



# JEWISH LUDMIR

## THE HISTORY AND TRAGEDY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF VOLODYMYR-VOLYNSKY

A REGIONAL HISTORY

VOLODYMYR MUZYCHENKO



WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY ANTONY POLONSKY

Jews of Poland



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A R E G I O N A L H I S T O R Y

V O L O D Y M Y R M U Z Y C H E N K O

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# Introduction

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In the introduction to his *Żydzi w Przemyslu do konca XVIII wieku* (The Jews in Przemyśl to the End of the Eighteenth Century), the historian Mojżesz Schorr wrote:

The main failing of the method which has been employed up to the present in investigating the history of the Jews in Poland is that general questions have been approached before the detailed problems were resolved. Scholars have attempted to describe the history of Jews in the whole of Poland before research had been done on the history of individual towns. Attempts were similarly made to describe the general history of the Jews before the specifics of individual periods had been illuminated.<sup>1</sup>

His observation, dating back more than a century, applies to the all of the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and it is as true today as when it was first made. There is thus all the more reason to welcome this comprehensive and moving history of the Jews of Volodymyr-Volynsky (Polish, Włodzimierz Wołyński; Yiddish, Ludmir), based not only on books and documents but also on many interviews and conversations with people from the town, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Volodymyr-Volynsky, situated on the Luha River (a tributary of the western Buh river), is one of the oldest towns in Volhynia. It takes its name from Prince Volodymyr Sviatoslavovych of

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1 Mojżesz Schorr, *Żydzi w Przemyslu do konca XVIII wieku* (L'viv, 1903).

Kyiv (ruled 980-1015 C.E.), who introduced Orthodox Christianity to Kyivan Rus' and established a stronghold here around 981. In 988, it became the capital of the Volodymyr Principality and the seat of an Orthodox bishopric, as is described in the Primary Chronicle. By 1300, the town had become the capital of the Principality of Galicia-Volhynia, one of the three principal states (along with Novgorod and Vladimir-Suzdal) which emerged from the collapse of Kyivan Rus'. In 1241, together with other Ruthenian principalities, it was conquered by the Tatars and incorporated into the Mongol Empire.

In 1349, the town was annexed by King Kazimierz the Great of Poland, but on his death in 1370 it was incorporated into the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which had incorporated Volhynia, Podolia, and left-bank Ukraine after Grand Duke Algirdas defeated the Mongols in 1362 at the Battle of Blue Waters. In 1431, the city was granted municipal self-government in accordance with Magdeburg law by the Lithuanian Grand Duke Švitrigaila. After the constitutional union of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in 1569 (the two states had been dynastically linked since 1385), the town again became part of the Kingdom of Poland. It passed to the tsarist Empire after the second partition of Poland in 1792. In 1915, the town was occupied by the Austrians, and during the Russian Civil War it was disputed among Polish, Ukrainian, and Bolshevik forces, coming under Polish control in January 1919. In the interwar period, it was the seat of a *powiat* within the Polish province of Volhynia and an important army garrison.

Following the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the city became occupied by the Red Army on 19 September 1939 and became a part of the Ukrainian SSR. On 23 June 1941, it was seized by Germany, and during World War II a German concentration camp was located near the city. It was recaptured by the Red Army on 20 July 1944 and again became a part of the Ukrainian SSR. Today it is the district centre of the Volyn' oblast in independent Ukraine.

The Jewish community of Volodymyr-Volynsky is first mentioned in 1171 and was initially made up of Jews from Kyiv, the Khazar khanate, and other eastern communities. The town became an important

way-station on the trade route between Spain and western Europe and the east, and among the merchants who took part in this were Jews from Ashkenaz (Northern France and Germany). In the last third of the thirteenth century, the community was led by Rabbi Chaim ben Yitshak (Maharah), author of *Or zaru'a*, and Rabbi Manoakh ben Ya'akov. According to Rus' chronicles, Jews participated in the funeral of Vladimir Vasil'kovich, Prince of Vladimir, in 1288. Tombstones from the fourteenth century are further proof of the Jewish presence in the town, as are the remains of a synagogue unearthed in 2009.

