
Helix Project/ Yiddishkayt , Deborah Rosenstein





Friends in NC who've seen this photo remark that it resembles the side of a tobacco barn around the corner— only without the blue.

By the time I saw this structure in northern Belarus, I'd already grown accustomed to such colors. It took me a few days, though, because my vague notions of shtetl landscapes and structures consisted primarily of grays and browns.

(cover image: endless grapeseed fields in Belarus,)



"Art has neither past nor future, it is eternally present." – Kazimir Malevich

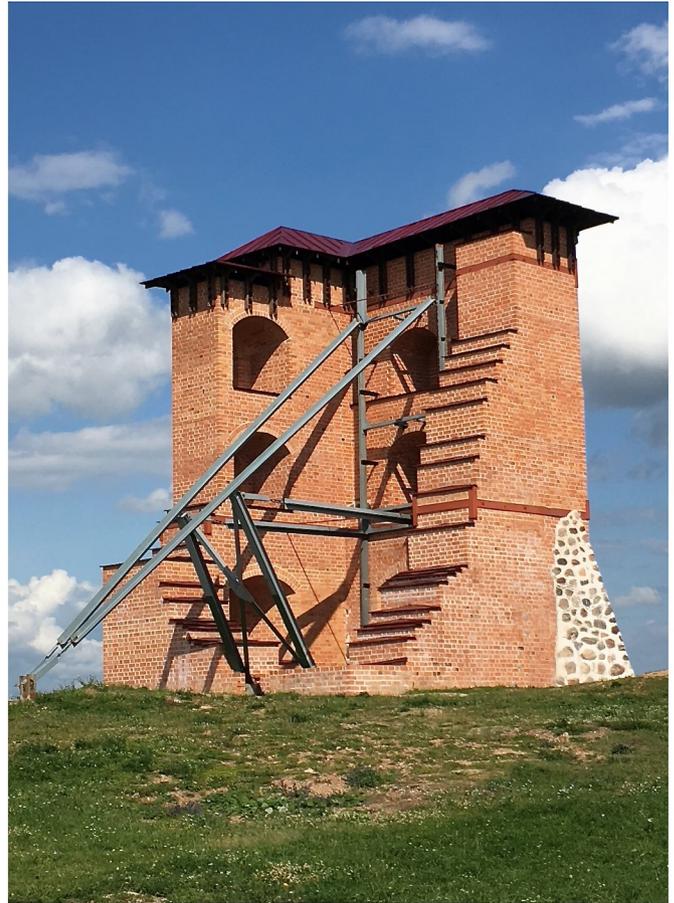
Mural outside the People's Art College in Vitebsk (which Malevich and Chagall both directed). The College, established in 1918, had open admission "regardless of age but first of all for workers and peasants and the poorest of the people free of charge." It's recently been refurbished and is used by artists creating new work.



Emanuel Ringelblum riding an owl on a mural in Warsaw (in the area that was part of the Jewish ghetto during World War II). Ringelblum was a historian whose archival efforts in the ghetto (buried in milk cans) documented resistance to Nazi atrocities. Our Warsaw guide was excited to show us the mural because local young people had initiated the project as a way of learning about people like Ringelblum. "It's taken 3 generations for people to face this history," the guide remarked.



At the Polin museum in Warsaw, we viewed the restored decorative ceiling of the Gwoździec synagogue— a wooden 17th century shul destroyed during and after World War II. The restoration was part of a larger project that included construction, painting, and educational workshops in different Polish cities where students worked with an international team of historians, architects and artists. Local residents were invited to presentations and inspired to learn more about the Jewish past of their own towns. Recently, the Gwoździec ceiling was mounted inside the museum. Polin is unique in that it seeks to present the 1,000-year history of Jewish people in Poland (past and present borders). Among other highlights are audio guides available in yiddish.



These two castle ruins stand a short distance apart in Nowodrodek, Poland; one having already been 'restored'. Apparently, the funding for the full site project may have run out. When we heard this, there was a collective sigh of relief.

