“What’s a Fairly Nice Historian of the Jews of Eastern Europe Doing in a City Named for Bogdan Chmielnicki?”

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I knew the world had changed when I nonchalantly checked the weather on my phone for the city of Khmel’nyts’kyy in the oblast of Podolia, now Podolii, Ukraine. Formerly called Proskuriv (in Ukrainian) and Płoskirów (in Polish), the city was renamed in 1954 after Bogdan Khmel’nyts’kyy, the legendary Cossack leader of a major rebellion against the Polish nobility in the mid-seventeenth century who is now a national hero and symbol of independent Ukraine. His rust-colored statue stands ferociously at the train station. It says: “Don’t mess with me.”

The Khmel’nyts’kyy revolts of 1648-1649 struck a fatal blow to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569-1772), Europe’s largest state at the time, and devastated the Jewish communities of the region. The terror that swept the borderlands was immortalized in several Hebrew chronicles, most famously in Nathan of Hannover’s Yeven Metzalah (Abyss of Despair, 1651). His wrenching text of Jewish martyrological suicides, Cossack and Ukrainian cruelty, Polish noble duplicity and support— which historians now argue was crafted in the spirit of the Crusade Chronicles of 1096— may even have been read regularly by Polish Jews in the three weeks before the fast of T’isha B’av to memorialize the thousands of their dead. Modern secular Yiddish writers Sholem Aleichem, Scholem Asch, and Isaac Bashevis Singer stoked Jewish collective memory of the gezirot takh-vetat (the evil decrees of 1648-1649, as they were known), in their widely read popular stories and novels; so, too, did the Hebrew poet Hayim Nachman Bialik, whose searing “City of Slaughter” about the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 was initially entitled “Maso be-Nemirov/The Event in Nemirov” to allude to the horror that engulfed that city in 1648-1649. For many Jews of East European origin, the Khmel’nyts’kyy revolt represents the beginning of a seamless blood-stained, pogrom-filled miserable existence in eastern Poland (now western Ukraine) that culminated in the Holocaust “by bullets”—the merciless murder of 1.0-1.5 million Jews in the late spring of 1941 by the Einsatzgruppen, the Nazi mobile killing squads.
who were sometimes aided by local gentiles. I once bought a six-pack of Ukrainian beer for a meal at a kosher restaurant in Queens with a BYOB policy and one of my dinner partners turned to me without missing a beat and said, unhappily, “So now we’re drinking Chmielnicki beer?”

So what was I, a historian of East European Jewry, doing checking the weather in Khmel’nyts’kyy?

I was on a road trip, traveling through western Ukraine in search of the Polish and Jewish Enlightenments, circa 1780-1825, the landscape of my first book and my exhibit on Mendel Lefin of Satanów (1749-1826) in the “Encounters with Modernity” gallery in Polin: Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the state-of-the-art museum of 1,000 years of Polish Jewish history that opened in Warsaw in November 2014. Lefin was born in Podolia (then a province of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, divided into Austrian and Russian halves in the first partition of 1772, and now an oblast in western Ukraine) into a traditional Jewish family. Seeking wider horizons, he journeyed to Berlin at the height of the Prussian Jewish Enlightenment (known in Hebrew as the Haskalah) in the 1780s. When he returned to the region, he brought components of the worldview of Prussian maskilim (enlightened Jews) back to Poland with the hopes that he, a Polish maskil, could help modernize his traditional brethren. My traveling companion, Rachael Rosner, Ph.D., was in search of the family history of Aaron T. Beck (b. 1921), the founding father of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), whose biography she is writing. Beck’s family came from Proskuriv. Benjamin Franklin, the American founder, was also in the mix. Franklin penned the first two sections of his memoirs in French in 1791 and Lefin, fluent in French, had appropriated a key element of Franklin’s program of self-reflection and individual moral improvement in his Sefer Heshbon ha-Nefesh (Lemberg 1808). Lefin had become acquainted with Franklin’s work via his Polish patron, Prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski (1734-1823), a republican aristocrat who, with Franklin, was a member of the prestigious “Nine Sisters” Freemason Lodge in Paris. Beck’s innovative “Daily Record of Dysfunctional Thoughts” bears some resemblance to Lefin’s and Franklin’s grids of psychological self-governance.

