

There Are No Jews Here: From a Multiethnic to a Monoethnic Town of Burshtyn

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Abstract

This paper is devoted to the preservation and transformation of historical memory about the Jewish population of Galicia among Ukrainians and explores how memory about Jews functions in the town of Burshtyn, although Jews have not lived there for over seventy years. The study is based on 20 in-depth interviews that were conducted in 2009-2010. The subjects, ethnic Ukrainians born before World War II, were eyewitnesses of the Jewish life that once flourished in the town. The interviews targeted three major themes: (1) life stories of Jewish families, (2) religious life, (3) Jewish calendar rites and rites of passage.

Today, Burshtyn is one of two towns in Galicia, where memories about the Jewish population are still preserved albeit in a fragmented form. Pierre Nora coined the term «un lieu de mémoire», a place of memory. The “Jewish local text” in Burshtyn is a case in point. The source of memories is symbolic spaces in the townscape – the cemetery and the synagogues. The “text about Jews” has survived only among those people, who lived in the town before the war and among their descendents and, what is particularly significant, only in the old part of the town, where Jews had lived. The case of Burshtyn enables us to observe a transformation of a polyethnic town into a monoethnic one at the level of “local memory.” Notably, the transmission “vehicle” of information about Jewish life is town toponymics: the informants describe some places as “Jewish”.

Introduction

Pierre Nora coined a term “lieux de mémoire”, places of memory. He spoke about French places of memory which incarnate the national memory of the French people. In my article I would like to present a much more complicated interaction of place and memories. This case study discusses the functioning of objects produced by one ethno-religious group and serving as the places of memory of another completely different ethno-religious group. In other words, I would like to analyze metamorphoses undergone by memories about Jews in the places where they have not lived for more than seventy years. The study is based on the fieldwork conducted in the historical region of Galicia, where Jewish population perished seventy years ago, during the Holocaust. The fieldwork, which my colleagues and me conducted in 2009 – 2010 years, was part of the project “*Jewish History in Galicia and Bukovina*”. Before World War II, Galicia was a multiethnic region of the Polish Republic, but in 1939 it was annexed by the Soviet Union. After World War II Galicia turned into a monoethnic Ukrainian province: the Jews had been exterminated by the Nazis and Poles expelled by the Soviets. During fieldwork members of the expedition conducted interviews in a dozen of former *shtetls* – Yiddish for “small towns” (e.g., Bohorodczany, Nadworna, Rozhniatov, Chernelytsia, Dolina, Kalush, Maniava, Otyniia and others) which once had predominantly Jewish population. The town of Burshtyn was one of the two former *shtetls* in Galicia, where there was no problem to find Ukrainian interviewees able to speak about local

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Jews (The second one is Solotvin). (All materials documenting this expedition are posted on the website: <http://www.jewishgalicia.net/>). In Burshtin my colleagues and me worked in August 2010. We collected data through in-depth interviews. Seventeen interviews with local inhabitants (date of birth between 1920 and 1930) have been recorded.

In my opinion, this unusual situation is caused by the preservation and “structure” of Jewish objects in this town. These objects play the role of “places of memory”.

“Places of memory” in Burshtyn

Two kinds of physical remnants play the role of “places of memory” about Jews in present day Galicia: Jewish cemeteries and former synagogues. In Galicia, like everywhere in Eastern Europe, the situation with Jewish cemeteries varies from complete destruction and disappearance to a relatively high degree of preservation. For example, only one quarter of the Jewish cemetery in Burshtyn is still preserved, and according to the local inhabitants, the rest had been destroyed by the Nazis who used the tombstones to pave a road. Buildings of former synagogues serve as a second place of memory about Jews. By contrast with cemeteries, these buildings were mostly destroyed. The few that survived were reconstructed. They seldom bear Jewish symbols. The buildings of former synagogues are now used as shops, sport halls, or storehouses (Cf. Vitti 2011, 108). However, in the memory of our elderly interviewees these buildings used to be “Jewish churches.”

Urban Topography

Using the town of Burshtyn as an example, I would like to show how the memory about Jews is preserved and constructed anew, and how it is connected with Jewish objects of Burshtyn’s urban topography.

The majority of our elderly interviewees said that Burshtyn had significantly changed after World War II. The Jewish and Polish population disappeared, and the structure of the town altered. Burshtyn grew considerably after a heat-and-power plant was built there in the 1950s. What used to be a downtown became a suburb. Some of the prewar buildings burned down during the war and others were demolished in the post-war years. Now the town consists of two parts: the new one with apartment buildings that rose near the heat-and-power plant, and the old one with small private houses. It is not surprising that the majority of those who work at the power plant are newcomers from neighboring villages and other parts of the Ukraine. They inhabited the new apartment houses, while the original, “indigenous” population remained in the old part of Burshtyn. Therefore it is quite logical that only families living in the old town preserve some memory about Jews who also lived in the old town. Ukrainians living in the new center are unaware that Burshtyn was multiethnic before World War II.

