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ASPECTS OF JEWISH LIFE IN BUKOVINA BEFORE THE HOLOCAUST

Bukovina and Transnistria, the two provinces that framed the destiny of the Jews of Czernowitz, are vanished places. A non-specialist would have difficulty locating them on a map. Bukovina vanished as a result of the Second World War; disputed by various empires and nations all claiming legitimate ownership, it was cut in two. The northern half, with Czernowitz (today Chernivtsi), is now part of Ukraine, while the southern half, with Suceava, belongs to Romania. Transnistria was created during the war, and likewise vanished at the war's end. The province existed for only two years and seven months (August 1941 to March 1944), but it had the sad privilege to be the destination of the Jews deported from Bukovina and Bessarabia and the cemetery of two-thirds of them.

Before the Shoah, Bukovina represented a crossroads between the "two Europes." For the Jews, it was a melting pot of the *Ostjuden* (the "Eastern Jews") and the *Westjuden* (the "Western Jews"). This intermediary position can be explained by social and familial links with Eastern Europe, as well as the profound influence of new ideas brought by German culture. Though the Russian border was quite near and Vienna more than 800 kilometers away, the cultural identity of Bukovina was oriented toward Vienna.

As with many other groups with a fractured history, Bukovina Jews could not escape a sometimes mythical image of their history, as reflected in a 1963 article in *Die Stimme*, the newspaper of Bukovina Israelis:

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"If God created a new Flood and sought a new Noah, to whom would He have entrusted the role of preserving the old European traditions? Who would He place in the Ark? A Frenchman, a German, an Englishman? No, they are only partially capable of carrying on the traditions. Obviously, God would choose a Czernowitzer!"

There were two pillars to this mythical past, this lost paradise: the Jewish *shtetl* or village on the one hand, and the Golden Age of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on the other. The *shtetl* is viewed today less as an historical socio-cultural reality than as the focus of collective memory. The nostalgia of childhood merges there with that of a world twice lost: first when the family moved to the city, second when this world disappeared completely. The memory receives simultaneously the mark of a "myth of origin" and that of its completion, of its final tragedy. The *shtetl* is often represented as an idealized place of a Jewishness "unified" by community life, food, and language, where one lived in the world of the *halakha* (Jewish Law). It is evoked as if, from deepest antiquity to the distant future, there had been no rupture in the tradition of the Eastern European Jewish world. The reality was different: a space torn by identity questions, economic conflicts, social antagonisms, and religious quarrels. Between the two world wars, it was rare to find a family in Czernowitz whose roots were not in one of these villages. As I often heard: "Obviously, my parents were not from Czernowitz. In a good European Jewish family, two generations were not born in the same place. A 'real' Jewish family would not even have two children born in the same place. My parents grew up in various villages of Galicia. It is only after their marriage that they arrived at Czernowitz."

As the second pillar of collective identity, Austro-Hungarian and German culture remained the principal cultural reference for Czernowitz Jews. The Jews had been among the strongest supporters of the Habsburgs. In *The Homecoming of Jossel Wasserman*, Edgar Hilsenrath wrote: "The Jews were satisfied … they hung portraits of the Emperor in their living room, painted the tobacconist's shops in black and yellow, sang the imperial anthem…, prayed for the Emperor…in their bed, before falling asleep…, so that God and the Emperor would guard their sleep."[1]

[1] Edgar Hilsenrath, *Josel Wassermanns Heimkehr* (Munich: R. Piper, 1993). The English translation is mine from the French version, *Le Retour au pays de Jossel Was-*

During the First World War, the city, located on the front line, was thrice occupied and ransacked by Russian troops and weakened by migration towards Vienna. The year 1918 ushered in dramatic change for the region. The earlier consolidation of Central and Eastern Europe nation-states was thought to be a solution for two growing problems: revolutionary sentiment and suppression of ethnic minorities; however, the new states could turn out to be empires just as multiethnic as their predecessors. This was exactly the case in Greater Romania, where only two-thirds of the population was Romanian. The annexed territories, with their large Hungarian, Jewish, German, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Romani ("Gypsy"), and Russian minorities, accentuated the non-Romanian character of the nation.[2]

From 1919, Jews constituted a 48% plurality of the Czernowitz population.[3] In spite of their extreme diversity, the Jewish community followed a common framework and rhythm of everyday life. They represented a considerable part of the cultural, professional, social, and economic elite.