Rachael and I wanted to see the place where Enlightenment ideas from western Europe had found fertile ground in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, dug deep in the roots of the long nineteenth century, and then migrated across the ocean to the United States in the early twentieth. Our destination was Podolia/Podolii writ large, particularly the cities of Lviv (Lvów/Lemberg/Lvov), Tarnopol/Ternopil, Proskuriv/Khmel’nyts’kyy, Kolybań, Rakowa, Międzybóż/Medzibesh, Mikołajów/Mikolayiv, and Satanów/Sataniv. We also wanted to visit Kaminiec Podolski/Kamianets-Podilskyi because of its enchanting setting on a rocky island.

We started out in Lviv (full disclosure: my grandfather, a man I did not know and about whom I know little, was born in Lemberg in 1901) on a Monday morning. The roads 50 kilometers east of the largest city in western Ukraine quickly became rutted and bumpy, but in our minds we
could imagine the ideas of the eighteenth century flying over the muddy roadways, absorbed and shared throughout Europe in a common language devoted to the improvement of the self. Our driver Vasyl had been recommended to me by a colleague who works on the Jewish history of the region of Galicia, the southeastern lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that were absorbed into the Habsburg Empire in 1772 and 1795, and ruled by Vienna until World War I. Thin, cheerful, with clear self-taught English, Vasyl expertly navigated the pitted roads, slow-moving combine transporters, and the occasional cow as we drove eastward through the marvelous expanse of the Ukrainian countryside.

Ternopil, today a city of roughly 217,800 inhabitants, was our first stop. I had heard from a Ukrainian student native to the city that there was a street named for Joseph Perl (1773-1839), Mendel Lefin’s disciple. Perl was an enormously important figure in the Galicia Haskalah, a founder of a modern school for Jewish children, an archive, and of a progressive synagogue. Perl wrote the first modern Hebrew novel, Megalleh Temirim/Revealer of Secrets, a satiric parody of Hasidic beliefs and practice, which he published in 1819. His Yiddish version, the better to reach the Jewish masses susceptible to Hasidism who were unfamiliar with maskilic Hebrew, remained in manuscript. He also wrote reams of memos to the Austrian government officials in both Lemberg and Vienna in his effort to curb the influence of Hasidism. His archive, neglected in the nineteenth century, had been brought to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem on Mt. Scopus in Mandatory Palestine. Its eighteenth-century documents became the foundational sources of my work on Lefin. Using Google Maps (what else?) we found the street sign behind some trees on a nondescript apartment house. Coincidentally, perhaps, Perl Street abutted a street named for Hugo Kołłątaj (1750-1812), a progressive Roman Catholic priest and Polish educational reformer from the late eighteenth century, who nonetheless issued a decree before the meeting of the last Polish parliament that Jewish men should be required to shave their beards if they wanted to participate in modern Polish society. Lefin contested this decree in his anonymously published French pamphlet to the parliament, Essai d’un plan de réforme ayant pour objet d’éclairer la Nation Juive en Pologne et de redresser par là ses moeurs (Essay of a Reform Plan Whose Object is the Enlightenment and Redress of the Morals of the Jews of Poland, 1791). I took pictures of both.
Leaving the city limits of Ternopil, Vasyl, who has vast experience ferrying contemporary Hasidim through the region, took us to a small memorial for its Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust. The memorial stone, written in three languages (Hebrew, Ukrainian, and Yiddish), stands above a small ravine in which there is a mass grave. The week before my Ukrainian road trip, I, with the rabbi of my synagogue, had guided a group of Jewish adults to Poland to experience the history and revival of Jewish life, and we had made a memorial pilgrimage to Birkenau. As several of the participants were the children of Holocaust survivors, our Birkenau “visit” was heartbreaking. More than one member of our group broke down as she recited the names of her murdered relatives. But it was the quiet ravine in Ternopil that shattered my heart and turned my stomach. I know there are hundreds of these ravines throughout Ukraine, the almost unnoticeable earthly graves of the millions of Jews who were never ghettoized or pushed into cattle cars. They were just rounded up and shot. I was relieved to get back into the car.
Heading east, we crossed the Seret River, leaving the former lands of Habsburg Galicia and headed out towards the kresy—later the Pale of Settlement—the oblast of Podolia, and the city limits of Khmel’nyts’kyi. Khmel’nyts’kyi was the home of Aaron T. Beck’s paternal ancestors. Rachael had made contact with an archivist through connections with a graduate student of history in Lviv. Serhii Yesiunin’s specialty was the oblasts of Volhynia and Podolia in the nineteenth century. After checking into our hotel, we met him in the Khmel’nyts’kyi history museum, where he showed us scores of family records of the Becks in Proskuriv/Khmel’nyts’kyi, Rakowa, and Kolybań. Aaron’s grandfather was a Galicianer, but he had crossed the border to Russian Poland in the late nineteenth century, where he became an arrendator, a manager of noble estates, the prototypical Jewish economic niche of the region and time. Rachael was practically jumping out of her skin viewing the maps of the city, the pre-war photographs of Jewish Proskuriv, and the municipal lists of her protagonists’ forebears. An archive rat myself, I, too, was brimming with excitement, anticipating the possibility of working with Sergei in the future to deepen my own understanding of the Polish Haskalah’s primordial ground. After spending two hours in Sergei’s cramped office, we were all in need of an afternoon coffee. And what is an afternoon coffee without an afternoon piece of strudel? And in that part of the world, strudel means sour cherry strudel. The Khmel’nyts’kyi café did not fail me, although its strudel’s dough was thicker than the classic, filo-like Austrian- (post-1867, Hungarian- type with which I’m more familiar. The Podolian version had a distinct flavor of orange rind, perhaps a legacy of 1672-1699, when the Ottomans captured the region. Either way: it disappeared quickly. As did the coffee, my fourth (fifth?) of the day. Regular sleep wasn’t an option anyway so I just gave in to my hyperactivity, stoking it with caffeine.

