

THE BUG

No, it's not an insect. It's a river that meanders for nearly 500 miles through Poland, Ukraine and Belarus. The name *Bug* (variously pronounced Buh or Boh) probably came from *baug*, an old Germanic word that meant something winding or bent. From its origin in southwestern Ukraine near the Black Sea, the river heads north running just east of Lviv until near Warsaw it swings sharply west to merge with the Narew and later with the Vistula that flows on to the Baltic Sea.

Rivers often serve as natural boundaries. During the Russo-Polish War of 1919–20, the Bug was proposed as an armistice line and soon became the Soviet-Polish border. For the next three years the river divided German-occupied Ukraine from the eastern portion of Rumania (now called Transnistria, the narrow eastern portion of Moldova) but the border, the so-called Curzon Line, kept changing. On June 22, 1941, Nazi panzer tanks, fitted with watertight rubber skins to make them submersible, crossed the Southern Bug into Russia, but far more interesting than geopolitical and military details are human stories of escape across the Bug — and what follows next are two such.

1. My father-in-law Irving Brower was born in 1903 in Felshtin (now Hvardyskoye) a small town in Podolia (Ukraine) which is located about 150 miles west of Kiev and close to the Bug. He told me that during his childhood Felshtin was “a very happy town”—at least until at sunrise on February 18, 1919, when a band of about 200 Cossacks on horseback arrived in town waving flags and blowing bugles. Within six hours 670 Jews (about one third of the Jewish population that comprised more than 90% of the total) were massacred. Stores were pillaged and the town hall where many Jews had gathered was burned down — no one escaped. Sixteen year old Irving hid on the roof of his house and watched it all; a few of his relatives were protected by gentile neighbors, others were bayoneted.

The Jews of Felshtin had been tipped off three days earlier that there'd been a pogrom in nearby Proskurov along the Bug River, at that time the border between Podolia (Russia) and Galicia (Austro-Hungary.) Roughly half of Proskurov's population was Jewish and at least 1,500 of them were slaughtered (some estimates were as high as 4,000). Many months later the *New York Times* reported, “The Ukrainian nationalist strongman Semesenko, at the head of several hundred drunken Cossacks, made his way into Proskurov and immediately the slaughter began.” The killing was marked by terrible ferocity and was over in about three and a half hours. This was not a pogrom in

the usual sense of the word; there was no torn bedding nor ruined stores — there was no time for that.

The Cossacks only killed Jews — targeting families, including elderly, women and children. It was pure carnage. After the bloody spectacle in Proskurov, the Ukrainian troops remained for two days before proceeding to Felshtin where a town official warned that he had orders to kill all the Jews. Forewarned, Irving's mother Pescia had fled with his two sisters to an out-of-town farm for safety, but they weren't permitted to stay and, according to a report written later by Red Cross investigators, "a Jewess named Brauer and her children were stopped by Cossacks on the road and "led out to be shot but [she] ransomed herself for a large sum of money." The family crossed the Bug into Galicia, stayed for awhile with a relative in Tarnopol and then moved on to Lvov where they remained until the early 1930s when they immigrated to Palestine.

Young Irving remained in Felshtin for about ten months after the pogrom, the Ukrainian nationalist White army was defeated by the Bolshevik Red Army and for a while things were quiet in Felshtin. But before long there was renewed violence that the teenager evaded by hiding in a latrine. Then on Christmas night, after walking for miles in waist-high snow, Irving was carried on the back of a smuggler across the Bug River where he reunited with his family in Lvov and remained there until November 1923 before he immigrated to the United States.

At the start of World War II, the Bug separated Germany and the Soviet Union as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression alliance until in July 1941 the Nazis violated the pact and crossed the river. The Russians fled and Yale historian Timothy Snyder suggests that at least half of deaths during the Shoah occurred in these "bloodlands" east of the Bug; the rest were murdered in the "Bug River death camps"—Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka—that were located just west of the river. In August 1943 the Ukrainian Insurgent Army decided to ethnically cleanse the area east of the Bug and placed notices in every Polish village stating, "In 48 hours leave—otherwise Death."

