



## Open Forum

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# How Does Jewish Identity Relate to Modern-Day Ukrainian Identity?

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Joseph Soloveitchik (יוסף דב הלוי סולובייצ'יק), a famous Modern Orthodox American rabbi and public figure, discussed the attitude towards Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews in his publications in the 1970s, and posited the concept of a “union of fate” for the entire Jewish population. According to this concept, all Jews—whether ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or secular—are united by the persecution and suffering that happened in the past, including – sometimes predominantly—during the Holocaust. Therefore, according to the approach proposed by Rabbi Soloveitchik, all Jews—regardless of how religious they are—must remember their tragedy during the Second World War and cooperate through civil efforts to resist various forms of antisemitism.<sup>1</sup> This approach was necessitated by both spiritual and pragmatic objectives: to get American Jews (amongst whom Modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews were a minority) to help Israel more actively. This became especially relevant against the background of the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

Yet there are also examples that demonstrate how different assessments of the “historical lesson” of the Holocaust can split the Jewish sense of community in various parts of the world. For example, the majority of Jews worldwide, including Orthodox Jews, primarily the national-religious camp in Israel, became supporters of Jewish statehood in the Middle East in the latter half of the 20th century. Meanwhile, a part of the ultra-Orthodox spectrum remained fairly categorical in their assessment of Zionism, the events of the Holocaust, and the prospects of the State of Israel. For instance, Rabbi Amram Blau (עמרם בלוי) believed that the “Catastrophe in Europe and Northern Africa was the Lord’s punishment for the

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<sup>1</sup> Read more about this concept: Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *Fate and Destiny: From Holocaust to the State of Israel* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 2000).

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state-building activity of the Zionists”.<sup>2</sup> Over time, this approach was relegated to the margins even within the ultra-Orthodox community, and the Holocaust became one of the core elements of Jewish identity both in Israel and in the West, with its regional specifics, of course.

The situation with Jews living in Soviet Ukraine differed significantly from the situation of those on the other side of the iron curtain. For the most part, Jews in Soviet Ukraine, who were largely, albeit not completely, isolated from commemorative practices in democratic states, were part of the Soviet society. It would probably be more accurate to refer to Soviet Jews of the 1970s and 1980s as Soviet people with Jewish roots. Of course, there were people who tried to observe the traditions, practice religion (*kashrut*, *Sabbath*), and study the Jewish languages, but overall this was an extremely marginal phenomenon. In 1991, a Jewish activist named G. Aronov (his full name is unknown) openly wrote about the level of assimilation of Jews in Ukraine:

Does a Jewish ethnic community exist in Ukraine? There are only citizens of Jewish descent... And even their perceived Jewish ethnic identity is based on irrational and mystical feelings instead of a solid foundation of language, traditions, culture, customs, and religion. All of this has been thoroughly and consistently destroyed.

In other words, we are talking about the revival of shadows, a reflection of a world that no longer exist. The same goes for the Yiddish language that, unfortunately, has only a past and does not have a future. There is no future in Ukraine for the Hebrew language either, as it cannot become the native tongue for an assimilated population.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, contemporary research by the Israeli historian Arkadi Zeltser clearly shows that remembrance of the Holocaust became a crucial element of the identity of Soviet Jews, which transformed from a communicative identity into a cultural one in the post-war period. Zeltser uses many examples to demonstrate that—despite Soviet state antisemitism masquerading as “anti-Zionism”—it was possible to build monuments to Holocaust victims. In spite of the generally negative atmosphere, at a local level such decisions as burying a site of a mass murder under a layer of earth to prevent animals from stealing bones and deter acts of vandalism versus building a monument depended on the position of the local authorities, the relationships between the initiators of such commemoration and local party bosses;

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2 Yakov M. Rabkin, *Ievrei protiv ievreia: Iudeiskoe soprotivlenie sionizmu* [Jew Against Jew: Judaic resistance to Zionism] (Moscow: Tekst, 2009), 366.