We then made brief stops in Rakowa and Kolybań, ancestral homesteads of the Beck family. Rachael, sated—at least momentarily—with her archival riches, now took a back seat to my quest: the castle and palace of the Sieniawski-Czartoryski family in the legendary city of Międzybóź (Medzibesh), Podolia. In the eighteenth century, the Czartoryskis were the equivalent of the American Rockefellers, although more so: they were the second largest landholders in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski’s wealth was so great that when he divided his estates in 1812, they included 25 towns and townships and 450 villages, which were valued at almost 50 million zlotys. Their wealth came from an enormous agricultural economy based on plantation serfdom. Their political power came from the particular decentralized political structure of the Commonwealth, also known as the Nobles’ Republic, which gave the Polish szlachta (nobility) far more power than the king, whose appointment
depended on unanimous election by the nobility. That political power gave the Polish magnates, the most powerful strata among the nobility, total control over the eastern borderlands. The Czartoryskis owned vast lands in Ukraine on which they grew rye and other grains, making their region the breadbasket of Europe in the early modern period. The rye was milled into flour and distilled into alcohol and shipped throughout Europe, east and west, with the Vistula River the main watery thoroughfare. Ashkenazic Jews managed these lands, collected the tolls, milled the flour, distilled the rye, and factored the products in Gdańsk ever since their migration to the Commonwealth from western Poland in the mid-sixteenth century (after arriving from German lands in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and settling in western Poland). Representing an essential component of the Polish economy and urban settlement, Jews found the Commonwealth the most hospitable European country in which to live and build communities, immortalizing their sense of security by a Hebrew play on words for their newfound home, Polin (“Here, let us dwell”). The Polish borderlands were the heartland of Jewish Eastern Europe until 1941-1942.

To travel those roads today in summertime is to drive for hours in a verdant sea of green, punctuated—if you’re lucky enough to catch the season—by a burst of vibrant yellows from a sea of sunflowers aching towards their natural god under a crystalline blue sky: the colors of contemporary Ukraine’s flag.

I had read, of course, about these lands, but to see and feel them was a revelation. I was stunned by their beauty and tried to imagine what it was like for the Czartoryskis who built palaces throughout the borderlands as aristocratic weigh stations when they visited their estates to travel by horse-drawn caravans on mud roads for months to make the circuit we made in a sturdy minivan in two days. The Czartoryski Family archive in Kraków contains a letter written by Izabela Fleming Czartoryska to her husband Adam in 1804, in which she describes the panegyrics (from the Polish word for lord, “pan”) intoned by the peasants, burghers, and Jews upon her arrival in Stara Sieniewa:

“After having been received in Poltawa in a truly touching manner . . . I am in your estates, my dear, where I delight heart and soul in all of the love and recognition that you have here. In entering your lands I have been received by several thousand people, Jews and Christians, minor nobles, burghers, the old and the young, who presented me with bread and salt, raising their hands to the sky and crying, ‘God bless our Prince and Princess, their children and grandchildren.’ I resisted none of their pure effusions; thereupon I began to cry from the bottom of my heart, having only the desire to see you here.”
The Czartoryski castle sits in a river valley and you see it as soon as you approach Międzybóż.