With the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the German-speaking culture of the province seemed condemned to disappear, especially after a drastic program of Romanianization of administration, public offices, and universities was initiated in 1919.[4] In 1924, Romanian was made the sole official language. The institutional network of German-speaking culture was destroyed "by the rupture of the umbilical cord with Vienna and by the inversion of the balance of power," yet German remained the language of privileged communication, at least in the private sphere.[5]

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sermann (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 220. As regards portraits, I can add that to this day, Israel's Bukovina Jews continue to hang the Habsburg portraits.

[2] For the statistics, see, for example, Carol Iancu, *Les Juifs en Roumanie, 1919–1938: De l'émancipation à la marginalisation. Collection de la Revue des Études juives* (Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 1996). See also *Recensământul general al populației din 29 decembrie 1930*, vol. 1–10 (Bucharest: Imprimeria Natională, 1938–1940).

[3] *Recensământul general al populației din 29 decembrie 1930*, *op. cit.*, in Iancu, *op. cit.*, 51.

[4] For the process of Romanianization, see Mariana Hausleitner, *Die Rumänisierung in der Bukowina: Die Durchsetzung des nationalstaatlichen Anspruchs Großrumäniens, 1918–1944* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2001).

[5] Andrei Corbea-Hoisie, "Autour du 'méridien': Abrégé de la 'civilisation de Czernowitz' de Karl Emil Franzos à Paul Celan," in *Les Littératures de langue allemande en Europe centrale*, ed. Jacques le Rider and Fridrun Rinner (Paris: PUF, 1998), 145.

During the interwar period, the composition of the Jewish population of Czernowitz changed. Many of those who had fled to the West did not return, and in their place arrived Jewish families from Galicia and Bessarabia. This led to an increase in the lower middle class and the proletariat, and to a reduction in the number of German speakers among Jewish community leaders. Yet the situation in Czernowitz was often paradoxical. For example, German was used by the Jewish National Council of Bukovina in its lengthy discussions regarding the language of instruction in the Community schools. The choice was between Hebrew, supported by the Zionists, and Yiddish, preferred by the social democrats. Yiddish had become relatively popular by that time—Hebrew by comparison seemed artificial.[6]

The topography of the city reflected its social diversity. The poorer sections of the population and the lower-middle classes resided in the northeast, near the railway station, in the so-called Jewish district. There, few people spoke *Hochdeutsch*; most spoke Yiddish or *Bukowinerisch* (the local German dialect, *Bukowiner Deutsch*). These languages continued to be spoken after the arrival of the Romanians. Influenced by the new official language, the local dialects were enriched by "new original words and truculent expressions," to which the Romanian and Ukrainian languages contributed some spicy curse words.[7]

Czernowitz is a "place of memory" ("lieu de mémoire") for Yiddish. From August 31 to September 3, 1908, a First world conference on Yiddish was held there, gathering seventy delegates.[8] The initiator was Nathan Birnbaum.[9] In Czernowitz, each ethnic group had its own community center building, which symbolized each group's existence. The Jews had just completed their own building and the conference was set to take place there; however, the leaders of the *Kultusrat* were part of the conservative establishment, and

[6] Ibid.

[7] Rose Ausländer, "Erinnerungen an eine Stadt," *Neue Literatur*, 39, no. 6 (1986): 48–50; Emmanuel Turczynski, "Longue durée: Kultur und Lebensform," unpublished paper delivered at the international conference "Czernowitz as Paradigm: Cultural Pluralism and the Nationalities Question," Tel Aviv University, November, 21–23, 1999, p. 10.

[8] See http://czernowitz.org/ for details on the Yiddish Conference.

