

## Pilgrimage, 2003

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*To the memory of Misha Kozakov (1970–2003)*

When academics go a-touring, it can sometimes be a bit much. Who ever heard of a trip led by five official tour guides: three historians, one archivist-and-ethnographer, and one scholar of literature, not counting the heads of both travel agencies, one from Tel Aviv, the other from Kiev? How in the world did they expect us to get through the 195-page source book handed to us at the airport, a reader crammed with maps, historical essays, stories, poems, and memoirs about the over 40 places we were about to visit, if they kept us going from 8:00 in the morning until 10:30 at night, and to wile away the hours in between, there was someone at the microphone providing background information about the place we were about to enter or had just left? The fun part, it might have seemed, was speaking Hebrew, only traveling as we were with a group of Israeli academics, they didn't merely speak Hebrew, they speed talked, non-stop, all at once. And while the presence of 14 students, recipients of generous stipends from Sholem Aleichem House, the tour's sponsor, was a source of inspiration, this too might prove a liability, since each had an area of expertise that he or she, sooner or later, was expected to share.

If the first day was a taste of things to come, there'd be no time for lunch, no indoor places to stop and pee, no fixed schedule, and no clear focus. Jewishly, the places we visited that day—Vasilkov, Bila Tserkva, Skvyra, and Vinnitsia—were rather spare. The synagogue in Vasilkov had been converted into a train station as far back as 1929, and now even the trains had stopped running. The main attraction was an 88-year-old woman who appeared from across the tracks speaking the Yiddish native to that region. Things here changed very slowly, witness the statue of Lenin still dominating the central square in Bila Tserkva, with its Soviet-era plaque to mark the house where Sholem Aleichem had once lived, though the Ethnographic Museum in Vinnitsia, founded in 1918, now openly displayed its Judaica collection and devoted a wall to three native sons who had gone on to change the world: Levi Eshkol, the third prime minister of Israel; Selman A. Waksman, the American-Jewish microbiologist who invented streptomycin; and the Soviet artist and set designer Natan Altman. Skvyra showed renewed signs of life, because the present-day disciples of the Skvira dynasty, the Hasidim of New Square, New York, were funding a reconstruction of the Rebbe's study house, home, and

*Bounded Mind and Soul: Russia and Israel, 1880–2010.* Brian Horowitz and Shai Ginsburg, eds. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2013, 189–203.

synagogue, overseen by an unpretentious, middle-aged, Yiddish-speaking gentleman.

“Do you come from Skvirer Hasidim yourself?” we asked him.

“One of my grandfathers was a Chekist [i.e., a member of the Soviet secret police],” he replied, “the other—a *kontrabandist* [i.e., a smuggler]!”

Despite the early wake-up call, we set out on the late side for Nemirov. On the bus, when David Assaf takes us through the drill, we first notice that Avital, one of the students, is missing. In fact, she’s still asleep.

And so is Nemirov. Once a thriving center of commerce and Jewish learning, under Soviet rule, Veniamin Lukin explains over the microphone, Nemirov underwent a process of deurbanization, so that today what remains of the central market is a gravel strewn parking lot and a few rundown buildings. There is nothing to feast one’s eye on, no fortress and moat, no Great Synagogue, no visible sign of its former glory. There is a forest, however, with a beckoning river flowing nearby, where our group disembarks, and where Elhanan Reiner, from the Department of Jewish History at Tel Aviv University, whips out his dog-eared copy of *The Abyss of Despair*, the 17th-century Hebrew chronicle by Rabbi Nathan Nata Hanover. “The Oppressor Chmiel,” he begins reading, “may his name be blotted out, heard that many Jews had gathered in the holy community of Nemirov, and that they had a great deal of silver and gold with them. He knew that the holy community of Nemirov was distinguished for its great riches. It had been a great and important community replete with scholars and scribes, a city full of justice, the abode of righteousness, but now they have been murdered.”

So Hanover, speaking in beautiful Rabbinic Hebrew, is helping us to both remember and to mourn this place, stripped bare of historical markers and returned to a somewhat bedraggled state of nature, and indeed, suddenly we see the Cossack army encircling the fortress, witness the perfidy of the local Poles, hear the cries of those many who drowned themselves in the moat, marvel at the Jewish woman who submitted to martyrdom rather than marry a Cossack. Could that be the river where she threw herself in? Could this be the forest through which the stream of refugees fled?

But there is more, for David Assaf, from the same Jewish history department as Reiner, has just mentioned Nemirov’s connection to the great Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, the anniversary of whose death we marked last night at the cozy Business Club in Vinnitsia by singing all the poems of his we could remember that had been set to music; Bialik, who published the first version of “In the City of Slaughter,” his epoch-making poem on the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, under the coded title, “The Oracle at Nemirov,” thus forever linking the heroism of 17th-century Jewry with the cowardice of their modern offspring. The scandalous memory of Kishinev, in turn, reminds Assaf of contradictory evidence about mass conversions to Christianity that did in fact occur in Nemirov and elsewhere, which may explain why Hanover’s sanitized version was enshrined in Jewish memory, and why, as Av-

rom Novershtern, the director of Sholem Aleichem House, reminds us, Yiddish novelists from Sholem Asch to I. B. Singer have cribbed from it so generously.