Accompanied by both Vasyl and Sergei, the latter who had called ahead to a colleague, we were able to tour the castle, palace, and museum, meeting Oleg Pogoreletec, the leader of an archaeological team that is excavating the site as the castle and palace are being renovated. Hiking tents (in Hebrew, ohalim) are staked throughout the interior courtyard for the archaeologists who bed within the castle’s inner courtyard when their work is done. Oleg’s team has found, among other treasures, shards of Armenian pottery from the legendary workshops of Kütahya, coins, nails, and keys, including ones with the Jewish star. A museum on the site is undergoing renovation. It was gratifying to see that some vitrines were dedicated to the vast Jewish population that used to inhabit these lands. Oleg invited us into his office and we exchanged Czartoryski- and Międzybóż-ica; he showed me facsimiles of eighteenth-century documents from the clerks of the Czartoryskis and I explained the connection of Prince Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski to Mendel Lefin. Imagine my surprise when I saw an English book on Oleg’s desk on R. Abraham Joshua Heschel of Aft/Opatów (1748-1825), one of the major Hasidic figures of the region, and grandfather to his better-known grandson, R. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), an influential religious thinker in post-war America, a civil rights activist, and namesake of a Jewish day school in New York City.

I wasn’t surprised by the book’s subject matter because the connection between the Czartoryskis and Hasidism was deep. I was just jolted by seeing English amid all the Cyrillic in the middle of western Ukraine. Mendel Lefin shaped his conception of the Jewish Enlightenment as a movement to modernize Polish Jewry in reaction to the development of Hasidism, the spiritual revolution of eighteenth-century Poland. Its founder, Israel ben Eliezer Ba’al Shem Tov (“the master of the Good Name”), known by his acronym, the “Besht,” a kabbalist who specialized in writing mystical amulets, had moved to Międzybóż in the 1740s in part because it was a hub of economic stability and demographic growth. There he attracted a group of like-minded mystics who furthered his teachings and innovated their own. The Besht died in 1760 and was buried in Międzybóż.
By the time of Poland’s first partition in 1772, the “Beshtians” were now called “Hasidim” and their new ways of praying, eating, communing, and relating to their leadership, known in Hebrew as addikim and in Yiddish as rebbes, had spread throughout Poland, stymied only in the northeast by opposition from the Vilna rabbinate. Lefin, a native Podolian, observed the efflorescence of Hasidism with horror; to his mind, it represented the antithesis of his ideas of the Jewish Enlightenment and appeared to subvert the values of traditional rabbinic Judaism. To counter the appeal of Hasidic piety, particularly its methods of “reforming the soul”—the eighteenth-century way of talking about psychological change—and coping with sinful urges (read: the libido), he published his ethical treatise, Sefer Heshbon ha-Nefesh/Moral Accounting, in 1808. This Hebrew chapbook looks very much like a traditional Jewish ethical treatise and received copyright approval and blurbs—in the eighteenth-century century sense—by contemporary rabbinic authorities, although scholars can see how its layout, punctuation, and coded anti-Hasidic message, are distinctly modern. Lefin hoped it would be pocketed and read by yeshivah boys susceptible to Hasidic piety, a kind of modern behavioral manual to protect them from straying off the rabbinic path. Moral Accounting utilized traditional rabbinic language and alluded to earlier Jewish ethical works, such as Hovot ha-Levavot/Duties of the Heart, which were widely disseminated in Poland in the early modern period, but its novelty lay in a method of daily cognitive and behavioral self-reflection in which the adept worked on one of 13 virtues over a 13-week cycle, four times a year, calculating in pencil until the bitter end how he had failed or succeeded in controlling himself. The “virtues” included moderation, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, among others. Lefin did not innovate this method. He adapted it from Franklin’s original French memoirs, which were undoubtedly brought back to Poland by Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski, who with his son, Adam Jerzy—which Lefin tutored in mathematics and philosophy—was a member of the “Nine Sisters” lodge. Supported by Czartoryski, Lefin appealed to his magnate patron to help him in his quest to subdue Hasidism, aiming his target at Baruch of Międzybóź, the Besht’s grandson, who, with his “nest of zealots”—in Lefin’s words—were taking over Podolia. Yet, by 1804, when Poland had disappeared from the map of Europe and the Russian authorities were uninterested in the internal religious and cultural battles of the Jews, Lefin and his fellow maskilim largely lost the culture wars. Hasidism captured the hearts and minds of much of Eastern European Jewry, flourishing well into the twentieth century in the region.