[9] On Nathan Birnbaum, see, for example, Robert S. Wistrich, *The Jews of Vienna in the Age of Franz Joseph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 381 *et seq*.; and Joshua A. Fishman, *Ideology, Society and Language: The Odyssey of Nathan Birnbaum* (Ann Arbor, MI: Karoma, 1987).

following the opening session they decided that they were dealing with a crowd of "revolutionists speaking in jargon." They found a pretext to curtail the debates by declaring the large hall of the *Jüdisches Haus* unfinished. Thus, the conference was forced to reconvene at the Ukrainian House, opposite the Armenian Church, and in the concert hall of the *Musikverein*.[10]

Despite the tumultuous debates, rambling speeches, and ineffective decisions, a final decision was passed: Yiddish would be recognized not as *the* national language of the Jewish people but as *one* of its languages. The authorities were magnanimous in allowing Hebrew—everyone could speak according to his own personal convictions![11]

Between the two World Wars, Yiddish cultural life reached its peak. Schools, publishers, libraries, theatrical companies, and religious organizations developed a network encompassing the great centers of Yiddish Eastern Europe.[12] Itzik Manger, Abraham Goldfaden, and Eliezer Steinbarg were, among others, at the core of this intense Yiddish cultural life.[13]

The well-to-do Jewish families lived in the southern part of the town in a residential district near the *Volksgarten*, known for its impressive *fin-de-siècle* villas. The top civil servants of the Romanian administration, the well-established German families, and a large number of Jewish families, many of which employed French or English nannies, lived there.[14] In this part of the city the Jews spoke *Hochdeutsch*. The mothers, in particular, jealously guarded the German language through overcorrection.[15] The German language represented for the Jews a *Vaterland*, or rather a *Mutterland*, to employ the words of Rose Ausländer.[16] Ultimately, if there was one language

[10] Hermann Sternberg, "Zur Geschichte der Juden in Czernowitz," in *Geschichte der Juden in der Bukowina*, vol. 2, ed. Hugo Gold (Tel Aviv: Olamenu, 1958), 34 *et seq*., 46.

[11] For example, see Florence Heymann, *Le Crépuscule des lieux* (Paris: Stock, 2003), 177–183.

[12] Andrei Corbea-Hoisie, "Autour du 'méridien,'" 147.

[13] David Schaary, "Jewish Culture in Multinational Bukowina between the World Wars," *Shvut*, 16: 288–289.

[14] Florence Heymann, *Le Crépuscule des lieux*, 82–83.

[15] It is true, in particular, for Paul Celan's and Rose Ausländer's mothers.

[16] See the poem "Mutterland," for example in Cilly Helfrich, *"Es ist ein Aschensommer in der Welt": Rose Ausländer. Biographie* (Berlin: Quadriga Verlag, 1995), 23.

that embodies the Jewish legacy in Czernowitz, and one language that, according to Nelly Sachs in her address to Paul Celan, best reflected the spirit of that place "blessed by Bach and by Hölderlin, blessed by the hassidim," it was of course neither Romanian, nor Polish, nor Ukrainian, nor, in my opinion, Hebrew or Yiddish. It is the German language that remains the language of connection, of recognition, and of nostalgia—even if, far from there, the German language has been burnt by the Shoah, even if among Jews today it is an orphan and broken language that "still projects the unconsumed traces of a shade."[17]

Within the various districts we find the coexistence of divergent religious currents in the community as well. On one side there were *hassidim* from Sadagura, Bojan, or Wiznitz, on the other side the assimilated Vienna Germans. Of course, there were many nuances between these two extremes. An analysis of Czernowitz using the model of a multiethnic city of *Mitteleuropa* shows that the town was very different from Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Lemberg, or Cracow. Here, we cannot speak of Robert Wistrich's phenomenon of "structural assimilation," where the minority group combines with the majority, resulting in the consequent disappearance of its distinct culture and its ethnicity. Jewish life in Czernowitz had no model other than itself and its mirroring of the German culture. The main divide within the group ran between the semi-proletarian and the lower-middle classes of the underprivileged districts of the city and the Germanized middle class. The first spoke Yiddish and jealously preserved traditional Jewish culture and Talmudic heritage. The latter developed a new secular tradition with its own rites and its myths, which would eventually find its place beside religious traditionalism as present in various social, cultural, and political movements.

