



THE ZÜRICH LAB[ORATORY]

# UKRAINE BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

— A TRAVEL REPORT

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From February 14 to 24 I was traveling in Ukraine. I wanted to do what I have been doing for several years: visit the places where traces of the rich Jewish heritage in Galicia and Bukovina are left after the genocide committed by the Nazis, photograph these places, write about them – trying to understand how people lived and how they died. I could not know beforehand that I would find myself in the midst of the Ukrainian revolution. After my return I slowly begin to understand how the past and the present of Ukraine are inextricably linked and how much my journey into the past was connected with the present and the future.

The trip had been planned for a long time. When I booked my tickets, there was no Euromaidan, no uprising of the Ukrainians against the Yanukovich government. When people began to take to the streets, thousands in the beginning, then millions, I thought this would be over soon. What government would, in the face of such massive protests, not agree to new elections? As my journey finally began and Yanukovich was still in power, I imagined chaos, considering the increasing radicalization of protests. I was wrong with everything.

My route takes me first through Galicia – Lviv (Lemberg, Lwow), Sokal, Velyki Mosty, Zhovkva, Staryi Sambir – then on to Ternopil and Sataniv, finally into Bukovina to Chernivtsi (Czernowitz) and Novoselitsa. During the first days of my journey, government and opposition are still negotiating. It is relatively quiet. I see administration buildings occupied by protesters – partially surrounded by huge barricades – but police have retreated completely at this time in Western Ukraine. I don't feel endangered at any time. There is an atmosphere of waiting.

I make it a habit to go where the demonstrators are gathered, where the barricades are, and try to talk to people. This is not easy, because language skills are scarce in Ukraine. Usually, however, I manage to find someone who speaks English. The people with whom I speak are very calm and prepared, even if they have to fear for the worst. In Lviv I ask a young man who guards a barricade, what he expects in the next days, in the event that Yanukovich might try to split Ukraine. He says "Europe will help us." I have a lump in my throat and do not dare to answer him.



Barricades in Lviv

## IN THE SHTETL

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One of my first destinations was Sokal, a small town 80 kilometers north of Lviv. A former shtetl, as one would say in Yiddish, a place with a large Jewish community, which was defining for cultural and economic life. Sokal is located in “Shtetlland” or “Yiddishland”, an area comprising large parts of Eastern Europe including Poland, the Baltic states, Belarus, Ukraine and Western Russia – the home of Eastern Jewry. Sokal is typical for the region. At the market place, there are former Jewish business houses in the style of the Austrian monarchy. A cellar for goods, a shop on the ground floor, upstairs an apartment for the family. If the door frames had not been renewed, one would still see traces of a mezuzah on the right doorpost, a Jewish house blessing containing the most important Jewish laws. In other places, these traces are still visible.

The Jewish Quarter of Sokal no longer exists. The German occupiers turned it into a ghetto. The Jews of Sokal were forced to slave work. Who was not murdered on the spot, was

deported to the Belzec extermination camp and gassed there. The gas chambers of Belzec did not kill by Zyklon B, but by combustion engines: they killed by carbon monoxide. On May 27, 1943 the ghetto was finally liquidated. Who survived until now, died by the guns of a killing squad. Thousands of places in Eastern Europe tell the same story.

After the liquidation of the ghetto, German authorities gave Jewish homes to the locals to plunder and to use as “building material”. Ukrainian neighbors took what they could. At that time the Wehrmacht moved huge quantities of food out of Ukraine – for their own consumption and for the supply of German civilians. Anything that had any value suddenly got a new meaning – it became essential for survival. The Jewish Quarter disappeared. Today it is a park.

Only two old buildings are preserved on the territory of the former ghetto. A 300-year old typical Galician fortress synagogue armed with thick brick walls, high-set windows and



Traces of a mezuzah in Zhovkva



Fortress synagogue in Sokal

an ornamented facade. The second one is an immediately adjacent building, which might have been a synagogue as well. A group of young people is sitting in front of it when I pass by. Although it is just noon, they are already pretty drunk. They want to talk with me and my friends, they are a bit proud that visitors from Europe have made it to their town, but communication fails because of the language barrier – and probably because of the alcohol. One gets an idea of the poor

perspectives of youth in an Ukrainian town in the country side. Other young people in Sokal have more ambitious plans. They have occupied an administration building and guard it. They look grim behind the masks they wear. Their mothers and grandmothers have also gathered – to protect their children and grandchildren. The ladies giggle like young girls when they become aware of my camera. In Sokal revolution has two faces.



