When Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, saw that the Jewish people were threatened by tragedy, he would go to a particular place in the forest where he lit a fire, recited a particular prayer, and asked for a miracle to save the Jews from the threat. Because of the Holy Fire and faithfulness of the prayer, the miracle was accomplished, averting the tragedy.

A generation later, when the Baal Shem Tov’s disciple, the Maggid of Mezrich, had to intervene with heaven for the same reason, he went to the same place in the forest where he told God that while he did not know how to light the fire, he could still recite the prayer, and again, the miracle was accomplished.

Later still, the Maggid’s student, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov, went into the forest to save his people. “I do not know how to light the fire,” he pleaded with God, “and I do not know the prayer, but I can find the place and this must be sufficient.” Once again, the relief came to our people.

When it was the turn of Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn, the great-grandson of the Maggid of Mezrich, who was named after the Baal Shem Tov, to avert the threat, he sat in his armchair, holding his head in his hands, and said to God: “I am unable to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story. That must be enough.”

Nobel Laurette, Elie Wiesel, recounts all of this in the introduction to his novel, The Gates of the Forest. One might wonder about all of these threats and perils against the Jewish community recurring generation after generation. But when we bear in mind that the Baal Shem Tov was born, and the Hasidic dynasties flourished in Ukraine, the history comes into clearer focus.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began this past February orchestrated by dictatorial leader, Vladimir Putin, the names of the towns and cities hear about in the news every day seem like a roadmap of Jewish history. Ukraine’s vibrant and influential Jewish
community goes back well into the Middle Ages, as does the history of antisemitism, pogroms, massacres. Some of the towns we name are remembered for those tragedies, and others for having been great centers of learning, and of thriving Jewish culture: Uman, Cherkasy, Kyiv, Dnipro, Odessa, Zhytomir, Lviv, Chernivtsy.¹

The stories of Ukrainian Jewry include the anti-Jewish violence perpetrated during the 17th century led by Bohdan Khmielnitsky—and then, more than a century later, the massacres carried out by Ivan Gonta. Other stretches of violence against the Jewish communities of Ukraine took place ever more recently, when waves of anti-Jewish pogroms occurring in the late 19th-Century following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, and then in 1905, during the failed first Russian Revolution. In the years following the first World War, approximately 100,000 Jews were killed in the more than one thousand pogroms that took place in some five hundred locales.²

Of course, the culmination of the catastrophies came during World War II, when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union. With an estimated one and a half million Jews killed in Ukraine from between 1941 and 1944, and recalling the thousands of Ukrainians assisting Germans in slaughtering their Jewish neighbors, the Holocaust remains the darkest page in the history of the Jews in the region.

Many have wondered why the vast majority of the Jewish world has taken up the Ukrainian cause, given the centuries of anti-Jewish hatred and bloodshed. But it would be a misrepresentation to reduce the history of the Jews in Ukraine to simply a narrative of unending pogrom and massacre, for over the centuries, these same towns and regions were places of coexistence, where were produced some of the greatest chapters in the history of Eastern European Jewish life.

Despite a history of enduring violence and constant political instability, Ukrainian Jews have made continued to make extraordinary contributions to the world in such diverse fields as science, politics, religion, the arts, sports and more. As I mentioned, here was the birthplace of the Baal Shem Tov, the inspirational founder of Hassidism. The birthplace of his great-grandson, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlov, the last Jewish mystic, annually attracts thousands of pilgrims to his gravesite in Uman. And Menachem Mendel Schneerson, known more commonly as “The Rebbe” was the last rebbe of Chabad Lubavitch – one of the most influential and dynamic international movements of the 20th - and now 21st- Centuries.
Israeli leaders including former Prime Ministers, Levi Eshkol and yes, Golda Meir, were born in Ukraine, as was Natan Sharansky one of the most famous refuseniks who advocated for Soviet Jewry's right to emigrate during the 1970s and 1980s.