Nemirov, then, was the first place to work its magic, for here the group experience, so different from traveling alone on a personal odyssey, paid its first dividend. A lone traveler would not have stopped in Nemirov, much less have spent an hour in its forest reading and picking apart an old Hebrew chronicle. Neither would that solo traveler have seen the bits and pieces of some long-ago event begin to cohere into a cumulative and communal narrative, a palimpsest, the performance of which put Nemirov on a reimagined map more real than the road signs along the highway, more real than any secular, temporal trajectory. At that moment, in that assembly, at that spot, our academic tour of Jewish sites in Ukraine turned into the beginnings of a pilgrimage.

Buoyed by this visit, we head for Braslav, our next stop. What a contrast! This time, we can actually see the river, flanked on our side by a picturesque flour mill and by geese and quaint cottages on the other. What's more, Braslav is an established shrine that has already been restored by present-day believers. This is because Rabbi Nathan Sternhertz, the scribe and chief disciple of the great theologian, mystic, messianist, and storyteller Nahman ben Simhah of Braslav, is buried here. From the flour mill below, a hundred steps lead up to the Ohel, the red-roofed tomb, of Reb Nathan. Cared for by a Ukrainian guard in special uniform and Jewish insignia, the tomb is spotless, save for the *kvitlekh*, petitionary notes, strewn about the grave, which bear witness to a constant flow of visitors. The various works of Reb Nahman in spanking new editions are neatly arrayed in book shelves positioned just above the stone benches that jut out of the walls. An electric clock keeps accurate time. Matches and memorial candles are available free of charge.

Yet except for Dvoyre, the only one in our group who brings her own *kvitl*, the rest of us are reluctant to do what is expected of pilgrims at the tomb of a zaddik. Assaf, our expert on all matters Hasidic, is not merely underwhelmed by what greets the visitor to Braslav, he is angered by the millions in profit made by the Braslaver from Israel who control the Rebbe's grave in Uman, which attracts over 15,000 pilgrims a year. He scoffs at the sterile design of this tomb, so reminiscent of the fake tombs of Moroccan saints that make such a mockery of religion in Israel. Did we notice the name Israel Meir Gabai emblazoned on the wall outside? Gabai, the Johnny Appleseed of Hasidic grave sites, is a Braslav Hasid of Sephardi descent. Why, young Sephardim, Assaf protests, are so brainwashed by the Braslav notion of *tikkun neshamot*, the perfection of dead souls, that they show up at the Ministry of Internal Affairs to adopt an Ashkenazi surname (like Bernstein and Rabinovich) and a Braslavian proper name (like Naftali, Nahman, Nathan). There's even a joke about such name changes, which Assaf is primed to tell, when Reiner, thoroughly exercised, cuts him off.

"Where else do you expect religious seekers to go?" asks Reiner in his stentorian voice. When Orthodoxy is in crisis, those on the periphery, he avers, those who feel themselves to be oppressed, as the Braslaver were throughout their history, and to some extent Chabad-Lubavitch too, become the movers and shakers of religious revival. As for the born-again Jews in Israel, it is simply untrue that all are of Sephardi descent. Many are the seekers of a spiritual path, and we should marvel at Braslav Hasidism for providing the address, the venue, the way.

Listening to this debate, I began to feel as if we were traveling in three time-frames simultaneously: even as we followed a fixed and fairly predictable repertoire of historic sites and sacred shrines, and even as the specific personalities and passions of our group were gradually coming to the fore, there were moments when the border between foreign place and familiar time converged. The debate between Assaf and Reiner about Braslav Hasidism had the effect of collapsing that border into the here-and-now. Assaf's emerging role, moreover, was not only to get us back on the bus, not merely to remind the Israelis of their commanding officer, not only to monitor the constant flow of information, but also to complicate the past by injecting the unresolved tensions of the present. Looking around at the sullen faces inside Reb Nathan's tomb, I wondered whether, so far from home, on such an arduous trip, the here-and-now was where one wanted to be.

Assaf must have been wondering the same thing, for at that moment, he calls on me to teach a tale by Reb Nahman. These 13 canonical tales, preserved in the Yiddish original and translated into Hebrew, have come to us verbatim, thanks to the tireless efforts of Nathan of Sternhertz. As students of Jewish history and literature, it is the *Tales* that we value most, not the theological and ethical works so conveniently arrayed on the surrounding bookshelves, tales that circulated only amongst the faithful for almost a century, until they were rediscovered by the architects of Jewish modernity: I. L. Peretz, Micah Josef Berdyczewski, Martin Buber, Hillel Zeitlin, Franz Kafka. I choose Tale No. VIII, "The Rabbi's Son." "Once there was a rabbi who had no children," I read in Yiddish and explicate in Hebrew. "Finally, he had an only son." It is a tragic tale of failed pilgrimage. Then Dvoyre concludes our lengthy stay in Braslav by teaching a short Braslavian "Torah."