3 Aleksandr Burakovskiy, *Khronika evoliutsii “natsional'noi idei” Ukrainy i evrei, 1987–2015 : kniga dokumental'noi publitsistiki* [Chronicles of the Evolution of the “National Idea” of Ukraine and the Jews. 1987–2016] (Boston: M-Graphics Publishing, 2018), 94.

as well as many other factors. The very fact that at least 733 such memorials, plaques, and monuments were installed under the Soviets says a lot.<sup>4</sup>

Before the Perestroika, the Soviet propaganda machine simultaneously fought against manifestations of a Ukrainian non-Soviet identity and against Jewish culture and religion, branding public demonstrations of the latter as “Zionism” and “Jewish bourgeois nationalism”. As already demonstrated, it was problematic to commemorate Holocaust victims. The democratization of 1989–1991 and the revival of Ukraine’s independence not only made it possible to fulfill the ambitions of representatives of Ukrainian nationalism from across the ideological spectrum, but also to create a new Jewish post-Soviet Ukrainian culture, as well as to endeavor for proper commemoration of the Jews murdered in the territory of Ukraine in 1941–1944. In 1991, the overwhelming majority of Jews in Ukraine spoke Russian and felt no affiliation with the Ukrainian project. Yet, in the final stages of the Cold War era, there were Jews who felt unity with the Ukrainians and helped bring both ethnic groups together.

Yakiv (Yakov) Suslenskyi was one of these Jews, a native of Odesa Oblast. When he was 12 and the German-Soviet war broke out, he evacuated to Astrakhan. Suslenskyi graduated from the faculty of English at the Foreign Languages Institute of Odesa in 1953, and worked as an English teacher. In February 1970, he was arrested in the town of Bendery for writing open letters to the Central Committee of the Soviet Union’s Communist Party, in which he criticized the Soviet government system. During a search of his house, the police seized tape recordings of BBC radio broadcasts and a diary in which Suslenskyi recorded his thoughts and conversations with friends about the Prague Spring of 1968. As a result, he was sentenced to seven years behind bars. In prison, Suslenskyi met Ukrainian dissidents and old activists of the Ukrainian nationalist underground movement in Western Ukraine.

After years of prison camp internment and indignities, Suslenskyi was able to emigrate to Israel in 1977. There, he established the Committee for Jewish-Ukrainian Relations in 1979 (subsequently known as the Society for Jewish-Ukrainian Relations). Among the Society members were such Israeli historians as Israel Kleiner, Michael Frenkin, and Wolf Moskovich. Suslenskyi and the Society tried to highlight positive experiences in the relations between Ukrainians and Jews during the Second World War: they made every effort to get Yad Vashem to award the title of Righteous Among the Nations to Metropolitan Archbishop Andrey Sheptytsky. At the same time, Suslenskyi was not pedaling the issue of collaboration between some of the Ukrainian political forces and the Nazis during the war. In particular, through the efforts of the Society and with the financial backing of Yuri Dyba, a Ukrainian from Canada,

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<sup>4</sup> Read more on this: Arkadi Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory: Holocaust Monuments in the Soviet Union* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2018), 386.

a joint monument to the victims of the Holocaust and the Holodomor in Ukraine was installed on the Mount Zion in Jerusalem on May 13, 1985, only to be destroyed a few days later by unidentified vandals.<sup>5</sup>

Suslenskyi also faced a strong wave of antisemitism among the Ukrainian diaspora in the USA and Canada. One major problem occurred when a Banderite activist, Petro Mirchuk traveled to Israel and published a book overflowing with anti-Semitic stereotypes.<sup>6</sup> To quote Wolf Moskovich, at the time Suslenskyi was an “incorrigible romanticist and optimist” who “tried to establish branches of the Society among active members of the Ukrainian diaspora”, but “all of this naturally crashed resoundingly and sadly in October 1981, after the scandalous visit to Israel by Petro Mirchuk, with his accusations against Jews in general, the State of Israel, Yad Vashem, Rabbi David Kahane, and even against Suslenskyi, followed by his public reaction. There was even no need to mobilize KGB provocateurs. Petro Mirchuk diligently did all the destructive work for them”.<sup>7</sup> Moskovich claims that the “Leadership of the OUN (Banderites – Yu.R.) did not wish to have contacts with Jews. When I broached this issue with Vasyl Oleskiv (one of the leaders of the Banderite diaspora in the UK – Yu.R.) in the late 1990s, he made this clear to me”.<sup>8</sup>