Our “Who’s Who” of Ukranian Jews includes Shalom Aleichem, one of the most beloved Yiddish writers of all time, who’s short stories about Tevye the Dairyman inspired the hit musical, “Fiddler on the Roof”. Acclaimed pianist, Vladimir Horowitz, and violinist, Isaac Stern join our list, as does figure skater, Oskana Baiul, actress, Mila Kunis, and computer engineer, Jan Koum, who invented the messaging application WhatsApp, recently acquired by the Facebook platform for nearly $20 billion.³

When Vladimir Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine back in February, his assault upon a sovereign and democratic nation immediately evoked the fierce ire of all free nations of the West. The aggression against Russia’s neighboring population was roundly assailed in the United States by leadership across the political aisle in a manner that few issues have inspired. Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, has been hailed as a heroic leader, standing shoulder to shoulder with his people. And when American President, Biden, offered to secure safe passage for Zelensky and his family to escape in advance of the Russian onslaught, his defiant response will go down in history: “The fight is here,” he retorted, “I need ammunition, not a ride.”

As you likely know, Volodymyr Zelensky is a Jew, and for his boldness, his vision, and his leadership over these months, he will surely go down in the annals of both world and Jewish history. Ukraine, historically, has a way of doing that, as Ukrainian Jews have been changing the world for hundreds of years.

The free world has denounced Russia's invasion of their neighboring and sovereign nation, and likewise the brutality of their assault against a civilian population. So, too, have many – not all, but many – who write and lecture on the morality of war itself. The American political philosopher, Michael Walzer, who spoke out against the Vietnam war in the early 1960's, is widely known for his liberal political stances. He is among those having deemed the Ukrainian fight against the Russians to be the paragon of a “just war.” The Ukrainians, he explained, “are fighting an unprovoked attack, defending themselves, and resisting Russian aggression by fighting, by risking their lives for their country's freedom.”
Interestingly, Walzer – a bonafide leftist, sees justification for a stronger pro-Israel attitude from those same liberal voices supporting the moral and just Ukrainian cause. He points out that Ukraine is the nation-state of the Ukrainian people, with a 20% [Russian] minority, and Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, with a 20% [Arab] minority, inside the Green Line he stipulates. He notes, “They are very similar, and if you realize the importance of Ukrainian nationhood, I think it is much easier to realize the value of Jewish nationhood. There are an awful lot of people on the Left, the liberal Left, who are very strongly supporting Ukraine. And I think we should be making the point that if they support a nation-state like Ukraine, they should support a nation-state like Israel.”4

In recent days, Rabbi Sergio Bergman, President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, sent a note to members of Reform congregations across the globe. He writes:

“News of atrocities and human suffering continues, and so we — as a united Progressive Jewish movement — are obligated to raise funds and provide emergency support to Ukrainian Jews and all the Ukrainian people, no matter their religion, background or present location.

“Among our initiatives, many in cooperation with our Progressive communities and synagogues across the European continent: rapid and safe transport for individuals and families fleeing Ukraine — food, clothing and shelter — relocation, integration and legal services — holy books for refugees and also those still inside the country — programs for child refugees with special needs — skills-building programs for women refugees in Israel, and more.

“As we pray for peace, and provide direct humanitarian aid to those in need, we are also preparing for the much-needed work reconstructing a full Progressive Jewish life in a free and sovereign Ukraine when that day arrives.”5

Three centuries ago, when tragedy loomed and the future seemed dim, an illustrious, Jewish leader, the Baal Shem Tov, lit a fire in the forest and lifted up a prayer to spark both faith and hope. So too, may we see the lights of freedom and democracy re-kindled and blaze in those same places of our people’s past. And perhaps those flames will be fanned and kept alive by another Ukrainian Jew, a leader of his nation, who stands on the shoulders of the generations.


2 Ibid.
3 See https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/16-jews-from-ukraine-who-changed-the-world/


5 See www.wupjis@wupj.org.il, August, 2022.