On the morning of Day Three, standing inside the surviving ramparts of Kamianets-Podolsk, the city most redolent of the past that we have yet encountered, Assaf, in his no-nonsense mode, makes explicit the many-layeredness of our journey. Every city and town we pass through, he predicts, will invite a different set of competing "narratives" (the word itself having entered Israeli parlance via the stand-off between the "Zionist" and "Palestinian" master narratives). There is the Hasidic narrative, the Misnagdic (mainstream Rabbinic) narrative, the Frankist narrative (of which more anon), the Masklic-modernist narrative, the Yiddish narrative, the Holocaust narrative, not to mention the Polish, Haidamak (Cossack), and Armenian narra-

tives. If ever a place cried out for multiple readings, Kamianets-Podolsk is that place. If ever a group could effortlessly provide such readings from within its own ranks, our group of 42 scholars, students, and spouses is that group.

Max, our 28-year-old travel agent, local guide, and provider of kosher food, has just finished his canned speech in halting English about the bad Haidamaks who persecuted the Jews back in the late 18th century, when Lukin, speaking Hebrew with his thick Russian accent, points to the tower to our right. There indeed is where the infamous bandit Karmaliuk was imprisoned in 1830. In the municipal archives (tragically destroyed by fire a month ago) he unearthed evidence, however, that Karmaliuk served time along with 80 of his comrades-in-arms, a local band of Jewish highwaymen! Then Eli from Irkutsk who speaks ten languages and whose eyes betray his Mongol origins, Eli our 26-year-old boy wonder, who will translate for us from Russian and Ukrainian into Hebrew, has something to say about the ancient Turkish dialect of the local Armenians, a fascinating footnote that is interrupted by the appearance of Lukin's friend, the local historian Galina Osetrova, who has one more narrative to throw into the hopper, the narrative of Soviet Jewry, with its Yiddish state schools and Yiddish state theaters. Poor Galina doesn't realize that the latter is of interest to no one, firstly because, for Israelis, the Soviet-Yiddish experiment is beyond the pale, and secondly, because we have been promised by Reiner that in Kamianets-Podolsk he will rehearse the first, riveting chapter of the Frankist Controversy.

So here we are, inside the cathedral, turned into a mosque during the Turkish conquest in the late 17th century and back into a church by the addition of a Madonna on top of the minaret. Reiner, by exquisite chance, has located the memorial plaque to Bishop Dembowski, the arch anti-Semite, whose sudden death in 1757 put an abrupt halt to the burning of the Talmud and set back the career of Jacob Frank, the Jewish messianic pretender, and his followers. I can't remember the last time I so enjoyed being inside a church, or felt so caught up in a theological disputation. For besides the future of Rabbinic Judaism in Poland, there is much else at stake. Was Kamianets itself so susceptible to Frankism because it belonged briefly to the Turkish empire, which, as we already learned yesterday, was the source of the Sabbatian heresy a century before? How is it that some towns, rabbis and all, were caught up in the Frankist heresy while others were not? What are the links, both latent and manifest, between Hasidism and Frankism? Between Frankism and us? Does the so-called Sephardi mystique, the sex appeal exerted by everything "Spanish" on the Ashkenazi imagination, go back to Jacob "Frank" who, Assaf informs us, spread his teachings in Latin and Yiddish?

The students are busy writing everything down, otherwise, they will never remember Lukin telling us that Kamianets was one of two major cities that invoked the privilege of not tolerating Jewish settlement, which is why Nahman of Braslav would be denied entry when, a generation later, he tried

to redeem the excommunicated spirit of Jacob Frank. How **do** the students manage it? Take copious notes, pose for digital photos, field calls from Israel on their mobile phones, and buy ice cream bars, all at the same time? Two of them—a handsome couple they make—even manage a flirtation.

What a relief to arrive in Okup, a one-horse town, and spread out on the banks of the mighty Dniester, listening to Tuvia, the head of Dissenhaus Travel Agency, sing the “Baal Shem Tov’s Melody,” which some still remember from the Israeli musical, “Once There Was a Hasid.” We have stopped here because according to *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, Okup was the birthplace of the Besht, the founder of Hasidism, and the magic of this place far outweighs its historicity, thoroughly compromised on Day Four, when we enter the Jewish suburb of Kolomiya, also known as Okup. Where was the Besht really born? Was it here, at the foothills of the Carpathians, or in some backwater where no other Jews are known to have lived? *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* is but one of many books that guide our journey. Before we’re done, even the hard nosed skeptics will have been convinced of the poetic truths that lie encrypted in its pages.

