

Remembering Galicia

The Ludmer Fund aims to highlight the history of the Jews of Galicia and Bukovina

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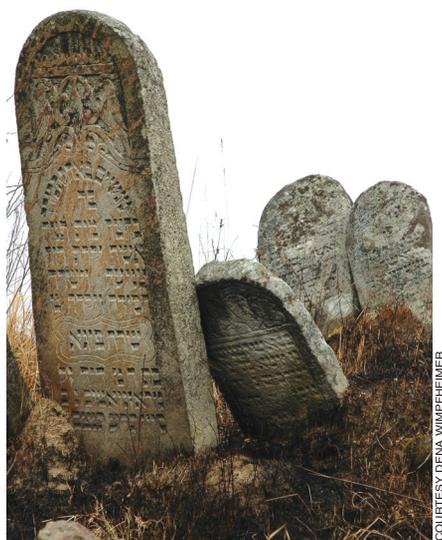
ICE COLD AIR RATTLES THE corrugated tin roof and bursts through the gaping windows. Through the vacant entrance, its wide doors long gone, replaced by tall trees and thick weeds, the engraved inscription over the lintel is barely legible: “This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter” (Psalms: 118:18).

This imposing synagogue in Podhajce, Ukraine, with its distinctive tall buttresses, dates back to the 17th century. Until the Holocaust, it commanded its surroundings. Now it is in ruins. The original ceiling collapsed years ago, and inside, the cavernous structure is dank and dark. The plaster has rotted, leaving only spots of the colorful floral ornamentation that once decorated the niche where the holy Torah scrolls were kept.

Across the dirt road is the Jewish cemetery, its gravestones, the earliest dating to 1420, leaning lopsidedly, many destroyed. The tombstones crowd around each other, but there are large gaps, where the stones were taken away by the locals to use for paving roads; even the stairs that lead to the cemetery are paved with these tombstones.

Podhajce (Pidhaitsi in Ukrainian) is a forgotten town in a forgotten region of a struggling country. But once it was a valuable trading town, the site of repeated conquests by Tartars, Cossacks, Nazis and Russians. And it was home to a flourishing Galician Jewish community, the birthplace of famous rabbis and scholars.

The Ludmer Project is a philanthropic fund dedicated to collecting oral testimonies, documenting cemeteries and synagogues, and collecting other information that can still be found in situ in what was once the region of Galicia and Bukovina, now in the Republic of Ukraine. In cooperation with the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the Petro Jacky Program for the Study of Modern Ukrainian History and Society at the Lviv National Ivan Franko



COURTESY DENA WIMPFHEIMER

REVIVING RUINS: By documenting and restoring ancient Jewish cemeteries, researchers hope to keep the memory of the Jews of Galicia alive

University and the Catholic University, the program also provides Ukrainian doctoral and post-doctoral students with scholarships to pursue research about the Jews of Galicia and Bukovina and spend a year at the Hebrew University, studying Jewish history, Hebrew and Yiddish.

To bring attention to their activities, the Ludmer Project brought a small group of historians, researchers and journalists, including The Jerusalem Report, to observe their current and future projects. In the summer of 2011, members of the Ludmer Project hope to come to Podhajce to document the cemetery and ruined synagogue. These ruins may not last for many more years.

“JEWES LIVED IN GALICIA FOR hundreds of years, and then they died a horrible death in the Holocaust at the hands of the Nazis and the Ukrainians,” says David Wallach, a member of a group of families, most of whom main-

tain their anonymity, who helped establish the Ludmer Fund. “Records, artifacts and information are being lost every moment, as we speak. If we do not preserve even these last traces of their existence, they will die another death.”

Tall and dignified, with a well-trimmed, graying beard and elegant demeanor, Wallach, 64, is a professor of molecular biology at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot. Only a few years ago, he began to research his own family’s history, after he found among his deceased father’s belongings a black suitcase, filled with photographs and documents that he had taken with him when he emigrated to Palestine. “My parents never talked about their relatives who died in the Holocaust,” he says painfully. “These were things that you didn’t talk about with children.

“My mother told me not to come here,” he says, nearly tearful. “She told me that Galicia is soaked with the blood of Jews. But I have already come several times and I must keep coming. We must try to learn as much as we can about our past, so that we can understand where we come from and who we are.”

Quoting from the Sayings of the Fathers (2:21), he says, “‘You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.’ We must learn as much as we can and preserve as much as we can.”

Dr. Vladimir Levin, 39, who immigrated to Israel from St. Petersburg, Russia, head of the Architectural Section of the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University, accompanies the group. “When we document Jewish history, we always think about the spiritual – the religious life, the philosophy and thought. But Jews produced material culture, and from this material culture – buildings, cemeteries, synagogues – we can learn about their lives,” Levin says. “Before the Jews of Galicia died, they lived, and we, today, are not the descendants of their deaths – we are the descendants of their lives.”