I'd never thought much about historical restoration/conservation, but found myself appreciating the ways that memory, landscape and space come together and how 'ruins' may be most able to bridge past and present when left mostly unaltered.

I visited Starobin,
where my Dad's
mother's family lived.

Thanks to courage
and luck,, the book
that contained
records of hundreds
of years of burials at
the Slutsk cemetery
was smuggled out
during World War II
and sections have
been translated.

This meant that I
could sit with my
laptop, in 2017, and
find the coordinates
of where my great
great grandfather
was buried. The
Slutsk river is just
north of Starobin
and this is the view
from the spot on the
river bank where he
rests. There were no
matseyvas
(gravestones)
remaining at the site,
but I sat and
imagined funerals
and other rituals
alongside the same
trees and under the
same clouds.





In Grodek where my Dad's father is from, I spent some time with trees as well. A local teacher interested in bringing Jewish related history to her classroom stopped briefly on the street (she knew our guide) to let me know about her efforts.





The Jewish people who lived in rural areas that are now part of Belarus had neighbors. How well they knew each other and what their relationships were like is as complex as all parts of the history we were exploring. So we sought out places and people who could help us understand more about these historical neighbors' descendants. These images are from a family-run vacation spot of sorts that's maintained to showcase the traditional arts and culture of the area (embroidery, flower crowns, cooking, beekeeping, etc). While we were there, we met city folks who'd brought their young children, hoping to interest them in Belarusian language and culture.



Seeing this graphic in the bathroom at a cafe in Minsk validated a sensation that I'd been experiencing, but hadn't yet processed; there were cameras everywhere and we, along with everyone else in Belarus, were under constant surveillance.

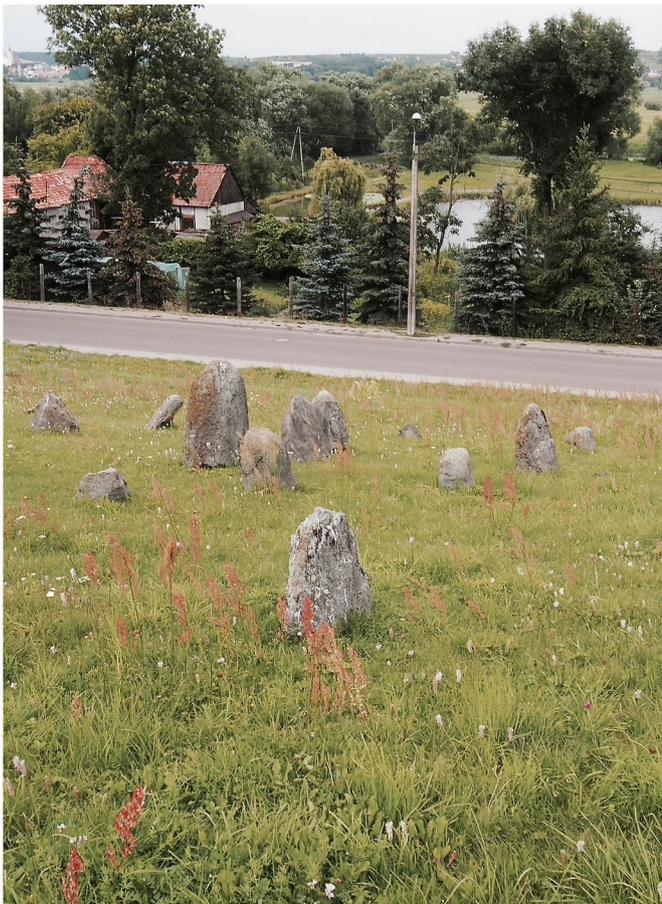
The national colors fly near or as part of many memorials.

And sometimes, Soviet era art adorns buildings occupied by fast food franchises.