Another guidebook is David Assaf’s *The Regal Way: The Life and Times of Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin*.<sup>1</sup> Without looking into the book, Assaf can rattle off the names and dates of the Ruzhiner’s innumerable descendants the way British schoolchildren once knew the kings and queens of England. What is more amazing: that Assaf is visiting the Hasidic shrines he knows so well for the first time in his life, or that this scholar, with his passion for all things Hasidic, is the quintessential Israeli, complete with very short hair, short pants and sandals, and a wicked sense of humor? In Assaf’s honor, we stop for picture-taking at the entrance to Ruzhin. Other than the sign, there is apparently nothing left to see. To compensate, Assaf leads the charge in Sadeger, now a suburb of Czernowitz-Chernivtsi, but once the seat of an incredibly opulent Hasidic court, with horse-drawn carriages, fountains, and a private orchestra. Undaunted by the collapsed roof and the ubiquitous ruin, Assaf luxuriates on the glories of old, saving for last the sordid tale of Berl Friedman, Reb Berenyu, who tried to break free of dynastic rule, found asylum amongst the local Maskilim, and was kidnapped by the faithful.

Reb Berenyu’s truncated life, evidence of ruination from within, is the perfect segue to Czernowitz proper, where we spend the night and a half of Day Four, for in this mini-metropolis of German, Yiddish, and Rumanian high culture, a brave new world was created, with the Jews, as usual, as its chief connoisseurs and consumers.

Setting off on the late side, through no fault of Avital’s, we head for the only functioning synagogue, in the old Jewish Quarter, when people sitting on the right side of the bus start yelling for us to stop. Moments later, we are

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from the Hebrew by David Louvish (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

assembled in front of a whimsical bust (a gift of the West German government) of the poet Paul Celan. Assaf asks if anyone wishes to say a few words, and Ada steps forward, with some trepidation: she is merely a graduate student, of Hebrew literature, at that. Ada improvises a short speech about Celan's love-hate relationship with the German language. Then Yehuda Bacon, whom everyone but Shana and I know to be a celebrated Israeli artist, very modestly informs the group that he has just illustrated a deluxe edition of four German-Jewish poets, Celan included. Then David Tal, who on the way into town the evening before, told of his childhood in prewar and wartime Czernowitz, one of 10,000 Jews of Czernowitz who survived, thanks to his father, who owned a factory in town, a story he had revealed to no one until 1991, informs us that Celan lived not here, but a few blocks away, with his mother. Then, because we cannot leave this site without enacting some kind of ritual, Chavi, our 31-year-old expert on the Holocaust, pulls out a xeroxed copy of Celan's most celebrated poem, "Todesfuge," in a masterful Hebrew translation by Shimon Sandbank, which Ada, after some prompting, agrees to read out loud. "Black milk of daybreak," she reads the famous opening lines, "we drink it at evening / we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night...."

Czernowitz is well known to some of us as the site of the Czernowitz Language Conference of 1908 where, after fierce debate, Yiddish was proclaimed "a" as opposed to "the" national Jewish language. The difference, Avrom explains, is exactly analogous to UN Resolution 242, which calls on Israel either to return "the" territories or only some of them. Czernowitz, implausibly, is now Ukrainian territory, and our impromptu stop at the Celan memorial has made us that much more aware of how language and politics converge in this neck of the woods.

Because so many of us are students of Yiddish (I am touched to hear Benny, Oren, Itay, and Eli practicing their Yiddish in the seats behind me), the encountered remnants of spoken Yiddish seem to give voice to a deeply rooted Jewish past. Noah Kofmansky, the rabbi of the Shapiro Synagogue, the first living synagogue we have entered, is the fifth person we have met who speaks Yiddish. Wouldn't you know it? Although a native of Czernowitz, his Yiddish, according to our resident linguist, David Brown, is actually Bessarabian. And anyway, what would Czernowitz Yiddish sound like, when, as Avrom instructs us, the dominant culture was German, and even the great Yiddish poet Itzik Manger, born here in 1901, went to a German gymnasium and pretended to have been born in Berlin?

The synagogue we're standing in also elicits a host of competing responses. Rabbi Kofmansky points to the absence of right angles in the construction of the building (to avoid, Dvoyre whispers into my ear, mimicking a cross or the crucifixion). Reiner is ecstatic about the fanciful illustrations on the ceilings, scenes of the Land of Israel, half torsos of Biblical heroes, birds, and beasts he has seen nowhere else. Assaf finds a rare commentary on the

Book of Deuteronomy that he thinks merits our rapt attention. It is Avrom's turn to play devil's advocate.

"Look at the memorial plaques on the walls," he says. "They are written in Hebrew letters but the language is German." "Dieses Gebethaus," he reads, "this House of Worship." Even a synagogue, then, so lovingly and lavishly built in 1923, betrays the upward mobility of its original "Mitglieder," or "members." Meanwhile, Novershtern informs us, the working-class Jews succeeded in organizing a cross-denominational Yiddish secular school.

"Yes," says David Tal. "I remember it well. We used to taunt the kids who went there. *Arop mit di royte shmates!* we would yell at them. 'Down with the red rags!'"