2. Dalit Warshaw is a multi-talented musician who recently collaborated with me on a documentary video about the Holocaust. Prior to World War II some of her ancestors lived near Lubomyl, a city that's currently located in western Ukraine, just east of the River Bug (Chelm is on the opposite bank.) When Dalit was invited to perform in Warsaw in 2016, she took advantage of the trip to learn more about her family's roots while visiting the Jewish Resource Center at the POLIN Museum. Initial warm feelings generated from visiting the old country were tempered by a visit to Auschwitz and upon

returning home, Dalit composed two new works in response to what she'd just learned — one was used as background in my film: See <https://vimeo.com/756136424>, password Chagall.

In particular, Dalit was intrigued by the story of Dov, her great, grandfather on her mother's side. He had lived in the riverside village Dubienka, some 20 miles from Lubomyl, and when the Nazis violated their non-aggression treaty with Russia and began a reign of terror in the region, Dov swam alone at night across the Bug to Ukraine that still was under Russian rule. His purpose was to mail a farewell letter to his three sons (including Dalit's grandfather) who were Zionists and had immigrated to British Palestine some years earlier. After sending the letter, he could have chosen safety and freedom, but decided to swim back to Poland to join the rest of his family in their fate. He was tortured by the Nazis and in 1942, Dov and all the remaining Jews of Dubienka were put on freight trains and marched to their deaths. In all, some 12,000 Jews in the region were killed and only a handful survived the war.

THE EAST RIVER

Moored in the East River just under the Brooklyn Bridge, with dramatic views of lower Manhattan, is a renovated 19th century coffee barge that since 1977 has provided a unique venue known to music lovers as *Bargemusic*. Chamber music is played on-board this "floating concert hall" year round and on January 8, 2023 the Barge was an appropriate nautical setting for the premier of Dalit Warshaw's latest composition about her great-grandfather Dov titled *Swimming Toward Fire* that was played by a chamber music quartet. Here's how Dalit described the origin of this emotionally intense piece:

"Swimming Toward Fire paints a true family tale of heroism that occurred during the Nazi occupation of Poland in 1939. Upon the German invasion, my great-grandfather undertook a great swim across the River Bug to the Ukraine, for the purpose of mailing a farewell letter. He had a premonition that he would never again see his three sons, who had immigrated to British Palestine.... After sending it, he could have chosen freedom by remaining in Ukraine, then under Soviet rule; instead, he decided to swim back to Poland, to join his family in their fate. In 1942, he and all the Jews of his native town of Dubienka were put on freight trains and marched to their murders at the extermination camp of Sobibor.

“I wonder about my great-grandfather’s final swim, the temptation of freedom in his grasp, and his decision to turn back from it, in doing so enabling himself to meet his fate by choice. I imagine what a fierce, if grim, celebration of life this colossal undertaking must have been. *Swimming Toward Fire* draws the listener into the inner workings of my great-grandfather’s mind, as he traversed the dark waves of the River Bug by night.

“It conjures the turbulence of both his external circumstance and internal emotional state, depicting the passion and resilience summoned at that moment....It is my hope that, through this work, the identities and stories of relatives unknown can be at last given some voice, if not with details long forgotten, then at least in general outline and emotional essence (or my imagining of it).”

This brave man’s return swim across the Bug calls to mind choices made last year by thousands of draft-age Ukrainian men who after separating from their families at the border, returned to fight for their country. Amidst the current debacle, we’ve become all too familiar with East European geography, and yet, it’s frequently been so for in earlier times of trouble when borders shifted, millions of citizens living in East European countries suddenly discovered that now they were Russians or Ukrainians, Poles or Hungarians, Moldovans or Rumanians — or just Jew.



The River Bug

River view



Bargemusic floating concert hall adjacent to the Brooklyn Bridge



River view