Organized Jewish life ceased to exist under Tatar rule but a small number of Jews were encouraged by Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania (ruled 1392-1430) to return to the town. Jews were expelled from the Grand Duchy by the Grand Duke Alexander Jagiellon in 1495. They soon returned, and in the early sixteenth century an organized community was re-established. Its growth was facilitated by the transfer, following the Union of Lublin, of the province of Volhynia to the Kingdom of Poland. It was now, in 1570, that King Zygmunt August II (ruled 1548-1572) granted a charter of privileges to the city, which came under his direct rule. According to it, the Jews, together with the Christians, were exempted from paying duties on trade apart from those on salt and beeswax. Jews now engaged in tax farming, the leasing of estates and mills, and the right to sell alcohol, and were active in trade, attending fairs at Lublin, Poznań, and Kraków, where they sold furs, woolen cloth, and wax. They also engaged in artisan trades, in spite of Christian attempts to limit this, above all shoemaking and leather processing. Ludmir was represented on regional and national Jewish councils, and one of its delegates was the well-known kabbalist and author Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller, who also served as community rabbi from 1634 to 1643. He was not the only distinguished figure to hold this office. Other important rabbis were Yitshak ben Bezalel, who served from 1547 to 1570, Ishaya ben Yitshak (Yitshak ben Shemu'el ha-Levi), who was rabbi until 1595 and later became rabbi of Kraków, and the talmudist Isaac ben Samuel ha-Levi (1580-1646), who was born in the town. There is much more to be found in the book on the spiritual leaders of the community at this time.

The Jewish quarter of Volodymir was located in the northeastern section of the town, along the defensive ramparts, not far from the Church of the Presentation of the Holy Virgin. The Jews of the town suffered greatly in the Khmel'nytskyi uprising. When it began, approximately 1,000 Jews lived there in 159 homes. During the uprising, Cossacks murdered or took captive many local Jews, and by the end of 1649, there were only thirty-nine Jewish homes in the town. In 1653 only twenty-five homes were subject to the poll tax. As a result, in 1653, and again in 1658, the leaders of the community were compelled to borrow considerable sums to assist its poorer members, and as a consequence the *kehila* became indebted to the royal treasury and private creditors.

These efforts to revive Jewish life do seem to have borne fruit. From 1653 the community's leaders once again began taking part in the Jewish regional council and also representing Volhynia in the Va'ad Arba Aratsot. A further sign of the revival of the community was the award in 1700 by King Augustus II of Poland-Lithuania (ruled 1699-1733) to a local Jew, Fishel Levkovych, the *parnas* of the regional council and the Crown Va'ad, of the title of "royal agent and purveyor and official secretary for the Council of the Four Lands." The 1764 census recorded 1,401 Jews living in Volodymyr-Volynsky, making it the second largest Jewish town (after Lutsk) in the Volyn region. According to the census of 1765, 1,327 Jews living in 159 houses paid the poll tax.

In 1795, the town was annexed by Russia; and in the following years, its population grew because of its importance as a center for trade and artisan crafts, close to the border of the Habsburg Empire. Jews traded in general goods, grain, and lumber; and the main artisan trades were tailoring, hat-making, and shoemaking. In 1805, there were 1,943 Jews and 673 Christians living in the town. According to the 1861 census, their number had now grown to 6,122, out of a total population of 8,636. The census of 1897, the first to be conducted using modern techniques, assessed the town's population as 9,883, of whom Jews comprised 59.3 percent (5,869 individuals). In addition, there were 1,735 Russians, 1,367 Ukrainians, 776 Poles, 14 Czechs, and 100 Germans. The fact that the Jewish population had fallen slightly since

1861 was probably the result of emigration. By 1912, the town's population had grown to 15,622 while the Jewish population was now 7,060.

