

Ukraine & The Jews: Past, Present, and Future

Shabbat Zachor

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The year before my bar mitzvah, my hometown of Cleveland, OH was the center of an international spectacle. A 68 year old auto mechanic of Ukrainian descent had supposedly been identified as a notoriously brutal and sadistic guard nicknamed Ivan the Terrible, at the Treblinka Extermination Camp—second only to Auschwitz in how many Jews were murdered there,. Perhaps you remember the saga of John Demjanjuk, his extradition to Israel to stand trial, his conviction two years later, his death sentence and imprisonment, followed by the overturning of that sentence by Israel's Supreme Court. We were shocked, I recall, when in 1993 Demjanjuk returned to Cleveland to resume his previously inconspicuous life in a suburb heavily populated by Ukrainian Americans. Not long after, he was back on trial, this time not for being Ivan the Terrible, but as a camp guard at Sobibor, Majdanek, and Flossenbergl concentration camps. For this, he was convicted—but Demjanjuk died before serving out his sentence.

I cannot describe to you how dramatic it was to live through those times in Cleveland, and what an impact it had on me as I was not only coming to terms with the enormity of the Holocaust, but also discovering my own Jewish identity. Demjanjuk was born in a farming village about 100 miles west of Kiev. Demjanjuk was conscripted into the Soviet Red Army, and then taken prisoner by the Germans, eventually being recruited as one of the Trawniki men, most of them Ukrainian, a paramilitary force that were responsible for some of the most horrific crimes of the Final Solution.

The reason I am telling you this is that when Russia invaded Ukraine, and this war broke out, I was obviously as concerned as any civilized human being would be by this wanton aggression and loss of life. The despair at witnessing the daily destruction of a sovereign nation, the blatant targeting of innocent civilians, hospitals, schools, homes, infrastructure; the dislocation of hundreds of thousands of people is absolutely heart wrenching. Vladimir Putin is a land-grabbing, brutal despot, period, full stop. At the same time as I felt all of this anguish, I also felt in my heart a certain hesitation about draping myself in a Ukrainian flag. Something inside me could not shake the blood soaked history of my people, the Jewish people, in Ukraine over so many centuries.

Jews have been in Ukraine for over a thousand years. In a story that has been repeated so many times, in so many countries across the European continent, they were often wedged between warring groups, due to circumstances largely outside of their control. In the 1600's Polish nobility took ownership of massive tracks of Ukrainian land, where they established farms and sprawling estates that produced great harvests of crops that made the Polish landowners very wealthy. Instead of financing and managing these lands directly, the Polish nobility employed Jews, who were restricted from most other occupations, to do it for them. This arrangement placed Jews in the cross hairs between Orthodox Christian Ukrainian peasants and the Roman Catholic Polish landowners. By the mid-17th Century, the Ukrainian peasants rose up in revolt, and as the historian Robert Seltzer wrote, "Jews were slaughtered by almost everyone."^[1] They were even betrayed by the Polish nobility who failed to defend them when the Cossacks and Ukrainian peasants massacred tens of thousands of Jews in one town after the next. There are many accounts of these pogroms, but they are all unspeakably cruel and describe such unfathomable violence that I could not in good conscience read them aloud in this place, on Shabbat. All this savagery was directed by the Ukrainian military mastermind, Bogdan Chmielnitski, who

^[1] Seltzer, Robert M. *Jewish People, Jewish Thought, The Jewish Experience in History*, 1980. Page 481

sought to eradicate Ukraine of all Jews. He almost succeeded. For liberating Ukraine of Polish influence, Chmielnitski has been considered a Ukrainian national hero. To this day, in the middle of Kyiv is a massive stone sculpture of Chmielnitski on horseback, right in Sophia Square, with the golden domed St. Michael's monastery in the background. Smack dab in the city center of Ternopil, stands another monument to Chmielnitski. All over Ukraine, this terrorizing murderer of tens of thousands of Jews is memorialized in statues and shrines. And the rampant antisemitism that led to so many pogroms in centuries past, resurfaced again in the Holocaust, where Ukraine was ground zero for the extermination of Jews. Putin may have bombed the Babi Yar memorial, but nothing will erase the mass grave where in the space of just two days, on September 29-30, 1941, 34,000 Jews were stripped, lined-up and machined gunned into a ravine just outside of Kyiv. That's 34,000 out of a million Ukrainians murdered in the Shoah. As Elie Weisel once wrote, "Babi Yar is not *in* Kiev, no. Babi Yar *is* Kiev. It is the entire Ukraine."^[2]

Another way to say that is that Jew hatred has been synonymous with Ukrainian history. But Ukraine is also a very mysterious place. It is mysterious because of the Jews who survived this onslaught, the Jews who returned after the waves of pogroms, and the Jews of Ukraine today. The paradoxical fact is that Ukraine produced some of the most consequential movements and leaders in modern Jewish history. The founder of the Hassidic movement, the great Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, who revolutionized Jewish religious thought and practice lived his entire life in Ukraine. Some of his greatest followers, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the Lubavicher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and the many luminaries of the Chernobyl Hasidic dynasty were all Ukrainian. Israel's national poet, Hayim Nahman Bialik was born in Ukraine, as was the author, journalist, and play write Isaac Babel, acclaimed "the greatest prose writer of Russian Jewry". The revisionist Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who was Volodymyr before he was Ze'ev, was born in Odessa. Seventy one years after Golda Mabovich was born in Kyiv, she became Israel's 4th prime minister, better known as Golda Meir. And on May 20, 2019, the grandson of a Holocaust survivor; a Jewish comedian, turned politician named Volodymyr Oleksandrovykh Zelenskyy was elected by an astounding 73% of the voters to be Ukraine's sixth president, and first Jewish president. When Zelensky was elected, Ukraine's prime minister was Volodymyr Groysman, also a Jew, making Ukraine the only country in the world other than Israel to have both a Jewish president and prime minister!