And even today, in a Ukraine largely absent of Jews, the Besht lives. His grave is now a mausoleum and his study house reconstructed. Hasidim from Brooklyn and Israel regularly fly to Ukraine on pilgrimages to his—and other addikim’s graves. Uman, the site of Nachman of Bratslav’s grave, is overrun every Rosh Hashanah/the Jewish New Year by pious Hasidim. In Zinków/Zin’kiv and in Satanów/Satani—Lefin’s birthplace—there are ohels—tent-like steel scaffolds protecting the graves—or at least the purported graves—of Hasidic addikim. “Purported” because many of these graveyards were desecrated during the Nazi occupation and in Soviet times. Who knows who is really buried under the headstones? The irony of the homophone ohel to denote the hiking tents used by the young Ukrainian archaeologists to uncover the rich artefact troves underneath the Czartoryski castle and the Hasidic shelters to protect the graves of deceased holy men was not lost upon me. Both kinds of “tents” are devoted to the past in a region redolent of the Noble-Jewish symbiosis.
Not only does the Besht live. He uses wifi.

Impatient to send photographs of the Czartoryski castle and palace and of the Besht’s supposed grave and *beit midrash*/house of study back to my family in the States at the very moment of my visit, I turned on my phone. I didn’t need to use data because I was immediately connected to the internet with the domain: “Holiness 1.” A second later I was given a choice to connect to “Holiness 2.” Logging onto FaceBook, I posted my pictures. It took only seconds for family and colleagues in the U.S., Europe, and Israel to “like” my posts. Clearly the Besht had channeled my request.

Our visit in Międzybóż complete, we drove back to Khmel’nyts’kyy, ate a sumptuous and inexpensive meal at a restaurant recommended on Trip Advisor, and collapsed, wondering what intellectual and emotional surprises awaited us on our second day in Podolia.

We were supposed to leave town early to get a jump on what was going to be a long day. Instead, Serhii had suggested that we meet him at the memorial to the Jewish victims of the 1919 pogrom, an urban riot that claimed the lives of 1600 Jews during the Russian Civil War. The memorial was next to the Jewish cemetery, which, like many cemeteries in Eastern Europe was messy and unkempt, not only because there are tiny Jewish communities, if any, without the resources to maintain the graves, but also because the cemeteries were put back together
haphazardly after the Nazis desecrated and the Soviets ignored them. Rachael was hopeful that she might find the burial plot of Beck’s grandfather. We walked around, doing a cursory search, noticing the mixture of Hebrew and Ukrainian on the headstones and the iconography typical of Jews: raised hands with Spock’s Vulcan posture, taken directly from the ritual of the Jewish High Priests, a headstone in the shape of a cut tree to symbolize a premature death, often of a young child, and a charity box to indicate the dead’s philanthropic work. A few newer headstones included etched photographs of the deceased, an indicator of the acculturation and modernization of Jewish death rituals among modern Ukrainian Jews.

Serhii also asked us if we wanted to visit the Jewish Community Center and Holocaust Memorial in town. How could we say ‘no’? Greeted by Vyacheslav Nagnibeda, a buff, earring-bedecked young, modern Jewish Ukrainian man, we visited the Center with its meeting rooms where holidays are celebrated by members of the small community, its Holocaust memorial room—there is a frieze indicating the victims of the catastrophe from Podolia—and, tantalizingly, an archive. Vyacheslav also told us that on the site of the former butchers’ synagogue near the city’s commercial district we could find its renovated version, active today for the community. We hopped into the car, opened up our phones, and navigated ourselves towards the address. It took a little effort to find the building, which was tucked away in a quiet, gated courtyard, close to a contemporary mall on the grounds of an earlier rynek/rynok, or market square.
Yet, the day was running away from us, so we could not dawdle. Rachael and I left Khmel’nyts’kyi reluctantly. I know there are more traces and signs of Jewish life in that unlikely-named city.