Sokal: Revolutionaries guard an occupied building



Sokal: Mothers and grandmothers guard the revolutionaries



Remains of Jewish headstones in Sokal

In Sokal there is no Jewish cemetery any more, but some Jewish grave stones are. Characteristic Khrushchev-era apartment blocks rise there today. A few grave stones are now stacked next to the Christian cemetery. They probably came to light during construction work. Germans and Soviets abused the stones to build foundations, walls, pavements. Whoever renovates houses or roads must expect to come across repressed memories.

“They have been thrown on the scrap heap,” a Jewish friend will write weeks later on Facebook when she sees my pictures. No, they

have been saved. Whoever knows exclusively European and American standards, can hardly understand what constitutes such a rescue in Ukraine. Grave stones get rescued by people who have some historical consciousness, who are not untouched by what they find, but no authority in monuments stands by them. They are completely on their own. A Ukrainian experience.

## THE BURDEN OF HISTORY – A NECESSARY EXCURSUS

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During my journey I become more and more aware of how much my search for the traces of Jewish life is interwoven with current events. Already the Yanukovich government had tried to denounce the opposition as fascists and anti-Semites. If one believes Putin's statements in recent weeks, fascists and anti-Semites – backed by Europe and the United States – seized power in Kiev. In Eastern Europe, fascism is not identified with Italian or Spanish fascism, it is always identified with German Nazism. Implied is a war of extermination and mass murder and the associated trauma.

Is the new government of Ukraine preparing a war of extermination against Russia? Will it murder the many ethnic minorities of Ukraine – or only one of them – in gas chambers or shoot them one by one on the edge of hastily excavated pits? Will it deport millions of Russians and Jews as forced laborers to the west of the country? This is obviously nonsense and proved as such in a single minute of reflection. What then is the background of this rhetoric?

Indeed, it appeals to a memory that should not even exist. The Holocaust was a taboo subject in the Soviet Union. Commemorated were not the murdered Jews, but “Soviet citizens.” Collaboration was not allowed to enter official memory – it would have raised too many questions about the ability of the Soviet model to convince. And yet there is something that everyone knows in Ukraine and Russia: the “banderovtsy,” the followers of Stepan Bandera, the leader of Ukrainian

nationalists, and his Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).

Lviv (Lemberg, Lwow), June 30, 1941. After days of fighting, the German Wehrmacht occupies the city. It is followed by the Ukrainian militia, organized by Stepan Bandera's Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian police units in German uniforms. The prisons of the NKVD, the Soviet domestic intelligence service, are opened. Surviving prisoners are no longer found. The NKVD have executed all who were suspicious. Ukrainians, Poles, Jews. In the cellars of the secret service's prisons are thousands of corpses. For German propaganda this is a godsend. For the German newsreels, traces of the atrocities are captured with the camera. But that's only the beginning. Germans and Ukrainian nationalists blame the Jews of Lviv for the Soviet crimes. About 140,000 Jews live in the city – plus an unknown number of Jewish refugees from pre-war Poland – a third of the entire population. Hastily printed posters by Ukrainian nationalists spread the “guilt of Jews” throughout the city. The pogrom begins on the same day. Ukrainian militia and police participate, units of the Wehrmacht and the mob. Men, women and children are driven through the streets, beaten bloody, and finally beaten to death or shot. Valid figures of victims do not exist; depending on the source, 4,000 to 10,000 people die in the streets of Lviv in these days.

The Lviv events are repeated in many towns and villages during the next few days and weeks. If there are no NKVD prisons that

provide the pretext for pogroms, there are criminals who are willing to kill their Jewish neighbors to seize their property.

Shortly after the beginning of the German invasion the alliance between the Ukrainian nationalists and the Germans breaks. Bandera proclaims an independent Ukrainian national state, the Germans then imprison him in Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The Ukrainian nationalists regroup, establish the UPA, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, that fights against the Germans until 1944 and against the Soviets until the early 50s. The UPA tries to protect Ukrainian villages from the food confiscation of the Wehrmacht, but they also pursue a concept of ethnic cleansing. Tens of thousands of Polish civilians are murdered. In the eyes of the UPA leadership Jews cannot be integrated into a future Ukrainian state. Although the leadership UPA says Jews are not the enemy of Ukrainian independence, rather the Soviets, yet they express their consent to the German methods of mass destruction.