Politically the Jews were less receptive to the old liberalism, which was unable to contend with the nationalisms of the other ethnic groups. Thus, they turned to Zionism and social democracy. The alliances between Zionists and territorialists, laic and religious, form perhaps one of the most characteristic features of the region: in contrast to other Jewish communities of Eastern Europe or France (where the Consistory was opposed to Zionism until the beginning of the 1930s), in Bukovina the religious

[17] Andrea Zanzotto, "Écrire dans la langue de l'ennemi," *Le Monde*, July 31, 1992, p. 17.

authorities were cooperating with the Zionists as early as the end of the First World War.[18]

Between the two World Wars, some of the most important leaders of the Zionist movement visited the city, including Nahum Sokolov, Nahum Goldmann, Ze'ev Jabotinsky, and Chaïm Weizmann. In contrast to the Regat (Old Romanian Kingdom) or Bessarabia, Zionism in Bukovina was less concerned with *aliyah* to Palestine or preparations for agricultural work than with national politics and support for and improvement of the status of Jews in their homeland. The difference in priorities corresponded to the legal and social disparities between the Old Kingdom and those of Bukovina. The status of the Jews in the Old Kingdom was so precarious that emigration represented the only possible solution. For the Bukovinians, however, incorporation into Greater Romania was seen as a regression, so hope remained that the social and cultural status of the pre-war period might be restored through a concerted effort.[19]

Jewish political parties in Bukovina expressed their sense of identity within a civil framework, in which Jews could fulfill their civic obligations without forsaking their ethnic identity. This would have been unthinkable in Berlin or Paris and could occur only in the new states built on multiethnic former territories of the Russian or Austro-Hungarian Empires. The common program that these parties presented had three main objectives: consolidation of the emancipation and civic equality of Jews, development of their culture and education, and their recognition as a national minority, with communal autonomy and elected representatives in all state institutions.

The third point was the most ambitious, and in the 1920s it was almost realized. The rise of Romanian nationalism and antisemitism in the following decade—in tandem with Hitler's rise to power—shattered those dreams (and later, lives).

From 1922 on, antisemitism was a primary tenet of fascist and other far-right organizations. In 1926, the murder of David Fallik, a young Jewish law

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[18] On the "Jewish politics" in Bukovina, see David Schaary, "Une communauté juive dans un environnement hostile: La 'politique juive' entre les deux guerres mondiales," unpublished paper, International Conference "Les Juifs en Roumanie aux XIXe et XXe siècles," September 25–27, 2000, Montpellier, Université Paul-Valery.

[19] On the status of the Jews in Romania between the two World Wars, see Carol Iancu, *Les Juifs en Roumanie.*

student, further increased tensions.[20] In 1927, Corneliu Codreanu founded the Legion of the Archangel Michael, which became the Iron Guard in 1930. Its program was a mixture of crusading Christianity, intransigent nationalism, and virulent antisemitism. The economic crisis of 1929 highlighted the weakness of the existing economic structures and eliminated the last chances for democracy. In 1938, Octavian Goga's fascist National Christian Party came to power. The Goga-Cuza government legislated an antisemitic program very similar to that of the Iron Guard.[21] A swastika now adorned the facade of the Czernowitz town hall. All the Jewish newspapers of the city were closed down. Speaking Yiddish or Hebrew in the streets became an offence. As in other places, many Czernowitz Jews refused to acknowledge the approaching storm: "As long as we will be able to eat cream at Friedmann, a *Gabelfrühstück* at Gabe, or *Kischke mit Farfel* at Geller, we need not complain." As Zvi Yavetz remarked, "They continued to live like onions, with their heads in the ground."

The Goga government was dissolved after a few months, when King Carol II imposed a dictatorship. Less than one year later, the Second World War broke out. Despite Romania's alignment with the Axis, Hitler dismembered the country. Bukovina was cut in two: Czernowitz and the northern part of the province were ceded to the Soviet Union.