At this time, there were two large synagogues in the city: one, elaborately decorated and made of wood, destroyed during the Nazi occupation; and the other, a brick choral synagogue, dismantled in the early 1950s. There were also two *Batei Midrash* and many smaller *shtetl-בלאך*, since the town had become an important Hasidic centre. In 1786, Rabbi Shelomoh Gotlieb ben-Yuta, a pupil of Aaron Perlov, founder of the Karliner hasidic dynasty, settled in the town and attracted a significant following. He was killed in 1792 by a Cossack involved in the repression of the Polish resistance to the second partition. In hasidic tradition, because of the circumstances of his death, Shelomoh of Karlin has been seen as the reincarnation of the first suffering Messiah, son of Joseph, who is reborn from generation to generation and is constantly present on Earth. His life and teachings are movingly described in this book. Today, Shlomo Wilhelm, one of his descendants, heads the Orthodox community in Zhytomyr and is Chief Rabbi of Central and Western Ukraine.

The town was also the home of the “Maiden of Ludmir” (Khanerokhl Werbermacher, born c. 1815), a popular miracle-working figure who was one of the few women to play an important role in hasidism and whose life and career is fully discussed in this volume. The Maiden of Ludmir established a reputation as a student of the Bible, Talmud, and other rabbinic literature. After the collapse of an engagement, the death of her mother, and a mysterious illness, she shut herself off from the world. She began to observe rituals usually reserved for men, using her inheritance to build a study house of her own and leading a weekly *tish* [gathering] for her followers, acquiring a following as a teacher and worker of miracles. At the same time, her behaviour aroused strong opposition, above all because of her refusal to marry, which was regarded as unnatural—although Jewish tradition legitimated on occasion male sexual abstinence, it deemed such behavior unacceptable for women.<sup>2</sup> The Maiden was thus forced to conclude two marriages, both

2 See Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Female Bodies, Male Souls: Asceticism and Gender in the Jewish Tradition* (forthcoming).

of which were unconsummated. She died in Palestine in 1892. In 2004, a new tombstone was unveiled at what was believed to be her grave on the Mount of Olives. In the words of Ada Rapoport-Albert, author of a pioneering study of her career: “Had this tradition bestowed any legitimacy on the ascetic piety of women, the Maid might have found an outlet for it even within marriage as did men who managed to achieve it without altogether renouncing their ... obligation toward worldly existence.”<sup>3</sup>

Jewish life in the town was affected by the new developments in the Pale of Settlement at the end of the nineteenth century. Modern medical and charitable facilities were created, including a mutual aid fund which offered Jews no-interest loans, and, in addition to the yeshiva in the town, a state Jewish school and Jewish technical school were founded. Modern Jewish political movements also established themselves in the town with branches of the Hovevei Zion Party, the Bund, and the Zionist Socialist Party.

Volodymyr-Volynsky was occupied by the Austrians in the summer of 1915 after part of the town had been destroyed by the retreating Russian army. It suffered further damage during the fighting in the latter part of World War I and during the Russian civil war and was occupied by the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UNR), the Hetmanate of Pavlo Skoropadsky, and the Bolsheviks before it ultimately came under Polish rule in September 1920. All these forces attacked the local Jews, who were defended by a two-hundred-strong Jewish militia established during the Austrian occupation.

When peace returned in 1921, there were 5,917 Jews in the town, making up just over half of the total population. By 1931 the town’s population had grown to 23,500, of whom 11,985 were Jews, comprising fifty-one percent of the total. Ukrainians constituted twenty-two percent. By 1934, the city’s demographic face had changed, partly as a

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3 Ada Rapoport-Albert, “On Women in Hasidism, S. A. Horodecky and the Maid of Ludmir Tradition,” in *Jewish History: Essays in Honor of Chimen Abramsky*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Steven J. Zipperstein (London: Halban, 1988), 502–3, 508.

result of the incorporation of surrounding villages. According to the town records, it now had 27,117 inhabitants, of whom 10,406 were Jews.