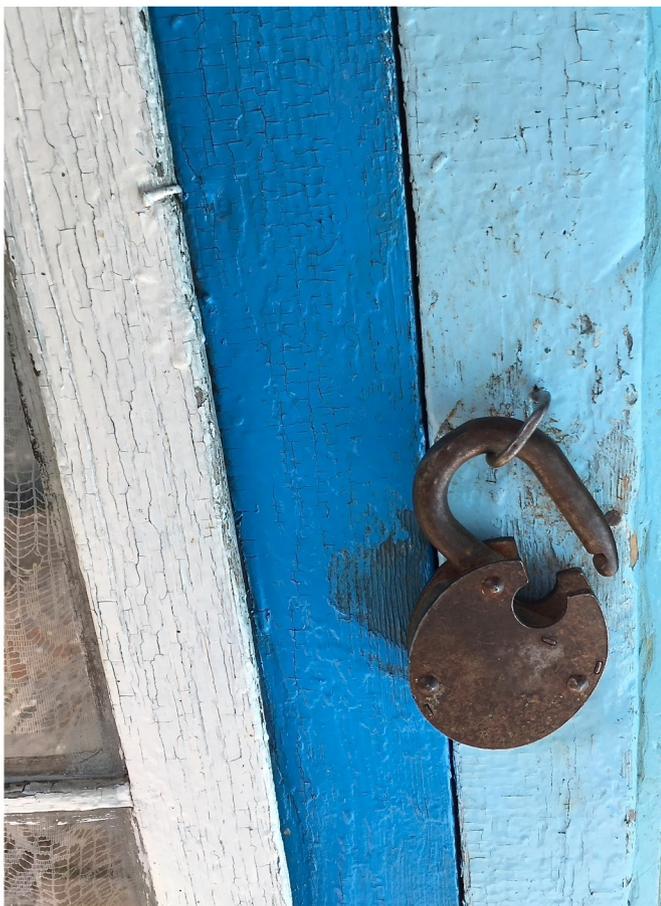
We came across many desecrated and/or decaying matseiyvas (gravestones) that had been placed together to form makeshift, collective memorials. Tree trunks were a common design, referencing, among other things, lives cut short.



A majority of the Jewish people murdered during World War II, in what is now Belarus, were brought to the sites of already existing Jewish cemeteries to be killed.

The cemetery and murder site on the left, like others we encountered, is in very close proximity to people's homes, schools and shops. I continue to wonder how people conceptualize such sites in their backyards.

The stone on the right had been vandalized and then painted over.

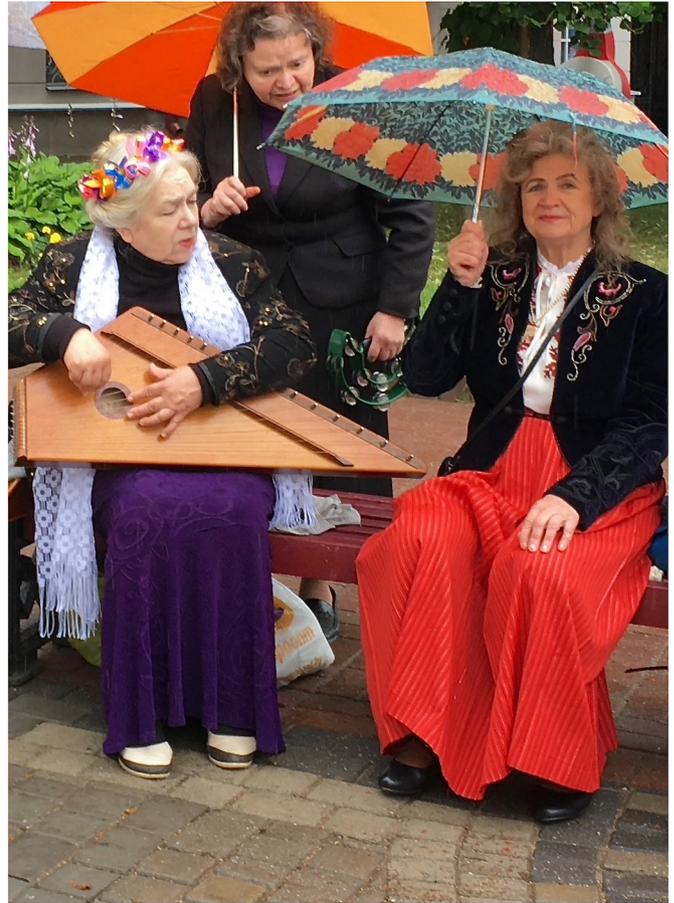




Victor, a retired doctor, moved to Starobin after the war, so he'd never met any of my relatives. He took us to the colorful gate and yard of the one remaining Jewish person in the town. The man wasn't home, but Victor proceeded to give us an ad hoc tour. While many of the houses were destroyed in the war, the Germans had a garrison nearby and so the area was spared from bombing.