Someone else knows what's written on all the plaques inside the Shapiro Synagogue. That someone is on a mobile phone from Israel, talking to his daughter, Yehudit. An hour later, as we assemble in the Jewish Cemetery, she addresses the group for the first time. Both her parents, Holocaust survivors, are from Czernowitz. Following her father's instructions, delivered over the phone, she exited the synagogue, crossed the street, and identified her father's house as the third one on the left. Then her mother got on the phone. From Czernowitz, Yehudit learned, her teenage mother was deported to a labor camp in Transnistria, and the one book she took along in her knapsack were the incomparable *Fables* of Eliezer Steinberg, in front of whose illuminated grave we are now standing.

I too have a story to tell that pertains to this cemetery, and to Steinberg, and to Czernowitz, my parents' last sojourn on European soil, and to the Masada Club, where Mother would perform Yiddish songs to her own piano accompaniment, and to the train station we passed on the way into town, from which my mother, brother, and sister Ruth escaped on the last train to Bucharest, on 25 June 1940, thanks to a phone call from Boncesco, who once worked for my father, at the Caurom rubber factory, which, amazingly, Yehudit's father had listed as a remembered landmark, and at the mention of the Masada Club, Tal allows that he too had performed there, at a Hanukkah celebration in 1938, at the age of four, when he recited a Hebrew poem, which he now recites for our benefit.

So Czernowitz worked its black magic. Here we discovered no degrees of separation between ourselves and the severed narrative of yesterday. How much easier and more congenial it is, we discovered, to conjure up the distant past than to relive that decisive, predictive, terrifying moment between staying and leaving, between catching the last train out and joining the transport. We think we're safe now, back on the bus, heading for Vizhnits, Kitev, and Kosov, picking up the Hasidic trajectory once again, when Chavi goes up to the microphone, and reads to us from the sixth chapter of Aharon Appelfeld's autobiography, about the blind children from Czernowitz who under the care of Gustav Gutsman set out on 13 October 1942 to the train station, all to-



gether, as a disciplined group, making five stops along the way. At the first they sang a song by Schubert, at the second, Mozart, at the third...

Assaf, as is his wont, tries to make a joke of it each time he calls Chavi to the microphone "to spoil our mood" with precise and mind-numbing data about the final destruction of Galician and Ukrainian Jewry. Even had the Germans not dug up the bodies and burned the corpses, and even had the Soviets not effaced the particular fate of the Jews, little physical remains of these crimes would be evident today. For obscure political reasons neither can we see Hitler's underground bunker in Vinnitsia, which has never been opened to the public. Yet the many slaughter sites along the way, some marked by a memorial, as in Kamianets-Podolsk, Kolomiya, Proskurov-Chmelnitsky, and Babi Yar, and others not, become like Stations of the Cross, just as Mobile Killing Unit C—3,000 upstanding and extremely zealous German citizens who with the aid of 200,000 regular soldiers of the Wehrmacht succeeded in murdering 1.5 million Jews, using only 1 million bullets—comes to embody the Anti-Christ, the Sitra Ahra, the demonic Other Side. When we disembark at each of these sites, it is enough to have Chavi read to us from yet another eyewitness account. Only rarely do we recite the *El Male Raha-mim* prayer for the dead. A surfeit of such prayers seems a desecration.

Our group varies widely in levels of Jewish observance. At one end is Dvoyre, who covers her hair with a marriage wig and wears long skirts even on the hottest days. At the other end is Nurit, a former kibbutznic, farmer, and ideologue. But since Elhanan, who has grown a white beard as a sign of mourning, is reciting Kaddish for his mother, we make every effort to assemble a quorum of ten men in tallith and teffilin every morning in the hotel lobby—in full view of our Ukrainian hosts, who take this act of *chutzpah* in stride—and also to stop somewhere in the late afternoon, so that he can lead us in two out of the three required daily services.

Our Ukrainian hosts are no strangers to the strange practices of the Jews. Outside the ancient Jewish cemeteries of Shargorod and Bolechov, Ukrainian women wait with a pailful of water and a cup, to provide the requisite hand washing. So profound is the connection in the popular mind of Jews with hand washing that a group of kids runs after us in Sadeger with a pail of water, and are unable to understand why visiting the ruins of a hasidic court does not demand the same level of ritual purity as visiting the dead.

Whereas the range of observance and nonobservance sometimes draws a dividing line between us, especially at meal time, part of what makes this trip so liberating is that each of us can abandon our earthbound self and try other identities on for size. Am I a Hasid or a Maskil? A Frankist or a Rabbinist? A Litvak or a Galitsyaner? Now that we have crossed into Galicia, Chaim, an expert on the rabbinate in this historic region, is in a state of quiet exaltation. He runs around each town armed with a prewar map, to help identify the many rabbinic institutions, and if ever there is a lull in the flow of information, he reads to us about the local rabbinic personalities. At the sight of a

funeral in Brody, Chaim is reminded of the great controversy that erupted here in the 1840s when the head of the Kehilla, insisting that tradition be upheld, destroyed the new carriage purchased by the Burial Society to modernize the transport of hearses. The police were called in to quell the riot.

