

Omer Bartov

*on Eastern Galicia's
past & present*

Not many people in the United States, or for that matter, Europe, have heard of Buczacz (or Buchach), even though it was the hometown of Yosef Shmuel Agnon (1888 – 1970), the Nobel Prize laureate who recreated it in his novels and stories as a microcosm of East European shtetl life; of Emanuel Ringelblum (1900 – 1944), the great historian of Polish-Jewish relations and the founder of the *Oneg Shabbat* archive, which preserves the records of the Warsaw Ghetto, next to which he was eventually denounced and murdered; and of Simon Wiesenthal (1908 – 2005), who came to be

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known after the war as the Vienna-based 'Nazi hunter.' One of Sigmund Freud's grandparents lived in Buczacz, as did many famous rabbis, nowadays largely forgotten by the non-Orthodox. Several lesser-known Ukrainian writers and musicians, including the impressive opera singer Solomiya Krushelnytska (1872 – 1952), were born and raised either in Buczacz or in nearby villages. My own mother spent her childhood there in the 1920s and 1930s.

Buczacz is located in what used to be called Eastern Galicia, the eastern part of the southern Polish territory annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1772 and made into the crownland of Galicia. Following World War I, Eastern Galicia was reattached to the new Polish state. It was taken over by the Soviet Union as part of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in 1939, occupied by Nazi Germany after its attack on Russia in 1941, and then taken over again by the Soviet Union and annexed to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine. Since 1991, the former Eastern Galicia – whose largest city is L'viv (Lvov, Lwów, Lemberg) – has constituted part of the western region of the independent Ukraine.

Buczacz, like many other towns in Eastern Galicia, was a multiethnic society. While the rural population was mainly Ukrainian (or Ruthenian, as it was previously called), the town dwellers were predominantly Polish and Jewish. The Jewish inhabitants of many of the small towns in this region, as well as in other parts of Eastern Europe and Western Russia, called these places *shtetlach* (plural of *shtetl*), indicating that the majority, or at least the plurality, of a town's population were Jews. But ethnic groups – arranged first and foremost by religion, and then from the latter part of the nineteenth century as different nations, or 'races,' as well – had lived side

by side in Eastern Galicia for some four hundred years.

While there were periods of strife – both domestic and with external forces – and although we should not idealize their relations, these groups knew only the reality of coexistence. Professions, neighborhoods, houses of worship, marriages, and burials were all organized according to ethnic and religious lines, yet people of different groups interacted constantly – in marketplaces and workplaces, in schools and public spaces, and increasingly in military and state service.

This reality began to change in the late nineteenth century, as people grew to associate religion and ethnicity, and to link ethnicity to nationality. This produced the demand to exclude, or at least limit, the rights of ‘foreign’ groups in the territories. In other words, nationalism – to which tradition and religion were grafted, and for which they acted as a sanction – began to wreak havoc on these borderlands. Nationalism was, of course, one of the main underlying causes of World War I, and it exploded with pent-up fury once the old multinational empires that had ruled Europe’s eastern borderland regions fell apart under the impact of the war.

In Eastern Galicia (at this time part of a resurrected Polish state that had ceased to exist for a time in the late eighteenth century, when it was swallowed up by Austria, Russia, and Prussia), the seething tensions between national minorities became dangerous both for the inhabitants of the region and for Poland as a whole. Devastated in World War I, Eastern Galicia was renamed Little Eastern Poland by its new rulers. It never completely recovered from the demographic and economic repercussions of the brutal Russian occupation, and the flight or deportation of hundreds of thousands of its inhabitants, many of them Jews.

The Polish government tried to colonize this land with ethnic Poles in order to diminish the demographic preponderance of the Ukrainian population. But Ukrainian nationalism, which had evolved there under the more permissible Habsburg rule before the war, took a violent turn, sprouting terrorism with strong anti-Semitic and anti-Polish components. Independent Poland, especially after the death of its dictator Józef Piłsudski, was also becoming increasingly anti-Semitic. The right-wing integral nationalists began to speak of a solution to the ‘Jewish question,’ one that would entail the departure or removal of the Jewish minority. The Jews, who constituted about 10 percent of Poland’s population, were especially numerous and often wretchedly poor in the eastern territories.

The Soviet occupation of Eastern Galicia (along with Volhynia and Western Belorussia to its north) between September 1939 and July 1941 greatly exacerbated the local tensions and dramatically destabilized the already fragile economic, social, and political conditions there. The Soviets tried rapidly to impose their own political and economic principles. They ruthlessly deported Polish nationalists, political activists, professionals, and intellectuals; and they went after Zionists, other Jewish political and religious leaders, businessmen, and white-collar workers. In the process, they also destroyed traditional Jewish communities. During the latter part of the Soviet occupation, which had initially presented itself as promoting the cause of Ukrainian nationalism by facilitating unification with Soviet Ukraine, the authorities turned against anticommunist Ukrainian nationalists with a vengeance. When the Germans invaded these territories, they found a legacy of violence, rage, and fear they could exploit to their

advantage, at least as far as their own plans of genocide and colonization were concerned.