Some thought that the electorate may not have known that Zelensky was Jewish...he certainly did not make it a cornerstone of his campaign. Others surmised that prominent Jewish involvement in the overthrow of the corrupt, pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich ushered in a new acceptance of Jewish Ukrainians. Indeed a Pew Survey conducted in 2018 revealed Ukrainians, notwithstanding all the Chmielnitski statues, as the most accepting people in all of Central and Eastern Europe of Jews as fellow citizens. Only 5% say they would not accept Jews as fellow citizens...in Russia it's 14%! A few years ago, Ukraine's parliament passed a law criminalizing antisemitism, complete with prison sentences and hefty fines. And today, the world has turned its collective attention to this brave 44 year old Jewish hero, who refuses to capitulate to Russian aggression; who has spoken out with moral clarity and invincible courage on behalf of his country and his people. Gal Beckerman, senior editor of The Atlantic wrote: "Along with all that seems to be recurring—the military aggression, the assault on freedom—there is also something new: inclusion and acceptance in a place where it once seemed impossible."^[3] To be perfectly honest, I worry about the Jews of Ukraine. I worry that if, somehow, the nation collapses and Russia overruns the country, Zelensky will go from being today's Jewish hero to tomorrow's Jewish

^[2] Wiesel, Elie. *The Jews of Silence, A Personal Report on Soviet Jewry*, 1966. Page 36.

^[3] <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/02/zelensky-ukraine-president-jewish-hero/622945/>

scapegoat, and the remaining Jews of Ukraine along with him. I pray fervently that he stays safe, and continues to have the bravery and tenacity to face down Vladimir Putin.

In the parasha this morning, the Torah states that the priests at the newly built tabernacle were to kindle the fire on the altar, where the sacrifices were made. *Ve'natnu b'nai Aharon ha'Kohen eish al ha'mizbeach...*^[4] But the Talmud provides a different angle. In Tractate Yoma, page 45b we read "*af al pi she ha'aish yored min ha'shamayim, mitzvah le'havi min ha'hedyot,*" Even though the fire miraculously came down from heaven to the altar, it was still a mitzvah for the people to kindle the fire. So the sacrifice was consumed on the altar from a heavenly fire, according to the rabbis, but still the priests were expected to light a flame in that place. What's going on here? According to the 13th Century Sefer Ha'Chinuch,^[5] when God performs miracles in the world, "*le'olam ya'asem derecho seter,*" God tends to do it secretly. In other words, God likes to embed miraculous events in nature and in the works of human beings. God is behind the scenes lighting flames, making miracles possible everywhere. About the element of fire, the Sefer Ha'Chinuch^[6] wrote, "*Bo itchazek ha'adam vayitnoei'a v'yifal,*" it represents the force with which we are strengthened and allows us to move and to function. My prayer is that fire burns brightly not only in the heart of Volodymyr Zelensky, but of all the Ukrainian people seeking strength to protect their families, their homes, and their nation. May the miraculous flames that have strengthened their resolve and courage so far, continue to propel them to miraculous survival in the face of extraordinary odds.

This week, Sari and I donated to the Joint Distribution Committee, which is providing food, medicine, and warm shelter to many displaced Ukrainians. I encourage you to give tzedaka to the Joint, to the Jewish Federation's Ukrainian Relief Fund, to IsraAid, to AJC, HIAS, or the many worthy organizations helping these people in desperate need.

And let me just conclude with a word of deepest gratitude for the single most important factor in the world for the safety and security of Ukrainian Jews or any Jews who face danger in the world. That factor did not exist when Chmielnitsky was massacring Ukrainian Jews, or during waves of Russian pogroms, or during the Holocaust. But it exists today, thank God, and we pray that it continues to exist forever...the Jewish State of Israel. A home and a refuge for any Jew, from anywhere, at any time. This crisis today underscores the very purpose of modern Zionism. That never again will Jews be homeless in the world, never again will Jews be victims of persecution and genocide, that never again will Jews wander in search of safety. May God bless the State of Israel, the one place where we are *Am chofshi be'artzeinu*, a free people, a liberated people, in our homeland. And may God bless all those fighting for freedom in Ukraine and throughout the world.

Shabbat Shalom

^[4] Leviticus 1:7

^[5] *Sefer Ha'Chinuch*, Mitzvah 132 (To Kindle the Fire on the Altar), Feldheim Edition, Vol. II, 1984. Pages 74-77.

^[6] *ibid*