In 1944, there is again a temporary alliance between UPA and Germans. Bandera is released from concentration camp to lead a partisan war against the Soviets with German support. Only at the beginning of the 50s are the last UPA units destroyed.

These are the skeletons in the closet of Ukrainian nationalism.

The reception of war history varies widely in Ukraine. Svoboda, a right-wing party that has several ministers in the transitional government, and the “rights sector,” a melting pot of various ultra-nationalist groups, refer positively to Stepan Bandera and the UPA and worship him as a hero. However, this hero worship goes far beyond this spectrum and is common in some regions of Western Ukraine. In Galicia there is a veritable competition of municipalities in the construction of Bandera monuments. However, the

positive reference to the military resistance against Germans and Soviets, and the will to create a Ukrainian nation-state, is not necessarily directed to the justification of mass murder against Poles and Jews, nor to a temporary collaboration with the Germans. It refers to the anti-colonial character of Ukrainian nationalism.

In the former shtetls, people with profound historical knowledge and appreciation of the multi-ethnic identity of the region can be found everywhere. However, they are not representative. Especially where Jews constituted the majority of population, there is no continuity in the narration of history. Many people are not even able to identify former synagogues as such. For them, they are what they were since Soviet times: libraries, workshops or cultural centers. Whoever asks questions about Jewish heritage often finds blind spots that oscillate between ignorance and denial.

For 23 years, Ukraine has been independent. The creation of a common understanding of history has not taken place. Whoever wants to examine the history of the Ukrainian national movement faces seemingly insurmountable obstacles: the Soviet narrative knows only a very simplistic picture. In this narrative there are only Soviet heroes or fascists. Dealing with the complexity of history – including confrontation with guilt – will only be possible when critical questions cannot be dismissed as “Soviet” or “fascist.”

To ask these critical questions is necessary. Answering the questions of who has murdered in Lviv, Sokal and many other places, is a matter of justice to the victims. To sort the answers into the overall picture of an era without falling into inner defenses and justifications is a challenge. If these questions are not asked or are only insufficiently answered, we will see again and again what we have been experiencing in the last few weeks: the return of Soviet propaganda in a new – or old – context.

## BACK IN THE PRESENT

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On February 18, calm comes to an end. Yanukovych's special police units "Berkut" attack Maidan in Kyiv, crowded with 20,000 people. I am at that time in Ternopil. When I return from my walk to the Jewish cemetery, people are already gathered in the hotel lobby, staring silently at the ongoing TV program. I go to my room, look at the live streams that are broadcast on the internet. Smoke hangs over Maidan. The self-organized medical service carries dead and wounded out to the ambulances. About 20 people die on this day in a hail of snipers' bullets, but protesters keep and successfully defend the barricades in Kyiv.

I go out on the street – even Ternopil has its Maidan, a busy square in front of the City Theatre. Earlier this morning there was hardly anyone there, now a crowd has gathered. Faces are very serious. People pray, light candles. Young people gather, equipped with helmets, shields, face masks. Some of them will make their way to Kyiv tonight. Everything happens with a remarkable calmness and serenity. Tomorrow more people will die on Kyiv's Maidan.



Memorial service for the fatalities of Maidan in Ternopil



Demonstrators in front of the town hall in Chernivtsi

On February 20 I continue to Chernivtsi (Czernowitz). There too, the situation is tense. In front of the town hall, a crowd has gathered. I ask some young people what's going on. "We demand the resignation of the mayor," they say. The mayor is not actually a mayor. The elected mayor was removed from office several years ago by the Kyiv ordered governor and replaced by a follower of Yanukovich. Local elections have not been held since. The governor, however, is no longer – a few days ago protesters stormed the regional administration and chased him out of office. Also, the "mayor" will fall this night. After the supporters of his own party have left the governing faction, the

City Council will remove him. Quietly and secretly he will make off – taking with him the official city seal. He is not the only one. Yanukovich also makes off. Irritated people will watch his ghost ride through the eastern Ukraine during the coming days – until he shows up again in Russia.