Here, in Eastern Galicia, geography is destiny. Here, Motti Zalkin, a historian of Jewish modernity from Ben-Gurion University who has been chafing at the bit for almost a week now, finally comes into his own. Zalkin is our great champion of the Litvak tradition, the rationalist way of life. Let the benighted Galitsyaner deride them as *tseylem-kep*, Crucifix-heads, which is to say, heretics. Zalkin points proudly to the rise of radically new institutions—elementary, secondary, and rabbinical schools, the press, the theater, public libraries—as the measure of modernization and the medium of cultural change. The hero of this region is Joseph Perl, founder of the first modern Jewish schools, the first critical scholar of Hasidism, the first great Jewish novelist.

Why this region produced so many great writers is itself a subject of debate. In Brody, where the students grab some ice cream, Avrom argues that early on, at least, the culture war between Hasidism and the Enlightenment proved fertile ground for Jewish literature. Eli suggests that with so many languages vying to be heard in society at large, Jews were stimulated to develop their own internal languages.

Meanwhile, just south of Busk, where we stop to admire the second oldest Jewish tombstone in eastern Europe, from 1521, is Zlochew, birthplace of the great (some would say, the greatest) American-Yiddish poet Moyshe-Leyb Halpern. In Brody, where we stop at what's left of the famous Brody Kloyz, the incubator of great rabbis and communal leaders, and get lost amidst the 10,000 tombstones in its horribly overgrown cemetery, we remember Berl of Brody, the first Yiddish folk bard, founder of the famous Brody Singers. Passing Zbarazh on the way to Tarnopol, we recall Velvl Zbarazh-Ehrenkrantz, the Hebrew-Yiddish folk singer, and the bus joins in the chorus of his wickedly clever anti-Hasidic song "Come Here, My Philosopher." In Tarnopol proper, we hear from Yonatan, a Jew by choice from Belgium, who is intoxicated—how else to put it?—with the satiric writings of Joseph Perl, though tragically, nothing remains of the Perl Library, once the repository of rare Hasidic books and untold numbers of unpublished manuscripts, including Perl's Yiddish adaptation of *Tom Jones*.

All this (and much more that I'm leaving out), is but a prelude to Buczacz, birthplace of Shmuel-Yoysef Czaczkes, better known as S. Y. Agnon. As the bus approaches Buczacz, in the late morning of Day Eight, Assaf takes the microphone and reads the following passage from Agnon's novella *In the Heart of the Seas: A Story of a Journey to the Land of Israel*.

When they left the House of Study, the whole town was already deep in slumber. The houses lay in the secret place of night, concealed by

the darkness. The moon was still hidden in the skies, and only stars lit up the summits of the mountains. Buczacz lies on a mountain, and it seemed as though the stars were bound to her rooftops. Suddenly the moon came out and lit up all the town. The river Stripa, which had previously been covered by darkness, suddenly gleamed silver, and the market fountain overflowed in two silver rivulets. One of the company said, I never in all my life knew that this town was so pleasant. It seems to me that there is nowhere in the world a town as pleasant as ours.

That, responded his companion, is just what occurred to me at this very moment.

Every city, remarked Rabbi Alter the slaughterer, in which decent and pleasant people live is decent and pleasant.

And now, added Rabbi Alter the teacher, those decent and pleasant people are going up to a truly pleasant place.<sup>2</sup>

Hard to say what is more poignant: That Agnon chooses to describe the physical beauty of his native town at the very moment of parting; that Buczacz in the year 2003 has still retained something of that beauty, even if the river Stripa is nothing to write home about; or that we are hearing this passage read to us in a tour bus of hard-nosed Israelis, who because they rarely wax eloquent about the beauties of their own native country, need a great writer like Agnon to give voice to their longing.

Comical and wondrous things happen to us in Buczacz, worthy of Agnon himself. As our bus pulls into Galitska Boulevard, we find another tour bus has arrived before us. This is most astonishing, for with the exception of Lviv, where we met other tours and some backpackers speaking Polish, we have thus far encountered no other tourists. Usually the arrival of our huge German bus brings out half the town. This time, by sheer happenstance, we have met up with a group of young Jewish students from St. Petersburg, headed by Boris Khaimovitsh and Alla Sokolova, old friends of Lukin's from way back. A joyous reunion.

Since there are suddenly so many of us, and the midday sun is beating down, we desperately need a place to congregate, so Chaim pokes his head into City Hall across the street and notices an empty auditorium. Why not? If we can pray in full view of the guests in each hotel, we can requisition the auditorium of Buczacz City Hall to hear our student Itay deliver a learned disquisition on the real Szibusz versus the mythical Buczacz. Itay speaks in Hebrew and Eli provides a simultaneous translation into Russian.

How clumsy, bordering on grotesque, is the attempt of City Hall to reclaim Agnon as one of its own! The glossy brochure of Buczacz we find

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<sup>2</sup> S. Y. Agnon, *In the Heart of the Seas: A Story of a Journey to the Land of Israel*, trans. I. M. Lask (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 20.

includes his photo alright, but gets his dates wrong. A mini-exhibit on his life and work in the local museum, where all the books are obviously donated, most probably by Agnon House in Jerusalem, spells the name AGNON with an aleph instead of an ayin. If they seriously wished to attract Jewish tourists, why on earth did they destroy the remains of the old synagogue, which Lukin saw as recently as last year?

