

Oleh Vernik Describes Finding Trotsky's Birthplace

"Leon Trotsky was born in Ukraine. Trotsky's exact birth place in Ukraine is known from his autobiography *My Life*--the Bronstein farmstead was on the outskirts of the village Yanovka in the Yelisavetgradsky District of Kherson Province. Therefore, finding his birthplace would seem to be a simple matter. So Workers Resistance (organization of the Committee for a Workers International in Ukraine) undertook to do find the place of birth of this great proletarian revolutionary leader.

"Our first surprise came when we attempted to find these population points on a modern map of Ukraine. In reality, in the Bobrinsky Region--and Trotsky referred to the township of Bobrinsky as the area of his place of birth--there was no village of Yankova. At this point, a less serious investigator might have given up. But that would have been a mistake.

"Placing side by side a pre-revolutionary topographical map of Yelisavetgradsky District and a modern military map, we were able to establish unequivocally that the geographic position of Yankova at the end of the 19th century coincided with the contemporary settlement Berislavka in the Bobrinsky region of Kirovograd province. It is interesting to note that the archival copy of the map bore the stamp of the Secretariat of the Ukrainian Central Rada, and someone had penciled in on that map a check mark next to the Bronstein Farmstead...."

The expeditionary team then had to take a trip to Trotsky's place of birth. This they did in August 1998.

"Berislavka is a miniature settlement of 60 homes. All the villagers know that their village is where Trotsky was born and they consider him a native son. This is particularly surprising because there has been much resettlement of the area and most of these people really came from other places. This region suffered particularly under German occupation. For example, 43 Jews in a neighboring village--the entire Jewish population of Gromoklei---were shot by the Nazis...Today, there are no Jews living there...Most of the village inhabitants today are elderly. There were no young people there. Their small village clubhouse had been closed up and locked for three years. The place is very cut off; they receive almost no newspapers--a local newspaper arrives twice a week.

"The Bronstein estate consisted of many buildings because Trotsky's father was a rather large landowner and landlord in the region. Even today, the majority of the buildings in this region are made of very strong bricks marked with the letter 'B', indicating they were made at the Bronstein brick factory. One resident in neighboring Ketrisanovka lives in a house built with bricks from the house where Trotsky was born. This man swore that Trotsky had been killed in the Spanish Civil War...

"Ten or 15 of the inhabitants considered themselves particularly knowledgeable about Trotsky, his life and work. With their help, our team located the foundation of buildings they considered historic, for example, the school Trotsky attended, and the remains of his father's house where Trotsky lived as a child...

"There was an old grass-covered Jewish cemetery in Gromoklei where we managed to find the gravestone of Trotsky's mother Anna Leontievna who died in 1910. It was well-preserved although the stone was split in two. We took photos of this gravestone and sent them to the Committee for the Study of Leon Trotsky's Legacy. Incidentally, in 1942 the fascists bombed this cemetery. No one knows why it was bombed...

"Stories about Trotsky have been passed from generation to generation of these villagers and miraculously, after so many years of during which Trotsky was anathematized by the Stalinists, they have been preserved.

"We are not talking at all here about heroic legends. For example, a woman born in Yanovka in 1915 provided the investigative team with a lively account of how young Lev Davidovich [Trotsky], with his uncle, fastened goat horns to their heads and secretly swam under water to where his sisters were bathing. Many villagers long remembered the scene of these young girls, absolutely naked, running away with terror screaming that they had just seen water devils...

"Local residents have said we could hold a conference on Trotsky in their clubhouse. It holds about 150 people."

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