Still, this does not happen. With the falling darkness, the crowd has swelled and the mood is tense. Partial chants resound across the square. Behind closed windows you can see the silhouettes of deputies of the city council; they look down to the square and the crowd. On the other side of the square, where the statue of the Ukrainian national



Self-defense units in Chernivtsi



Nighttime Concert on the occupied town hall square of Chernivtsi

poet Taras Shevchenko stands, two platoons of young militants have gathered. They are masked, lean onto baseball bats, and wait. I walk over to talk to some of them. They are very young, about 16 to 20. What are they waiting for, what are they up to? “We are waiting for instructions from our commander,” says a masked young man with a helmet. What could that be? “There are rumors that hired thugs are being brought into the city to attack the demonstration. We want to protect the demonstrators,” he says. He is a student at the University of Chernivtsi. That’s why he wears a face mask. The university administration has threatened to expel all students who participate in protests.

Later that evening something very wonderful happens. Some young people bring a piano to the square. A young woman is playing it - classical music and pop songs. The young militants with their helmets, shields, and baseball bats are reverently listening to her. They are still waiting for their commands. They do not come. In Chernivtsi it is quiet tonight.

The next morning I take a walk to the Jewish cemetery. I pass the town hall square. Again there are people who pray, light candles, remember the many who were slain in Kyiv in recent days. An icy mist sinks down to the city. When I arrive at the cemetery, it has set as hoarfrost on shrubs and grasses. The fog swallows every sound. Just a couple of crows can be heard. No one else is here, except a pack of feral dogs. They look like a trace of wolf blood is in them. Now, in winter, the cemetery is easily accessible. Annual plants are withered. In two months a jungle will begin to sprout again. After the excitement of the last days I come to a rest here. The Jewish cemetery of Chernivtsi is the history book of the city. It tells of all eras, of social changes, the shifts of borders, of extermination and genocide. A new chapter of city history is added in these days.



Chernivtsi Jewish cemetery

## FUTURE BEGINS

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Training materials for teachers in the Jewish Museum of Chernivtsi

I return to the city center, meet with Mykola Kushnir, Director of the Jewish Museum, and his volunteers Janne, who came to Chernivtsi through Action Reconciliation, a German volunteer service. Janne proudly shows me the latest project of the museum: educational materials and an exhibition about the Holocaust in Chernivtsi and Bukovina. “Young people need to know that the Holocaust did not take place anywhere, but here, in their cities and villages,” says Mykola. The interest of the teachers in these new materials is huge. The Holocaust recently became part of the school curriculum; providing schools with appropriate educational materials, however, has failed so far. Mykola’s project is closing a gap.

The Jewish Museum in Chernivtsi, its director Mykola Kushir, Janne the volunteer: they do exactly what is needed. They spread the necessary information materials and they encourage people – teachers and students – to ask questions. Questions about the history of their villages and towns. Some witnesses who can answer these questions are still there. Mykola also sends students to the villages, to interview old people and record these talks.

The next day we make a trip to Novoselitsa together. There, beautiful murals have been preserved in a synagogue from the 20s. Immediately after our return we get back to the harsh reality of Ukraine. The Jewish Museum is housed in the former Jewish



Wall-paintings in the synagogue of Novoselitsa

National House – since Soviet times until today the city’s “Palace of Culture.” Today, a coffin is carried through the door – one of the people who were killed on the Maidan in Kyiv. Grieving People are rushing in to take leave of him. The man was a member of a messianic Christian sect. He will be buried with a yarmulke on his head. This too is part of Euromaidan: activists come from all parts of society, from all professions, all the nations of multi-ethnic Ukraine, all religious communities.

Perhaps this is one of the most important achievements and messages of Maidan: people became aware that they are a diverse community – Ukrainians, Russians, Armenians, Jews, Tatars and many others. They have not only resisted attempts to be pitted against



Funeral for one of the fatalities of Kyiv’s Maidan in Chernivtsi

each other, they like this diversity, they are proud of it and meet each other with appreciation. What happens in these days, is not the return of the 30s and 40s, it’s a new chapter.



Mourning in Chernivtsi

For these people and for us, Russia’s President Putin has a different message: with the “protection of the Russian population” in eastern and southern Ukraine from attacks by Ukrainians that never took place, as well as with the annexation of the Crimea as protection from an invasion by “fascists” from the west of the country, he has reanimated the mono-ethnic nation-state of 19th century and by this set an anti-European society design on the agenda. It depends on all of us, how to deal with this challenge.



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