Aleksandr Burakovskiy is also worth noting as one of the Jews who were active supporters of the Ukrainian project during the Perestroika and the first years of independence. He was born in Kyiv, in October 1935. In the late 1980s, Burakovskiy became actively involved in politics and grassroots activism. He helped create many nongovernmental organizations, particularly Jewish NGOs committed to reviving Jewish life in Soviet Ukraine. In 1989, he was actively involved in the establishment of the Popular Movement of Ukraine for Reconstruction (PMU). At the founding congress in September 1989, he was nominated as chairman of the PMU Council of Ethnicities, but back then the congress decided to postpone the election of this body. The PMU Council of Ethnicities was finally formed on February 11, 1990. Dmytro Pavlychko was elected its chairman, and Burakovskiy became his deputy. In October 1990, Burakovskiy replaced Pavlychko, who decided to focus on parliamentary work. Burakovskiy also served as PMU Deputy Chairman until December 1992. Objecting to the policy of the PMU transformation into a party in April 1993 and a strong tilt towards ethnic Ukrainian nationalism, Burakovskiy left the organization and resigned as chairman of the Council of Ethnicities. In December 1993, Burakovskiy emigrated to the USA with his family, where he wrote and published several books.

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5 In lieu of an obituary, <https://ua-il.livejournal.com/287672.html>, accessed on February 8, 2023.

6 Petro Mirchuk, *Meetings and Conversations in Israel (Are Ukrainians “traditional antisemites”?)* (New York, Toronto, London: Ukrainian Survivors of the Holocaust, 1982).

7 Letter from Wolf Moskovich to the author, dated January 7, 2020.

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Burakovskiy perceived the events of 1989–1991 in Ukraine with a fair amount of romanticism and idealism. He viewed his work as an attempt to build an independent Ukraine for all ethnicities living there. However, the economic crisis and mounting radical nationalism fueled trends against which he no longer wished to fight, so his answer was emigration. However, at the dawn of the country's independence, Burakovskiy saw in the commemoration of the Holocaust victims (particularly in Babyn Yar) an ideal of the culture of remembrance, which had to exist in the independent Ukraine of his dreams. Recalling the events of the fall of 1991 in his memoirs, he wrote:

In late September – early October 1991, the 50th anniversary of the Babyn Yar tragedy was marked in Ukraine at the state level for the first time. The agenda was packed with events. The entire city was bedecked in banners with inscriptions in Hebrew, Yiddish, Ukrainian, and English. A gigantic Menorah was installed at the site of mass executions of Jews by firing squads.

Kyiv hosted a requiem rally, an international scholarly conference titled *Babyn Yar: History and Its Lessons*, roundtable discussions, all sorts of exhibitions, concerts, and awards ceremonies for Righteous Among the Nations. The ceremony ended on October 5 with a memorial procession along the “road of death” that Jews of Kyiv walked fifty years prior to that in a seemingly endless flow of people from all over the city. A big stage under a canopy was built in Babyn Yar, and chairs were placed in front of it. That’s where the memorial rally took place.<sup>9</sup>

Yet eventually, as the trends in Ukrainian society and the economic processes mentioned above intensified, Burakovskiy became disappointed with the squabbles among Jewish organizations in Ukraine, with each one trying to commemorate the victims of Babyn Yar “in their own way”.<sup>10</sup>

Since 1991, a Russian-language culture combined with loyalty towards Ukrainian statehood has been prevailing among Jews who did not emigrate from Ukraine. Some Jewish public figures switched to the Ukrainian language in public after the events of 2014, but continue to speak Russian behind closed doors. Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022 has spurred these trends between both, Jews who remained in Ukraine, and those who left.

Jews in Ukraine have not revived the Yiddish language. It is studied mostly by non-Jewish scholars and professionals (historians, philologists, and linguists). Israeli Hebrew is spoken by those Jews who performed *aliyah* but returned to Ukraine for various reasons, chiefly economic ones. Holocaust remembrance remains one of the cementing foundations that unite the majority of Jews and their descendants in Ukraine and elsewhere in the world, which is manifested in international, statewide, and local days of remembrance, unveiling of new monuments, joint prayers, and

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<sup>9</sup> Burakovskiy, *Khronika évoliútsii*, 66–67.

<sup>10</sup> Burakovskiy, *Khronika évoliútsii*, 100.

mourning processions in remembrance. This in many ways confirms the theses posited by Rabbi Soloveitchik back in the 1970s about the “union of fate” of Jews worldwide in their remembrance of the Holocaust and collective resistance against all sorts of antisemitism.