Our elderly interviewees in the old town mention that Jews constituted the majority of prewar population in Burshtyn. They owned shops and were engaged in crafts. One woman recalled a proverb that circulated before the war: *“The streets are Polish and the houses are*



The building of the second synagogue in Burshtyn was constructed (or restored) in 1931

Jewish” (SII, 1920). However, today only one street is perceived as a Jewish one. It starts from two former synagogue buildings and continues to the Jewish cemetery. In the interwar period this street was named after Theodor Herzl – the founder of political Zionism and the World Zionist Organization. In the Soviet period it was renamed after Alexander Herzen, a Russian author and thinker, without any Jewish roots. His writings introduced socialist ideas to the Russian reader. In the Soviet period they were part of the school curriculum, so his name was widely known. The majority of our Ukrainian interviewees live in this street. They did not pay special attention to the name change and seem to believe that renaming was due to the change of the official language from Polish to Russian after the war. Moreover, they are convinced that Herzl and Herzen are two versions of the same name:

-- З кладбищі того, то Герцена вулиця. Не знаю, чому назвали вулиця Герцена, по-моєму то був письменник який чи що, по-моєму.

-- А як вона ранніша називалася?

-- Так і називалася ще за Польщі, весь час вон Герцена називався ще за Польщі

-- there is Herzen Street near the cemetery. I do not know, why it was named Herzen Street, I think he was a writer or something.

-- And what was it called earlier?

-- This is what it was called in Poland. It was always called Herzen Street in Poland” (NFS, 1929)

-- Вона називається Герцена, а до війни називалася Херця.

-- Ну, то по-польськи

-- Герця по-польськи. А по-руски Герцена

- It is called Herzen Street, and before the war it used to be called Herzl.

- It is a Polish name.
- Herzl is a Polish name. And in Russian it is Herzen (SGM, 1932)

One interviewee even thought that Herzen was a Jewish figure:

- Герцена.
- А хто єто?
- Я не знаю точно, хто він був. Але я знаю, що він був якийсь старий... старший рабін. А хто він ще то я не можу вам сказати, то я не знаю. Но так уважали все, що раз він Герцена, раз вулицю назвали Герцена, значить, та людина щось заслуговує і що вона якась відома людям і так назвали вулиця Герцена і вона і до сьогодні вулиця Герцена
- It is Herzen [Street]
- Who was he ?
- I don't know precisely who he was. But I know that he was an old... chief rabbi. I don't know who he was. But he was respected by everyone, so the street was named Herzen. It means that he was known to people. And it is Herzen Street now (SII, 1920).

All our interviewees were children before the war; therefore their reminiscences about neighbors are connected to those individuals who maintained contacts with their parents. For the most part these were business contacts, so the interviewees remember the names of shop owners or their parents' employers. Some Jewish people were very important for children, for example, Gedalya, who produced dairy products, including ice-cream:

От за нашим огородом була одна хата, друга хата, третя хата, в тій хаті, третьої хаті, там було молочарні, робілі морозиво, робілі молоко, сметану - все там робілі, все. Не було. Але нам не було треба, мама малі свою господарку [apparently

the interviewee meant господарство] не було треба, а шо ми колись казали "ледом", ми за тім морозиво бігали. Ми бігали, мама давала чи молока, чи сиру, а вони нам давали морозиво.

-А от як їх звали тих, у кого морозиво?

-Я не помятаю, як писав, то була хата – називали Бранци, а друга – Ханци, а той молочарня називали його Гедаля. А як писав не знаю. Було прізвище, а я не знаю.[...] У них був гробарь, там була хата, він там жив, мал кози, і там жив. Він ходив за тім цвинтером. Але хата була тут на переді, бо я помятаю добре...

Here behind our kitchen was one house, and another house, the third house. In that house, in the third one there was a dairy. They made ice cream, milk and sour cream. They made everything. But we didn't need it. My mother had a farm, but we used to say to her that we were buying the "ice", for ice-cream. We used to go there. Mother gave us milk or cheese for them. They gave us ice-cream.

-And what was the name of these people with ice-cream?

-I don't know how they spelled it.

That house was called Brantsi, and the second house was Hantsi's, and the dairy was Gedal'ja's.. I don't know how they spelled it. He had a family name, but I know [...] They had a coffin-maker. There was a house there. He lived there, he had goats and he lived there. He took care of the cemetery. But the house was here, in front, I remember this well... (SGM, 1932).

Hasidic court

What makes Burshtyn markedly different from other Galician settlements is reminiscences about the Hasidic court of Rabbi Moshe Branwine (1890-1943) which functioned in the shtetl in the late 1930s (Alfasi 1995, 350). In other



The Jewish cemetery in Burshtyn

Galician towns, where Hasidic *Rebbes* (Hasidic leaders) lived, the memory about them has already disappeared. Elderly Ukrainians in Burshtyn describe how they peeped into the windows of the *Rebbe's* court in order to see him.