With the arrival of the Soviets, some Ukrainians and Jews, especially those of the younger generation, initially expressed their anti-Romanian feelings and received the Red Army troops in jubilation. The older generation, however, was far from enthusiastic. The economic situation rapidly deteriorated: basic goods were lacking, individual freedom was curtailed, factories and banks were requisitioned. Most schools became Ukrainian or Russian overnight. For the Jews, two Yiddish schools were in operation, directed by commissioners sent from Moscow. The quality of the teachers and the professors was poor: most likely they had not qualified for their positions in Russia, and were sent to Bukovina on administrative exile.

In each district, once a week, an appointed propagandist of the Party gathered in the largest apartment all the inhabitants without exception.

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[20] On the "Fallik Case", see Florence Heymann, *Le Crépuscule des lieux*, 235–238.

[21] On nationalism and antisemitism in Romania between the two World Wars, see Leon Volovici, *Nationalist Ideology and Antisemitism: The Case of Romanian Intellectuals in the 1930s* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1991).

The oldest member of the listeners, decorated with the title of *starosta*, kept an attendance log. Before a heteroclite assembly composed of janitors and intellectuals seated side by side, the speaker lectured on the well-known topics of Communism. The janitors might have been bored by these homilies, but they were undoubtedly proud of their new equal status with their former social superiors.[22]

On June 13, 1941, NKVD units patrolled the city's streets in search of the regime's enemies, arresting 3,800 people—80% of them Jews. They were deported to Siberia in the beginning stages of an operation that the Soviets intended to continue. The German invasion one week later interrupted their plans, at least temporarily.[23]

On June 19 in Bucharest, Ion Antonescu, the new Conducator of the Legionary State, had verbally decreed "special orders" to exterminate a portion of the Jewish population of Bessarabia and Bukovina. The operation to euphemistically "clean the ground" had three goals: the extermination of all the Jews of the rural areas, the enclosure in ghettos of the urban Jews, and the arrest of suspected Soviet activists.

In rural and semi-rural areas, some of the local population took advantage of the situation and formed terrorist gangs to murder Jews. In Czernowitz, during the time between the departure of the Soviets and the entry of the Romanians, there was nothing to eat, while the stores and warehouses were plundered: "I saw barefoot women wearing fur coats stolen from luxury shops. In the street where I lived, wine barrels taken from the warehouses rolled from the bottom of the hill," testified a survivor.

On July 5, 1941, Romanian armed groups penetrated the city, plundering and setting fire to the Jewish houses. Some Jews persisted in their refusal to acknowledge the peril they faced. Upon hearing that almost all

[22] Letter from J. Truelle to Admiral Darlan, September 5, 1941, in Carol Iancu, *La Shoah en Roumanie. Les Juifs sous le régime d'Antonescu (1940–1944). Documents diplomatiques français inédits* (Montpellier, France: Université Paul-Valéry, 1998), 151.

[23] For the Soviet year in Czernowitz, see Zvi Yavetz, "The Jewish Czernowitz under the Soviets, 1940–1941," *Shvut*, 5 (1977) (in Hebrew); David Schaari, *The Jews of Bukovina between the Two World Wars* (Tel Aviv: The Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, Tel Aviv University, 2004), 277–281 (in Hebrew); and in this volume, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer.

their co-religionists who had lived in small isolated communities had been massacred by axe, pitchfork, or knife by the peasants, they continued to say: "It is only the work of the Romanians; if the Germans, more civilized, had been there, this could never have happened." The Romanians soon were followed by the first German units. And there begins the story which will be the subject of my colleagues' articles.

To evoke so briefly the destiny of the Jews of Czernowitz between the two World Wars, we have followed the arrow of time. But this period was a fugitive one, a discontinuous succession of moments, marked by courage, fear, improvisation, or chance; thus, it is unsurprising that the memories of *Czernowitzers* remain centered on the "margins of the place." Places may be eternal but the human beings are no longer there. For the Jews of Czernowitz, the place of their childhood or of their adolescence has been lost and despoiled. It is in fact a "no place."

Would it be legitimate to speak of the Jews of Czernowitz as a "people of the place," to paraphrase Mircea Eliade as he spoke about the Romanians during his legionary period? Of course not. In my eyes, however, they are irrevocably "people of the link." Rather than being linked through topography and geography, these people remained connected by history and culture.