Jews dominated the economic life of the town, and in 1926 eighty-four percent of the businesses were in their hands. The reconstruction of Jewish life was assisted by the the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (“the Joint”). Faced with anti-Jewish violence in May 1923, the tradition of self-defense established during the war was still effective. The most active of the Jewish political parties were the Zionists. The Zionist youth movements—*Ha-Shomer ha-Tsa’ir*, *Ha-Tsofm* (scouts), *Ha-Shomer ha-Leumi* (National Guard), *Ha-No’ar ha-Tsiyoni*, and *Betar* all operated in Volodymyr-Volynsky. In the municipal elections of 1929, Jewish groupings won twelve of the twenty-four seats. By the late 1930s, however, the rise in government and popular antisemitism made the situation of the Jews increasingly perilous, as is well-documented in this book by the memoirs of Juliusz Bardach, a native of the town who later became a leading Polish legal historian.

At the same time, Jewish cultural life was well-developed, with a large Sholem Aleichem Library of Jewish Literature and a Yiddish theatre. Several Yiddish-language periodicals were published there, including the non-party *Unzer lebn* and *Ha-Khaver*, published by the student union of the Zionist Tarbut school. Among the Jewish educational institutions were this Tarbut school and an agricultural school linked with it which offered theoretical and practical training for young people who intended to work the land in Palestine, separate Orthodox schools for boys and girls— part of the Yavneh and Beys Yankev networks— and a private Jewish gymnasium with Polish as the language of instruction. There was also an ORT technical school where students were trained as artisans.

After the Polish defeat in September 1939 and the incorporation of the town into the Soviet Union, large numbers of Jews fled eastward, and the Jewish population of the town rose to 25,000. The leaders of the Tarbut briefly obtained the consent of the new authorities to allow the school to continue to offer instruction in Hebrew, provided all study of religion was removed from the curriculum, but this lasted only two months; and sovietized Yiddish then became the language of

instruction. As elsewhere in the newly incorporated areas of the Soviet Union, the initial hopes of many Jews that they would be able to live under Soviet rule were soon dispelled. Jewish businesses were nationalized, Zionist politicians were arrested, Jewish political parties were banned, and middle class Jews and refugees made up a significant proportion of those deported to the interior of the Soviet Union in the spring and summer of 1940.

The Germans entered Volodymyr-Volynsky on 25 June 1941, and the city became part of the administrative-territorial order of the *Generalkommissariat Wolhynia and Podolia* (Volyn and Podillia), which was part of the *Reichskommissariat Ukraine*. The account of the fate of the Jews of Volodymyr under Nazi rule is one of the most valuable and new aspects of this book. To Hitler and his closest associates, the myth of the Jewish conspiracy to destroy the German people provided a central motive which would unite the disparate elements making up Nazi doctrine. Though Nazi Germany had been slow to put into practice the more extreme elements of its antisemitism, by 1938 the regime was set in its deep-seated hatred of the Jews and its determination to root out Jewish influence wherever it could. In November of that year, a ferocious pogrom was unleashed over the whole of Germany in response to the assassination in Paris of a German diplomat by a desperate Jewish youth. As relations between Poland and Germany deteriorated, Hitler threatened the Jews with genocide: "If international Jewish power in Europe and beyond again succeeds in enmeshing the peoples in a world war, the result will not be the Bolshevization of the world and a victory for Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."

These genocidal threats were not immediately carried out after Hitler's occupation of Poland, but the twenty-one months that preceded the invasion of the Soviet Union saw Nazi policy towards the Jews grow increasingly harsh. It was this invasion by German forces on Sunday, 22 June 1941, supported by troops from Finland, Hungary, Italy, Romania, and Slovakia, that made genocide possible. The conflict that followed was seen by the Nazis as an ideological crusade and a war of extermination (*Vernichtungskrieg*). Hitler and his circle saw the war as