IN SOLOTVYN, A SMALL SHTETL before World War II, the group sees another cemetery, in another small Ukrainian town that seems to subsist in an earlier time. The cemetery is at the top of a low, muddy hill. At the foot of the hill are family farms, with small plowed fields dotted with haystacks. A woman leans over a tin tub outside her house, washing clothes by hand in the wet cold. A dog barks in the distance and chickens cackle in a small coop.

Walking up the soft slope in the gray wintery light, the monuments, tipped and titled, dark against the overcast skies, look at first like the stumps of a burned forest. Eerily, the frozen grass in the cemetery is charred and still smells burned – the local residents burn the ground to retard the growth of weeds and keep away wild animals.

In the summer of 2009, a group sponsored by the Ludmer Project worked in this cemetery, cleaning up the area and documenting the tombstones, then uploading the information to the project's website. Enthusiastically, Levin points out the engravings, the decorations in the forms of quills, foliage, and florals, the letters chiseled or carved in relief, the traces of color painted into the stone, and the languages, Hebrew, Polish and German – all signs of different social classes across different periods of time.

He points to a grave from 1648, inscribed with a Hebrew inscription, which usually refers to a Jew killed by a non-Jew; the stone, he assumes, marks the grave of a man killed in the savage Cossack uprising, led by Bohdan Chmelnytsky, who attacked that Jewish community with vicious cruelty in 1648-1649. Another grave, nearby, is dated 1655 and indicates that the man died a natural death. "From this," explains Levin, "we can learn that the Jewish community came back to this region after the Chmelnytsky pogroms much sooner than was previously assumed."

At the top of the hill, two farmers in heavy rubber work boots, neither threatening nor inviting, lean against a decrepit pick-up truck, watching the group of researchers.

WHAT WAS ONCE KNOWN AS Galicia is now southeastern Poland and northwestern Ukraine. More than one million Jews lived in this area before the Holocaust, mostly in the larger towns and smaller shtetls. Since coming to the area, probably as early as the 14th century, the Jews lived in a hateful har-



FORGOTTEN GLORY: The synagogue in Podhajce, now in ruins, bears witness to the flourishing Jewish community that existed here from the 15th century until the Holocaust

mony with their neighbors, a tense anti-Semitic status quo marked by outbreaks of vicious violence and savage pogroms across the centuries. The area was conquered and reconquered so many times through history, that many of the towns and cities are still known by their Russian, Polish, German – and Yiddish – names.

As a minority posed between Polish and Ukrainian nationalism, in a region occupied by the Austrians, the Poles and the Ukrainians, the Jews were often in a precarious situation, although, during the second half of the 19th century, Jews were particularly noteworthy for their political participation in affairs of state and for establishing modern institutions and societies.

Despite the simple peasant life that surrounded them and endemic poverty, the Jews of Galicia formed a hub of cultural activities and Jewish studies. Traditionally oriented, they absorbed the Hasidic movement and founded the dynasties of Belz, Tzanz, Viznitz, Sadigora and others. At the same time, Jews in the region were also receptive to the ideas of the Enlightenment and liberalism; in later years, Jewish writers, including S.Y. Agnon, Itzik Manger, Mordechai Gebirtig, Paul Celan, Joseph Roth and Henry Roth came from this region, as did artists from the fields of drama

and film, including Lee Strassberg, Billy Wilder, and Otto Preminger.

The Jews of Galicia were known as Galicianers. And this, says Rachel Manekin, a professor at the Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Maryland, whose research focuses on the Jews of the region, was much more than a geographic designation. In Eastern European Jewish folklore, the Galicianer had all sorts of qualities – most of them negative, yet talked about with a certain sense of endearment. Galicianers were reputed to be troublemakers, shrewd operators, money-grubbing religious fanatics who spoke a simple, vulgar Yiddish dialect.

At the same time, in the contradictory way of stereotypes and perhaps because of their experience with political liberalism due to the long years of the Habsburg rule, the Galicianers were also considered to be more moderate in their politics. Although some Jews from other regions thought that the Galicianers were too willing to compromise, others noted that they were more moderate in their politics and maintained Zionist societies without being inclined to join the more radical Bundist-type organizations.

The Galician Jewish community was almost completely annihilated by the Nazis, aided, practically more than in any other country under Nazi occupation, by the willing local

population. Under the subsequent Soviet occupation, almost all memory of the Jewish community was annihilated. And after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, which throughout history has had strong nationalist trends, continued to erase the past and the presence of any non-Ukrainian peoples.

UNLIKE POLAND, UKRAINE HAS not experienced a Jewish renewal nor a philo-Semitic movement. “Jewish history is simply not part of the agenda of modern Ukraine,” states Yaroslav Hrystak, director of graduate studies at the Ukrainian Catholic University. “If Jews are mentioned at all, they are mentioned as part of the Holocaust, not as part of the economy, or the social fabric. But how can we teach the history of Ukraine if we do not study the Jews? The Jews were an integral part of Ukrainian society for centuries.”