Our next stop was Zin’kiv (full disclaimer #2, Zin’kiv is directly related to my patronymic and is perhaps the birthplace of my forebears; my great-grandfather likely came from this town before his immigration to New York City in 1904). We drove into the sleepy “town”—which reminded both Rachael and me of Israeli *moshavim* off the beaten path—with one main road, a few small stores, cultivated fields encircling the road and a riot of green grasses and wildflowers everywhere else, including omnipresent red poppies, which explains East Europeans’—and Jews of East European origin’s—love of *mak/mąk/mohn* filling in strudel and cookies. The most well-known use of poppy seeds are in hamentaschen, the commemorative pastry of the holiday of Purim. The name of Haman, the evil persecutor of the Jews in the scroll of Esther, is pronounced “Hamohn” in Ashkenazic Hebrew and Yiddish, with a long “o.” Rather than destroy the Jews, Haman is “consumed” by those whom he hoped to victimize when they eat cookies made with “mohn” filling.
Getting out of the car, we met an old peasant woman in a bright purple dress wearing a babushka and holding a folded plastic bag because she was en route to buy some groceries. Friendly and garrulous, she told us the location of the Jewish cemetery, which was right by where we had parked.

We descended into the grass and up a hill to find it. Enveloped by a landscape of unfathomable beauty and perched on a beautiful hill overlooking a small river valley, the cemetery is home to scattered gravestones, some cared for, more akimbo or turned over. Standing sentry over a haunted past are the *ohels of zaddikim* protecting the Hasidim’s chain of personal mystics. The terror, the silence, and the landscape’s beauty collided. Although my ancestors may have come from Zin’kiv, it was Rachael who couldn’t handle the erasure of Jewish life in Zin’kiv. Her eyes were wet when I climbed back into the car.
We next headed south to Kaminiec Podolski/Kamianets Podilskyi, the fortress city on an island in the Smotrych River, which is now justly a major tourist site. We needed a break from our Enlightenment quest and the echoes of the Holocaust. The city is magical, its towers and turrets creating a Disney-like silhouette. Enchanted, we had lunch—I restrained myself from ordering more strudel. We entered the fortress, which, set up for tourists, has an archery field, a medieval clay oven in which a baker clad in historically accurate garb bakes bread, an artillery room, and other delights. Rachael bought various toy weapons for her nine-year old son, including a bow and arrow (the arrows were rubber-tipped), which barely—she later told me—made it through
security upon her return flight. I looked for coffee-to-go to fuel the remaining part of our

We next headed north to Satanów/Sataniv, Lefin’s birthplace. By now, we had grown accustomed to what we would see in market towns owned by the Czartoryskis with formerly large Jewish populations: a Jewish cemetery replete with old gravestones in various states of disrepair, neglect, and soundness, some protected by Hasidic ohels, and a synagogue rebuilt with
donations from abroad. Satanów/Sataniv did not disappoint. It also had remnants from the medieval walls that protected its municipal residents from incursions by Cossacks and Ottoman Turks. Because Lefin had settled in Mikołajów/Mykolaiv, another Czartoryski city, supported by his magnate patron, I had to go there. Unfortunately, there are currently three Mikołajów. Mykolaivs in contemporary Ukraine—and we debated if we were actually setting out to the correct one. I had to assume that “my Mikołajów” was close to Lefin’s birthplace and other cities in his biography. The journey was long and the day was getting shorter. We followed the eastern bank of the Zbrucz river, marveling at the glorious countryside and delighting in seeing a stork, one-legged, perched on his nest. Yet, Mikołajów proved unfulfilling in that there were no remains of the Jewish or Polish past that we could discern. Rachael and I had two lectures on Franklin, Lefin, and Beck scheduled for the next day in Lviv, so we abandoned a visit to Teofipol, the village where Rachael’s mother-in-law’s family came from, and to Husiatyn, the border town that straddled the Zbrucz River and through which Aaron Beck’s father, Harry Beck, likely made his risky illegal ferry crossing out of Russia on his way to America in 1904.