The United Nations runs an initiative dedicated to preserving 'intangible culture" and Belarusian karavai (sour round bread created without yeast) is on the list. We visited with Stepanida Alexandrovna, the country's expert karavai baker. I was struck by how very tangible the details were with her oven and process.



We were also welcomed into a self-taught visual artist's home gallery and enjoyed his collaging of different forms on his walls, ceilings and floors.

The multigenerational musicians on the street in Bialystock, Poland reminded me of similar groups in Appalachia.





Sometimes the expanse of the thousand years of Jewish history in this region was hard to grasp and textures that I could see and touch helped. The image on the left is taken from inside the ruins of the 17th century fortress synagogue in Bykhav. The gate above is from a cemetery at a different location.



In Michalowo, Poland, we visited a multimedia museum that teaches people of all ages about the multicultural history of the area. The director shared an intense documentary he'd just completed on the myth of the blood libel and anti-semitism. At the Shklov district 'historical-ethnographic' museum, there was a small room dedicated to Jewish history that included a life-size mannequin dressed as a Jewish shop owner from the past. In Sjeny, a clay model of a shtetl was exhibited alongside contemporary art. The Borderland Foundation in Sjeny combines cultural activism with literary and scholarly projects that focus on the recovery and celebration of East-Central European heritage. They remind visitors that the region not only experienced the Holocaust, but also anti-semitic pogroms, hostility toward ethnic Belarusians, Russian Old Believers and Roma people.





Part of our in-situ learning was the opportunity to reflect daily on yiddish writers' words in the places where they lived and/or wrote. In Minsk, we sat on sculptures and read excerpts from Meyshe Kulbak's writings and discussed the height of the Jewish labor bund's strength in the city.

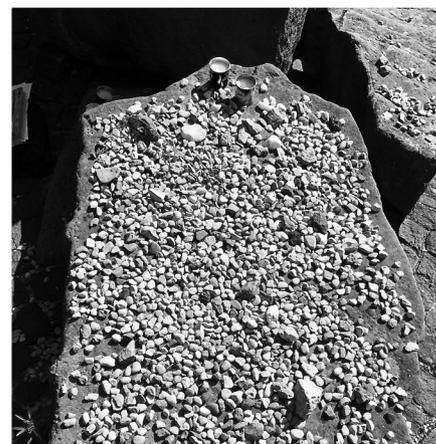


Whereas I think of latkes as an annual kwanitz treat, *draniki* are ubiquitous and a year-round food staple throughout the area (seen here at a cafeteria in Minsk).

Sometimes our search for traces led to boarded up former Jewish community buildings that weren't known to still be standing. We used maps and anecdotes from yizkher bikers (memorial books), multilingual recollections and other primary source materials to find these sites.



The Warsaw forest/ cemetery had recently experienced a storm and stacked wood was placed in front of many of the graves— almost an expanded version of the tradition of marking burial places with pebbles.



Muslim cemetery in Kruszyńniany (Poland). Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. Site of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

Lake Naroch
(Mikhas Kalachinski,
1949)

*The road had
brought us for the
night. The forest's
dark had scarcely
spread. Nearby Lake
Naroch deeply
sighed, Its freshness
flowed around our
heads.*

*The mist's light
gauze it swept aside,
And cleared a bright
path to the strand,
And like an
accordion opened
wide, Lay in long
waves across the
sand...*

Lake Naroch is the
largest body of
water in Belarus; we
read Kalachinski's
poem about
fishermen
organizing as we
stopped near this
leaning birch on a
windy, clear
morning.