“Poland has rewritten its narrative to include and even embrace the Jews,” Hrystak continues. “But Ukraine has not even begun this process. Ukrainian history has always been taught as local history and only now are we attempting to integrate that local history into its global context.”

In fact, Ukraine has been singled out many times by Jewish and international organizations as the country that has done the least to restitute Jewish property and compensate Jewish communities and individual Jewish heirs. At this time, says Wallach, there is a “window of opportunity, in which the authorities are willing to let us do our work. Who knows what will be in the future. In Russia, for example, we had free access to archives, until Putin decided to close them.”

In August 2010, the Executive Committee of the Lviv City Council announced an International Competition for the Sites of Jewish History in Lviv, also known as Lvov, or Lemberg. But at the same time, despite domestic legislation that protects historical sites, many of the sites of Jewish cemeteries, synagogues and public buildings have been razed or fallen into abject ruin and neglect, as in Podhajce.

Wallach speaks gingerly, aware that relationships with the Ukrainian Republic are complicated, based not only on the history of anti-Semitism but also on the diplomatic relations that the State of Israel is attempting to forge, irrespective of the country’s treatment of its Jewish legacy. In August 2010, for example,

Israel and Ukraine signed an agreement canceling visas between the two countries, in a mutual attempt to increase tourism.

“At the least,” Wallach says, “we could expect the authorities to obey their own domestic legislation, which mandates that they protect historic sites.”

Dr. Semion Goldin, from the Leonid Nevzlin Research Center for Russian and European Jewry at the Hebrew University and a researcher for the Ludmer Project, adds carefully, “It is important to understand that we, as Jews and Israelis, are not coming here to take revenge – we are hoping that as they build their new, modern nation, there will be a place for Jewish history, too. There are Poles and Ukrainians who can trace their family lineage back to the 16th century – but I, a Jew, don’t know the names of my great-grandfathers. The majority of us did not come from well-known or high-placed families, and so it is as if we do not have a past. As individuals and as a people, we must know where we came from to know who we are. The Ukrainians understand this.”

AT THE CENTRAL HISTORICAL Archives of the Ukraine in Lviv, Manekin confidently holds a heavy book of archives, bound in dark brown, its ancient pages yellowing and giving off the paper-smell of history.

Because Lviv was under Austrian rule for so many centuries, careful records of all kinds of written documents have been kept, all catalogued and grouped according to a precise system that, once decoded, enables historians like Manekin to research the lives of Jews.

But it is a highly complicated process. Goldin notes that archival research about Jewish communities in a multicultural region like Galicia, which went through so many upheavals, requires sensitive, in-depth socio-political knowledge and, in the case of Ukraine, familiarity with at least six languages: Polish, German and Russian, because of the changing sovereignties; Yiddish and Hebrew, used by the Jews; and Latin, the official language of the courts and the church.

The Ukrainian authorities have made a small room and several volumes of archives available to the group. Many of them list generations of births, deaths, weddings and census accounts, some dating back to the 16th century. Excited, clearly in her academic element, Manekin explains that “archives reveal much

more than these lists.” She holds a volume of records, dating to the early 18th century, in which she finds the protocol of the trial and verdict of the Reitzes brothers, Jews who were accused of trying to convince an apostate to return to Judaism and were tortured and eventually burned in Lviv. “Until this record was discovered,” she says, “it wasn’t even known if this was a legend or an actual event.”

She finds a receipt for a debt paid by the Jewish community, recorded in Latin, on which an unknown 17th century court registrar has drawn an anti-Semitic caricature of a group of Jews holding bags of money and added the word, “stinking,” in Ukrainian. “He must have been bored, so he doodled,” Manekin quips.

In another part of Lviv, now a city of some 900,000 residents, the tiny Jewish community has established a small hostel, kosher dining room and community center. The room is long and dank, electric wires strung precariously along the walls, *siddurim* (prayer books) scattered over tables and a small holy ark in a corner.

Meylech Sheykhet, affiliated with the Chabad movement, greets the group. A former expert in telecommunications systems, he has become increasingly involved in Jewish life and now lives as an Orthodox Jew. Sheykhet is using his own and donated funds to buy up former Jewish properties throughout the Ukraine, hoping to make at least some of them into museums that would attract Jewish travelers and bring some income to the financially and organizationally struggling community.

At the end of the long room that doubles as dining and prayer room, a wooden door leads out to a littered courtyard. At the far end, a heavy gate opens into a vast space. Here, too, the lintel over the entrance reveals that this was once a synagogue, now overrun with trees and weeds, recognizable only to a dreamer like Sheykhet.

“This was a wonderful synagogue, hundreds of years old” he says. “We will rebuild here, too.”

“The Jews have been erased from Galicia and Bukovina,” says Wallach. “We at the Ludmer Fund want to respond to this – to bring the history of the Jews to consciousness, in the Ukraine and among the Jewish people.

“This region is covered in the blood of Jews,” concludes Wallach. “The study of their lives is the memorial we are obligated to create.” ●