Why, for that matter, has every church in Ukraine been so lovingly rebuilt, complete with gilded golden domes, while the great fortress synagogues of Zholkva (1692) and Satanov (1534) have been left to rack and ruin?

Is not this linkage of memory to physical space doomed from the start?

Does Agnon's somnolent city of Jews belong to present-day Buczacz any more than Bruno Schulz's Street of the Crocodiles, probably the most famous street in modern Polish fiction, belongs to present-day, Ukrainian-speaking, down-and-out Drohobych?

Does the presence of a plaque on the house where Bruno Schulz lived stake out any more of a claim than the absence of such a plaque on the house where Bialik lived, in Zhitomir?

What kind of pilgrimage is this, anyway? A search for actual, physical "roots"? An act of communion with the dead? A journey of the heart and mind?

The answer will come in due course, for what happens on a pilgrimage, as opposed to when one travels alone, is that willy-nilly, one meets up with other dedicated pilgrims.

The group of Jewish students we encountered in Buczacz had preceded us not by 15 minutes but by 15 years. This my wife and I learn from our traveling companion, the modest and soft-spoken Veniamin Lukin, an engineer by training, who once formed part of an underground Jewish Studies Seminar in Leningrad. One day, their colleague Ilya Dvorkin set out by bicycle to his home town of Vitebsk to see what he could see, and returned with a glowing report about the manifold relics of Jewish life still to be found there. A year later, in the summer of 1988, Dvorkin organized a field trip to the Ukraine ("the" because it was still part of the USSR), which was joined by Lukin, his wife, and two children, and five other members of the Seminar. Their destination was the mythical fortress town of Miedzhybozh, the residence and burial place of the Baal Shem Tov. And what an embarrassment of riches they unearthed! Ancient, intact tombstones. The foundations of a synagogue. Native informants. Archival sources. Although none of them had ever done fieldwork before, they managed to wash the graves with toothbrush and water and took a lot of pictures. What the Hasidim did to these graves later on—using abrasive soaps, highlighting the Hebrew letters in soluble black paint—he shudders even now to recall. But each year as more people joined up, spread out to other towns in the region, and gained professional expertise, what began as a search for personal identity burgeoned into an act of national reclamation, a restorative act worthy of S. Ansky's ethnographic ex-

pedition on the eve of World War I. The fruits of their labors Lukin has been carrying with him ever since the trip began: a 700-page densely printed *Historical Guide to 100 Jewish Towns in Ukraine* (St. Petersburg, 2000). How else could we have identified the “Jerusalimka” in Vinnitsia and the “Kabtsanovka” in Tulchyn as the historic Jewish quarter in each of these former shtetls? Known where to find every last synagogue, study house, and hasidic kloyz now turned into a factory, warehouse, granary, restaurant, train station? Zeroed in so quickly on the grave of Ber of Bolechov and his beloved second wife? Have benefited from so many local, Ukrainian historians and informants along the way?

Much of what was photographed and surveyed back then is already gone. Almost all the Jews they interviewed for their memories of the Stalinist years, the Holocaust, and the postwar return have already left for Israel, as have all the original members of the expedition, including 18-year-old Misha Kozakov—a fine mathematician—who collected eyewitness accounts about the Nazi slaughter in the district of Kamianets. Lukin wants us to remember Misha, because just this year, while serving as a reserve officer at the Egyptian border, he was gunned down by a Palestinian terrorist.

So to the extent that our pilgrimage is informed by a keen sense of place and regional specificity, it is thanks to the efforts of our friends from St. Petersburg, who in turn were inspired by the ideal of ethnography as nation-building.

And when we finally hit Miedzybozh, on the morning of Day Nine, not only will the local museum have cleaned up its Jewish act thanks to the efforts of Lukin and his team (the two-handed laver for ritual hand-washing was originally identified as “a cup used by two Cossack brothers”!); not only will the Jewish tombstones have been properly preserved; but the town of Miedzybozh itself will have been turned into a major Hasidic pilgrimage site, complete with dormitories and clean bathrooms, a Hebrew street sign that reads “Baal Shem Tov Street,” and an accurate reconstruction of the Besht’s wooden house of study, made from the architectural plans that Lukin published.

Here, in the study house, we meet our first Hasidic pilgrims, a family from Safed. Where else they are headed we do not know, but it is obvious what brought them here. Although the Besht left explicit instructions not to build a crypt over his grave and to keep it simple, already in the generation of Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye and Nahman of Braslav it became known that by visiting the Besht’s holy grave one could achieve mystical communion with his spirit. For the Jews of Ashkenaz, Assaf informs us, the cult of holy graves begins right here in Miedzybozh. And whom should we meet outside, next to the instant marketplace of souvenirs that has sprung up upon our arrival, than Israel Meir Gabbai himself, looking very sprightly in his tzitzith and open-collared white sleeve shirt.