In addition, they remember the hollowed grave of the previous Hasidic *Rebbe*, Rabbi Nahum Branwine (1847-1915) in the local cemetery and say that the Jewish funeral processions would stop at this grave and only after paying respects to the *Rebbe's* grave would continue on their way to the place prepared to bury the deceased. Importantly, Hasidic *Rebbes* and Jewish “miracle-working” tombs were significant not only for Jews. We managed to record narratives about the once widespread practice, when non-

Jews asked *Rebbes* and graves for help in important matters:

Я была мала, у меня очи не видели, очи, а соседка еврейка каже: “Иди до рабина, доню”. Мама меня повела малу, детиной, я не знала, не знала. У мэнэ так було. Дюже не видела! А еврейка та сказала: “Сонечко, иди до рабина”. Мешкай там недалеко от нас. Я зазрела! Сами, сами. Еврейка. Рабин такой, зробил так, что я зазрела

I was a child, my eyes did not see, my eyes, and a Jewish neighbor said, “Go to the Rabbi, darling.” Mum took me, I was a little child then and I didn’t know, I didn’t know. I didn’t see anything. . And that Jewish woman said, “Sonechko, go to the rabbi.” The rabbi lived not far from us. And I began to see! My eyes began to

see clearly! The Rabbi did something so that I could see. (PYI, 1923).

Another old woman told us that she had asked the holy grave make her healthy:

А то на середине [кладбища] зара був рабин, я все шла и говорила: “Рабин, рабин, дай мне здоровья!” Рабин, рабин, дай мне здоровья. А рабины такие поважные были, как ксендзы, их уважали люди, великий, великий був рабин. А даже когда парканы не було, то я шла в том конце, я все равно: “Рабин, рабин, дай мени здоровья

In the middle of the cemetery there was a rabbi's grave. Each time I passed by, I would say “Rabbi, rabbi, give me health, rabbi, rabbi, give me health.” The rabbis were so important, like Catholic priests, people respected them. This was a great rabbi, a great, a great rabbi. Even after the fence around the cemetery had disappeared, I kept saying, rabbi, rabbi, give me health (GMT, 1922).

The practice of visiting synagogues and rabbis still lingers on among Ukrainians in the neighboring regions (Amosova, Kaspina 2009, 1–24), but in Galicia it has disappeared completely, and only some reminiscences are still preserved.

In addition to the stories mentioned above we collected many descriptions of Jewish religious life, calendar rites and rites of passage. These descriptions often have folkloric nature and rely strongly on stereotypes (Cała 1995; Belova 2005). For example, Jews are believed to be buried in sitting position, and Jewish weddings to be organized on a pile of garbage:

воны шлюб берут на мусорной куче. А свадьбу они добре, они разные блюда. Я не знаю. Я не знаю, я не ходила. Спивают, спивают, так дюже гарно: вай-вай-вай. Это я запомнала. Они так поют”

Their weddings take place on piles of garbage. But the wedding was good. They made various dishes. I do not know. I do not know, I did not go. They sang so well: wai-wai-wai. I remember this. They used to sing (MP, 1929).

Ховали по-моему сидя і до сонця (на восток), у цю сторону клали у білому чи то халат був, чи покривало.

I think they were buried facing the sun (on the east) and in this way they were placed in a white robe or blanket (NFS, 1929).

It is interesting that among different fragmented memories the best preserved is the memory about funeral rites. The reason may be that funeral is the most noticeable rite for non-Jewish neighbors, and there are many more stereotypes about the funeral than about other life events. Secondly, the reminiscences about Jews are often connected to an existing cemetery and therefore begin with the funeral.

Conclusions

We have seen that the whole “Jewish local text” in Burshtyn is based on the objects in the townscape – the cemetery and the synagogues. The “text about Jews” exists only among those people, who lived in the town before World War II and their children. What is particularly significant is that it exists only in the old part of the town where Jews used to live. This “text” is mostly widespread among the people

living in Herzl – Herzen Street. Thus, we may say that the existence of Jewish objects in the townscape constructs and preserves historical memory. This illustrates the thesis of Pierre Nora: "The less memory is experienced internally, the more memory needs external support and points of support. The memory exists due to the points of support." (Nora 1999, 17 – 18).

The local memory about an extinct group exists very often only around extant Jewish objects in the townscape and only thanks to their existence. The Jewish cemetery which nobody visits, two former synagogues and the "Jewish" name of a street in Burshtyn play a significant symbolic role in the town's narrative. The less the degree of preservation of these places of memory, the less the preservation of the local historical memory about the Jewish life.

In this context it is important to mention that stereotypes are usually preserved better than real facts about the Jewish way of life and tradition, about Jewish neighbors and their names. But in today's Galicia we see not only the disappearance of real reminiscences, but also the disappearance of ethnic stereotypes. Young people have no memory about Jews who lived in the town before the war. Usually they only remember that there used to be Polish population in the area in the prewar period since the border with today's Poland is situated nearby. Quite often they consider all "strange," non-Ukrainian objects in their town to be Polish heritage, excluding completely any remembrance of the past Jewish presence.

The example of Burshtyn shows how a multiethnic town becomes monoethnic

at the level of "local memory." For the majority of present-day inhabitants of Burshtyn the memory about its multiethnicity, about its "others," and non-Ukrainian history is meaningless. This memory has no symbolical value.

Note

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Archive Material

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