European or American...Broadway or pop...mention the composer or the title and it was the next piece he played. And he smiled. A broad smile.

At first I did not give him money, but Bev did. I held back and stood in the shadows. Then Bev gave him larger sums, American dollar bills, and these he took and covered up. Eventually, I began to give him gifts, but they were still small; and today I feel sorry I never gave him more.

He's gone now. There is no longer music coming from his spot on the street as people walk by. I have no idea where he is.

Maybe he is at home, here in Uzhhorod, Ukraine. Maybe he went some place where it is warm, to Odessa maybe, or even to Yalta. I hope he did, for if he is there the folks who walk by him will enjoy his music.

I miss him, and in a few weeks, in the middle of December, I'm leaving Uzhhorod for America. I'll probably never see him again. But far more importantly, I'm afraid I'll never hear the violinist of Uzhhorod again.