

We Need Time

In Chernivtsi with Action Reconciliation
by Kate Power



The Ukraine gives us a loud welcome, long before we even reach the border. Men and women screaming at each other – that’s the family sitcom running in an endless loop on the bus ride from Berlin to Lviv. We’re sitting directly beneath the speakers - sixteen volunteers, ready for atonement. We’re entering a country that our fathers and grandfathers barreled across as masters of the imperial race.

Our goal is Chernivtsi in Bukovina, now Ukraine, formerly Soviet Union, formerly Romania, formerly the Empire of Galicia, crown land of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, formerly Russia, formerly the Ottoman Empire, formerly Moldavia, formerly Kiever Rus. Each period left its traces - buildings, people, languages. Culture and barbarism.

We’re coming to clear the jungle out of the Jewish cemetery of Chernivtsi - actually a tiny part of the cemetery. Founded in the 19th century, it is one of the largest preserved Jewish cemeteries in Europe with 50,000 graves. Until recently, it was completely overgrown. The ancestors’ children are no longer there to take care of the graves; they were deported, murdered or they left.

Are we setting signs of atonement if we tear out roots and chop vine tendrils in the blistering heat, or are we just creating chaos in the cemetery’s daily routine? Wouldn’t it be better if we gave our invested money to the cemetery administration, so that they might clear the grounds more effectively with a chain saw, lawn trimmer and chemicals? Doesn’t an overgrown cemetery seem more beautiful and enchanted; isn’t the deterioration part of the natural order of things? And anyway - is it presumptuous to want to atone for something that is too large to be atoned for?

These are German hands with German tools that want to dig a path to atonement. These are German questions that can’t always be answered.

On the second day, Paula arrives from the US to join our group. She is in Chernivtsi for the first time in 65 years. She chose this path to embark on a painful journey into the past: working together with Germans in the Jewish cemetery. We fell trees, remove tendrils and brush, while clearing a path towards the graves. And as we defoliate tombstones, discovering the emerging letters, stories are remembered and told. Clawed by nettles and covered in mosquito bites, we try to discern and count the rows, forging a path in the search for the grandfather’s tombstone. We come across blank slates where the letters are too weathered to read, the engravings as if washed away by the wind and by time; just like the memories - a haze. The stone keeps its real story locked inside. What Paula has experienced and seen has been engraved into the body and soul; it isn’t visible.

It’s good that we have time. Paula has offered to tell her story. This is not the first time she talks about herself; she was a teacher and is an active member of the Breman Jewish Museum in Atlanta. But this is different. We’re in Chernivtsi here, and we are Germans. We’re right in the middle of the story.

Chernivtsi on August 17, 1941. Curfew had just started as Paula's mother Etká was getting her first contractions. There was no way for the midwife to come: Since the raid by the allied German and Romanian troops on July 5, 1941, Jews were prohibited from going out on the street after 8 p.m. under punishment of death. Earlier, during the Soviet occupation, the father had already been dispossessed and abducted by the NKVD secret police. So the three-year-old Paula was left alone when her mother took the coat with the yellow star and disappeared into the night.

That's Paula's earliest memory: the bronze handle of the apartment door and the fear in the night. Only the next morning did her mother return with the newborn sister. A few months later, in October 1941, the Romanian officers drove 50,000 Chernivtsi Jews into a pre-established ghetto under orders from the German army units. That was where the first deadly deportations to Transnistria started from. How could a newborn survive the death march? How was a mother to take care of her two little children on this hellish journey?

The current mayor, Traian Popovici, was able to convince the Romanian governor that the city would fall apart if all Jews were deported. He was allowed to issue special exemptions. He wrote as many certificates as he could and was able to save the lives of 20,000 Jews.

Paula and her little sister were also spared for now.

Traian Popovici was discharged and arrested in the spring of 1942. The coveted certificate lost all value and could no longer protect Paula from being deported to Transnistria. This new province under Romanian command in occupied Ukraine was used as a giant ghetto and extermination camp. Those who survived the massacres and shootings soon died of hunger, cold or typhus. Etká had to leave the little children every morning to perform forced labor in a stone quarry. At only four years old, Paula was left alone with her sister. It was well into the night when their mother returned and nursed the baby. Each day was marked by the dread that their mother would never come back. Each day she hoped that there would be an end, that one day all of this would be over.