Most important, even though the Soviets had deported Jews in disproportionately higher numbers than either Poles or Ukrainians, the local gentile population had come to identify the Jews with the Communists, and thus with their recent suffering by Soviet hands. In part, the fact that Jews were indeed proportionally overrepresented among the Communists encouraged this view; and in part, it also reflected the reality that Soviet rule had provided opportunities for Jews – young Jews especially – that the anti-Semitic Polish state had blocked. The consequences of this perception were of course disastrous when the Nazis made the Jewish population the main target of persecution and murder.

In the brief three years of German occupation, 1941 – 1944, the Jewish population of Eastern Galicia was almost entirely wiped out. Of the more than five hundred thousand Jewish inhabitants, about half were deported to extermination camps and the other half murdered in or near their own towns, often in sight and with the willing collaboration of their gentile neighbors. Initially, the Ukrainian militias and nationalists worked closely with the Germans, hoping the new rulers would assist them in creating an independent anticommunist Ukrainian state. Once they realized that this would not happen, and that the Germans were likely to lose the struggle against the Soviet Union, Ukrainian nationalists turned against German rule. Yet, simultaneously, they fought the arriving Soviet forces and carried out widespread ethnic-cleansing operations against the Polish population in hopes of ending the war in an ethnically homogeneous Ukraine.

In this the Ukrainian nationalists succeeded: Ukraine became largely ethnically homogeneous in its western parts (in the east there were and still are large Russian concentrations). But it did not become independent until 1991. The nationalist insurgency against the renewed Soviet occupation continued until the 1950s, with large-scale warfare between Ukrainian insurgents and Soviet security forces. Afterward, the region remained a high-security area and difficult to visit; its economy was depressed and little changed there until a few years ago.

My original impulse in undertaking research on Buczacz, in the heart of this region, was to try to understand how one interethnic community – whose constituent groups had for centuries managed a delicate, complex coexistence – was transformed into a community of genocide. In researching its history, I discovered the extraordinary richness and variety of the historical sources and the individual voices of this community, whose population ranged in the twentieth century from just ten thousand to fifteen thousand people. Searching for documents entailed using archives in Ukraine, Poland, Russia, Austria, Germany, Israel, the United States, and even France and Britain. The number of languages I had to master in order to put together the story of this place was also staggering. Moreover, I discovered that many of Buczacz's citizens had recorded their testimonies, mostly of suffering, exile, and murder. I collected hundreds of these Jewish, Polish, and Ukrainian written and oral accounts to recreate the complex fabric of a site whose biography can only be told through many voices.

Indeed, the schizophrenic nature of the town's biography is what makes it all the more intriguing. Buczacz, and many of its sister towns across the wide

swath of Europe's eastern borderlands, offers several narratives of its past. Though they speak of the same place, each of these narratives is radically different, depending on the narrator's ethnic-religious identity. For the Jews, a town like Buczacz was a venerable old *shtetl*. For the Ukrainians, it was part of their ancestral lands, ruled and exploited by the Poles and their Jewish agents. For the Poles, it was a borderland they had civilized and protected from savage invaders from the east and the south, an outpost of European culture and Roman Catholic faith.

While undertaking this research, I became fascinated as well with the current Ukrainian politics of memory, and how they relate to a past largely unknown to the present population. My ruminations on this issue culminated in a book, which Princeton University Press is publishing this fall, *Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine*, a journey in time and space into this cradle of Jewish mysticism, Ukrainian nationalism, and Polish Romanticism. Since its independence, Ukraine has been obliterating the last remnants of Jewish civilization from this region and replacing them with the symbols of a resurgent local nationalism. The book documents cemeteries turned into markets, synagogues made into garbage dumps and sports halls, unmarked sites of mass killings, and staircases made out of gravestones. Conversely, it also reveals the rapid erection of statues, memorials, and museums that not only celebrate the Ukrainian nation but also glorify nationalist leaders who collaborated with the Nazis in the murder of the Jews. The book includes sixty out of hundreds of photographs I took in order to record this second destruction as well as the rapidly vanishing remnants of a world that is no more.

Harriet Ritvo

on the animal turn

Learned attention to animals is far from new. The scientific study of animals stretches back at least to Aristotle. Livestock have attracted the interest of scholars with either a practical or theoretical interest in agriculture. Critics of art and literature have explicated animal symbols and animal themes. Historians

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