Vasyl, our indefatigable driver who showed no sign of exhaustion or hunger—Rachael had kept him in calories with American-style peanut butter sandwiches en route—dropped us off at our hotel at 11:30 p.m. He had called his wife about two hours earlier to inform her that he wasn’t coming home that evening. Hasidic clients had called him repeatedly on our return trip to Lviv to update him on their arrival time at the Polish-Ukrainian border, where they had arranged for him to pick them up. Apparently, they could save time by taking a train to the border, crossing by foot, and meeting a driver on the Ukrainian side. They were headed to Belz on a pilgrimage to their rebbe’s birthplace.

Rachael and I crashed. The next day we gave a lecture, “Enlightenment Migrations, Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia, Paris, Podolia (Ukraine), and Providence,” to two different audiences: to historians, social scientists, and urbanists at the Center for Urban History in East Central Europe, and to clinicians of CBT at the Catholic University. At the first, the Polish and Jewish history was somewhat familiar to our audience, with Aaron Beck’s connection to the region an intriguing sidebar. The clinicians at the second knew nothing about the Jewish and Polish foundations of Podolia. Oleh Romanchuk, a psychiatrist who is head of the Institute of Psychological Health at the university, read a letter a greeting from Beck to the group of psychologists, celebrating their work and noting his ties to Ukraine. They were all visibly moved by hearing their mentor’s words and surprised by his background. Most of them, young, smart Ukrainian practitioners of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, working in a fragile democracy with a population only recently becoming familiar with modern therapies, had no knowledge of their region’s history.

Their ignorance has profound historical roots. The Polish nobility lost most of its lands during the long century of partition and, if not, suffered during two world wars, and then under the Soviets. In the postwar period, 45 million people were transferred across the new state boundaries decided upon in Yalta. Over one million and a half Poles were expelled from western Ukraine and moved westward into what became the People’s Republic of Poland in 1945-1946; another transfer of Poles took place in 1955-1959. The poet Adam Zagajewski’s Dwa Miasta/Two Cities (1991) immortalized his grandparents’ longing for Lwów/Lviv as they tried to remake their lives in Stettin/Szeczin after the war. Jews in the region had begun their migration
westward in the last third of the nineteenth century, forming the core of today’s American Jewish community. Those who stayed in their historic European homeland—on both sides of the Zbrucz River—were brutally victimized by the Nazis during World War II. Over 90% of prewar Polish Jewry was murdered in the Holocaust. In Ukraine, Jews lucky enough to have moved eastward during World War II could survive physically, but Soviet ideology destroyed their historic Jewish culture that combined religion, language, place, and folkways into a cohesive, self-confident whole. Until 1991, Soviet memorial culture made no room for the Jews’ unprecedented sorrows. Only now is Ukraine beginning to discover and tell the story of what happened to its Jews. It shouldn’t be a surprise that young Ukrainians know little of the Polish and Jewish roots under their soil. Or of the potential links between Benjamin Franklin’s system of moral reform that may have wended its way into Aaron T. Beck’s “Daily Record of Dysfunctional Thoughts.”

Our short visit to western Ukraine ended with a breathless trek up the narrow steps of the city hall to get a sense of Lviv’s panorama, a moment at the Synagogue Square, a memorial site commissioned by the Center for Urban History and the Lviv City Council on the site of the Golden Rose and Great City Synagogue, and some shopping: t-shirts with Lviv’s bright logo (“Open to the World”) for our children, three kinds of strudel (apricot, mak, and sour cherry) to insure that I wouldn’t forget the taste of Eastern Europe in my Morningside Heights apartment, stoneware cups, and some lovely blouses.

Our takeaways: Aaron T. Beck has eager, bright, and devoted disciples in contemporary Lviv. Ukraine is struggling to become a democracy inspired by the ideals of the Enlightenment despite the pressures from a bullying Putin-led Russia. The descendants of East European Hasidism will continue to journey to the region to find inspiration from their movement’s founders and to tend their graves. And two American historians will ruminate on how western Ukraine, a landscape far removed from New York City and Boston, shaped the subjects of their scholarship, Jews from Europe’s heartland, who encountered modernity in the late eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, respectively, and endeavored to make a place for their people (in Lefin’s case) and themselves (in both Lefin’s and Beck’s cases) in brave new worlds—partitioned Poland and the United States.

I can’t wait to go back.

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