Paula survived. Only as they returned to Chernivtsi did they see how many people did not make it. Nearly all relatives and friends had been murdered. The worst was that their father never returned. In their native city, they were without country and home. Etká decided to leave Chernivtsi. They made the arduous journey to the American troops in southern Germany. Paula lived in the Displaced Persons' Camp for six years until the family emigrated to the US.

It is difficult to talk about these experiences here. The suffering is intimate. Paula's story ends with the approaching Sabbath. We leave for the synagogue. The rabbi invites us to the service.

It's good that we have time. Time to talk and ask questions. But ten days are not a long time to open up, have all of the needed discussions with the Jewish community, the German community, the Hesed welfare center. We visit the Jewish museum and the former pilgrimage site Sadhora. And we absorb the city. Anew each day in many small encounters.

At lunch we buy bread and cheese at a nearby market. "Where do you come from", asks the babushka who is selling us tomatoes from her garden. Out of an old habit of not wanting to be German in Eastern Europe, I reply: "From Berlin", and then correct myself: "From Berlin, from Germany." "Oh", the old woman says radiantly, "Tell me - isn't it good that Hitler is gone?" "Yes," I say, "that's good, it's really great." "And", she continues, "isn't it good that Stalin is gone?" "Yes", I say, "that's really wonderful." "But now", she adds, "everyone is going away, everyone is leaving home. That's not how it used to be."

Her granddaughter is with her at the market, smiling. No, she no longer lives here. She's studying medicine in Kiev. Now she's on vacation, visiting her grandmother.

It's night in the hotel bar. The restaurants and cafes close at 11 p.m.; no alcohol is permitted outside. There are few cafes that have special licenses to stay open for celebrations, such as weddings, which seem to be the most important and frequent celebrations in Chernivtsi. Dance music is blaring from the restaurant; it's the third wedding this weekend. Wedding guests are smoking outside the door; there are high and even higher heels; the women are outdoing each other with their dresses and the hair stylists are fully booked for the weekend. Marrying couples are standing in line at the registry office while a music ensemble is playing. After church, they sway through the city in a precisely choreographed photo session; once they would have stopped at the memorial for the soldiers fallen in the battle against fascism in the great war of the fatherland, but now they pose near gaudy iron carriages, buckets of flowers, the rented and heavily decorated Mercedes. They stand and wave into the camcorder from the top deck. The highlight is a round plaza that the married couple is swaying in as the Mercedes drives circles around them, the brother-in-law rolling down the window to capture the immortal 360° tracking shot: Sway, sway, and kiss.



Inside the bar, we come across the local youth: Dima, Masha, Shenyia. At 19, they're no longer teenagers but young adults entrenched in their professional life or studies. They show a lot of interest and ask many questions, then offer to take us to us the Carpathians. Hiking, climbing, rafting. "Anyway," they tell us, "we like the Germans." "Because of soccer?" I ask. "No, all around, the economy, the industry, everything. Germans are well-respected here." For a moment I let go of any guilt, shame and the past, and turn towards the future, the hope, and the youth of the Ukraine: web designer, architecture student, transportation entrepreneur. I ask about politics, the local parties, the elections. Silence. "You know, it's like this," Shenyia starts. "Back then, during the so-called Orange Revolution, we talked about politics all the time. We got into arguments. We argued so much that it tore apart the friendships. Now we no longer talk about politics."

Maybe there has to be silence for a while when something is still so fragile.

In the end we cleaned nearly 500 graves. Yes, this is a sign. Something invisible has emerged into view. Long hidden inside a green darkness, it's now returning into the light. It has been there, in front of us, for a long time. And it will continue to be there long after we have stepped back on the bus. We're tired and also cheered. The 15-hour bus trip is ridiculously short and we love the heated Russian comedies.

Before starting on her trip, Paula asked herself who these Germans might be and why they would come. Each one probably gave a different response. But I'm back at the beginning, immersing myself in the story of this city, its wealth and its terrible tragedy. I need time.