an opportunity to carry out an even more radical ethnic reshaping of the areas east of Germany than that attempted in the Polish areas directly incorporated into the Third Reich. *General Plan Ost*, formulated early in 1941, envisaged massive German settlement in the areas they hoped to conquer, which would be made possible by the expulsion or starvation of “thirty-one million Slavs” and, presumably, by the elimination of most of the local Jews. In addition, the awareness that Germany was fighting a war of attrition and the memory of the hardships created by the blockade during the First World War meant that Nazi planning was based on the rapid conquest of the Soviet Union and the seizure of its resources, above all grain and oil, which would be needed for the war with the British Empire and, in due course, the United States. The military requirement for a rapid campaign, combined with the Wehrmacht’s logistical shortcomings, led to a decision to live off the land. That decision, plus the regime’s determination to extract food for the home front, contributed to a policy of deliberate starvation by which the Germans expected to kill off a large portion of the Soviet population. Terror would be necessary to ensure the provision of food for the army and the German home front, and, because of the shortage of German personnel, to carry out the grandiose plans of the Third Reich. Moreover, German military strategy had long been based on the principle that pre-emptive action was necessary to forestall civilian resistance.

These considerations led to the adoption of a policy of genocide. By this time the policies adopted by the Nazis towards the congenitally ill and people with disabilities had resulted in the development of a technology of mass murder. The gas chamber, the iconic instrument of the Nazi anti-Jewish genocide, with its employment of assembly-line practices, its use of disinformation and deceit, and its avoidance of the need for the murderers to be personally involved in the shedding of blood, was first tried out in Germany in the “euthanasia” program in which 70,000 people with mental and physical disabilities were gassed between September 1939 and the summer of 1941. In September 1941, experiments with Zyklon B gas, an insecticide, were carried out on Soviet prisoners of war in Auschwitz. There was much interchange of

personnel between those engaged in implementing these programmes and those later involved in the mass murder of the Jews.

Although such a policy was not part of the planning of Operation Barbarossa, its architects clearly envisaged mass killings of Jews and other civilians. In order to avoid such conflicts between the Wehrmacht, the SS, and the civilian authorities as had dogged the September campaign in Poland, agreement among these agencies was reached before the invasion on the abrogation of international norms in the conduct of war.<sup>4</sup> The ideological character of the war in the east meant that the commanders of the Wehrmacht were willing to cooperate with the Nazis' plans there. Thus, in accordance with Hitler's instructions, in March 1941 Reinhard Heydrich, the Head of the RSHA, and Kurt Daluge, the Chief of the German Order Police (*Ordnungspolizei*), were able to reach an accord with the Wehrmacht on their relative spheres of competence in the areas to be conquered.<sup>5</sup> This led to the promulgation of a series of orders, among them the Order Concerning the Exercise of Martial Jurisdiction and Procedure in Area "Barbarossa" (*Gerichtsbareitserlaß*), the Directives for the Behaviour of the Troops in Russia (*Richtlinien für die Truppe*), and the Commissar Order (*Kommissarbefehl*).

The first of these, issued by the Armed Forces High Command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* [OKW]) on 13 May 1941, abolished the jurisdiction of courts martial in cases of "criminal activities undertaken by enemy civilians," authorizing officers to take "violent collective measures" against areas from which the Wehrmacht was attacked.<sup>6</sup>

4 A detailed account of the crimes of the Wehrmacht can be found in *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht* rev. ed. (Hamburg: Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, 2002), 16–36.

5 Helmuth Greiner and Percy Ernst Schramm (eds.), *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Wehrmachtführungsstab) 1940–1945*, 4 volumes (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1961–65), vol. 1, 341; vol. 2, 336 ff; Götz Aly, *Endlösung: Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995), 270.

6 Erlaß über die Ausübung der Kriegsgerichtsbarkeit im Gebiet 'Barbarossa' und über besondere Maßnahmen der Truppe, BA-MA, RW 4/v. 577, Bl. 72-74, cited in Christoph Dieckmann and Saulius Sužiedėlis, *The Persecution and Mass Murder of Lithuanian Jews during Summer and Fall of 1941* (Vilnius: Margi Raštai, 2006), 111–2.