Assaf was right. Israel Meir Gabbai is a born-again Braslav Hasid from France. And his life's work, he proudly tells us, is to reconstruct the graves of 300 zaddikim. He has another 250 to go. Yesterday he was in Uman. Tomorrow he's flying to Pinsk. Given how young he is, and how adept at raising money, he should be able to carry it out.

The naive fakery of this place, the tackiness of the souvenirs available for sale from the Hebrew-speaking Ukrainians outside (Shana and I, connoisseurs of authentic folk art, refuse to buy a thing), would have elicited the same angry response as our visit to Braslav, were it not for Elhanan, who is already poised with his copy of *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, open to "The Besht in the Messiah's Heavenly Palace," one of the longest and most enigmatic in the book, which Elhanan enacts, playing the Besht, on that fateful Yom Kippur eve in 1757, when "the bishop of the town of Kamenets," whom we recognize as the wicked Dembowski, placed two tomes of the Talmud in a pyre and had them burned, all of which caused great consternation in Heaven, which the Besht first attempted to thwart by raging at the rabbis, whom he blamed out loud in front of the whole congregation assembled in the synagogue, the synagogue that once stood just across the way and whose foundations Lukin had identified; then retired to his study house, where he sought to alleviate the evil decree and the mass conversion of the Frankists through his prayers and "terrible gestures," the reconstructed study house where we are standing right now, spellbound.

Ours, then, is a pilgrimage of the heart and mind, different from the historic-ethnographic expeditions that set out from St. Petersburg, and different yet again from the pietists, who believe that the zaddik will intercede on their behalf from the grave. (In Berdichev, in the reconstructed tomb of Levi Yitzkhok, we will find his grave strewn with petitionary notes delivered by fax!) To the contrary, we now have realized that the purpose of our pilgrimage is for the living to intercede on behalf of the dead.

By finding the right words, in the right languages.

That is why, when leaving Buczacz, someone hands Assaf an Israeli 50-shekel note, which features a portrait of Agnon, and why Assaf, not quite as young as he looks, calls upon Joshua, a student of medieval Hebrew poetry whom Assaf nicknamed Joshua-Judges, to read what's written below the portrait in very fine print: the full text of Agnon's Nobel Laureate Address.

That is why Oren, standing in front of his great-grandparents' grave in Banilo, puts on a baseball cap and recites Psalm 15, A Psalm of David; why in Czernowitz, it is so fitting for Ada to read Celan's poem in an exquisite Hebrew translation, a language about which Celan felt no ambivalence; why Elhanan so enjoys the neo-Biblical style of Rabbi Nathan Nata Hanover; why, working together, there isn't a single Hebrew epitaph that our students are unable to decipher; why after 9 grueling days and 1500 kilometers, bearing witness to so much destruction, so many cities of slaughter, so many fields of

shattered dreams, so much buried, neglected, wealth, the 42 of us spend the long ride from Zhitomir to Kiev laughing and singing.

What do we sing? We sing the song that I have taught them, "From Kosov to Kitev," a haunting Yiddish song about the Baal Shem Tov communing with the forests, streams, and birds deep inside the Carpathian mountains, and by dint of daily repetition, this song has become our anthem, our psalm of ascent.

Fun Kosev biz Kitev  
Iz a brikele faranen (x2),  
Avu der Bal-Shem (x2)  
Shpatsirn iz geganen.

(From Kosov to Kitev / You can find a foot bridge / where the Baal Shem Tov / Used to go a-walkin'.)

Even Zvi, the Kurdish-born director of the Zalman Shazar Center, even Ada, of mixed Moroccan-French parentage, even Lukin, from St. Petersburg, have committed the words to memory.

No, this pilgrimage of ours is not about the reclamation of real places. It is not about the recitation of petitionary prayers. Our pilgrimage is about people, people rediscovering what it is that makes them a people.

Of course, it isn't over yet. In Kiev, on our last morning, we pose for group photos in front of the jaunty statue of Sholem Aleichem doffing his hat to all passers-by, and proceed from there to Babi Yar where once there was no memorial, until the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtsushenko protested so courageously, and now there are three, and whether or not it happened at this very spot, Chavi has us assemble next to a ravine, where from 29–30 September 1941 33,771 Jews were murdered at point-blank range, where she has us read from last testaments scribbled on the walls of a synagogue in Kovel, where Tuvia recites the long version of the Memorial Prayer, and those few of us who know the Yiddish words sing the Partisan's Hymn. After that, we try to sing Hatikvah. But it is impossible to cry and sing Hatikvah at one and the same time.

We are not sorry to leave Ukraine, laden with bottles of Nemirov vodka, but we are sorry to be taking leave of each other. Like all pilgrims, we have left home in order to return. Were we Muslims returning from the Haj, we would paint the door posts of our houses in a host of bright colors. Instead, within a week, 3,000 photos of our trip will already be posted on a restricted website.

But if ever I do come back, never will I do so alone. Henceforth, I promise always to travel in a group, singing in Yiddish, reading in Hebrew.