

Preserving Centuries of Jewish Heritage in Ukraine: An Interview with Meylakh Sheykhet

In February 2011, Mr. Sheykhet, the Director of the Union of Councils for Jews for the Former Soviet Union, visited the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre in Toronto. Mr. Sheykhet has been working for over 25 years on the preservation of sites of Jewish heritage in Ukraine. He lives in Lviv. Interview conducted by Orest Zakydalsky, researcher, UCRDC. Translated from Ukrainian

How and why did you start your work?

When perestroika started, people began to come out of hiding, their internal hiding. For many living in constant fear lost all sense. People began to organize, to think, to work together. This was an unimaginable joy. I got to know Iryna Kalynets, and many others, and we did a lot together.

Back then anyone travelling to Ukraine had to go through Moscow. I had very good contacts in Moscow, and prominent rabbis who had their roots in Ukraine began to visit, and wanted to see what was left of Jewish heritage after communist rule. For the Jewish people, Ukraine is the cradle, where religious movements were founded, where there was a high culture, which was born in Halychyna, in Bukovyna, in Volyn, which continues to nourish the Jewish world with its dignity, its spirituality. And this all came from Ukraine. And so people from the West began to come. And because I was well-known in dissident circles, they came to me. Also, I knew a lot of languages – Yiddish, Ukrainian, English, Russian – I grew up in a multilingual world, and it was easy for me to talk with them.

I had submitted my papers for emigration, and was waiting. I began to talk with these people, and we began to travel in the towns of Halychyna, which we couldn't do before – to show an interest in your roots was the same as showing that you're a Zionist or anti-Soviet - we began to travel, and when I saw the destruction, I was very moved. The neglected cemeteries, toppled gravestones; many cemeteries had already been built over during Soviet times.

Under Soviet rule, new administrative documents were created, which left out sacred Jewish places, including cemeteries. Jewish cemeteries and synagogues simply ceased to exist on these topographical maps, and if you take those Soviet city plans, it was as if the Jewish people had never existed here. Despite the fact that some of these cities had 50 or 60% Jewish populations before the war, and they lived side by side with Ukrainians and Poles. This was a neighborly life – the Soviets destroyed maps in books that showed this life. They wanted to fully destroy an understanding of the past, as if it had never existed. Jewish schools and synagogues were closed.

These cemeteries, although de facto they existed, from the Soviet position, de jure, they no longer existed, because they weren't on any maps or plans. So many of them were simply built-over with new buildings. The destruction was massive. The Germans, during the War, used the grave monuments to build roads, and Soviet power continued this.

So, those rabbis came to Ukraine, and tried to do something about this. They went to the authorities, and the authorities simply lied to them, coming up with various excuses. The rabbis had gone to the locals, who told them, here was the Jewish cemetery – and the authorities told them, no there's no cemetery here. I saw all of this, and understood that I had to do something. Even though I had the right to emigrate, I decided to stay. The first problems we faced, since many of the Jewish archives had been destroyed or taken away, was how to come up with evidence about sacred sites, and how to deal with the stonewalling of the communist authorities. But Ukrainians, ordinary villagers, townspeople, were interested in protecting these sites – they helped us. But it's very difficult. The authorities, to this day, are not very cooperative. The problem today is “prykhvatysatsiya”¹ – business interests are trying to privatize things to which they have never had any right. Everyone who comes to power tries to use their time to get something for themselves, because they don't know if they'll be elected again.

I am very happy that I have the opportunity to try to preserve Ukrainian Jewish heritage. But this is a very long, arduous process.

Could you describe the practical side of your work? What is the process that you have to go through to get a place designated as a heritage site that can't be privatized?

Ukrainian legislation is adequate for protecting heritage sites. There is a process that must be gone through to prove that a site is a site of heritage. First, we have to find documentation and evidence from pre-Soviet times, because Soviet documentation cannot help us. We look for old documents in archives throughout the world; Ukrainian archives, have, for the most part, been destroyed – by the German, then the Soviet authorities - there is very little left. The archives that remain are disorganized, and the Jewish community in Lviv has spent great efforts trying to organize them, especially in the Central Historical Archive in Lviv. We've created a database about Jews who lived in Halychyna. Now, if someone from the West wants to find their roots in Ukraine, this has become easier. You can search this database by name. This is part of our work.

Once we find archival materials, we compare them to contemporary city plans, we check, we search for physical evidence, and then write a report about that particular Jewish community and site. We submit this to the local authorities. The local authorities, according to the law, must submit these documents to the oblast authorities, and from them, to the central state apparatus. Unfortunately, in many cases the local authorities stop these documents – they don't want to pass them on, because of business interests. This, despite the fact that ordinary citizens want to see these places protected; they often come up to us and thank us for the work we're doing. It is thanks to our cooperation with Ukrainians, real Ukrainian patriots, that we were able to protect many sites.

In Lviv, Ukrainians are working with us; Yuri Shukhevych and I have been to the city prosecutor more than once, where he has pounded on the table and demanded from them, “At long last, will you behave like Ukrainians!?” Together with Vera Lyaskovska, we

¹ A word with no English equivalent – literally, stealing through privatization.

were able to protect the Citadel², where, in one tower, tens of thousands of Jews were murdered. The Citadel had been turned into a high-end restaurant; the rich ate there. But we won; this site is now designated a heritage site. This happened thanks to the central authorities, but not the local authorities in Lviv. In the city of Lviv, which was the center of the struggle against Soviet power, we have this situation. The problem is not with the people; it is with the authorities.

The protection of historical and cultural heritage is an instance that unites people, that unites the past with the present and future. It gives people energy, to work together to cooperate, to organize. Because Ukrainians in the West have a different experience, of tolerance and freedom; we need your help in bringing these values to Ukraine. The mentality of the authorities is, unfortunately, the same as it was during Soviet times. They are more afraid of perceptions in the West than how they look to their own people. In the West, it's the opposite. The government, first and foremost, listens to its own citizens. In Ukraine we don't have this yet. That's why the position of the West is very important.

Recently the cemetery in Sambir³ has been the subject of much attention in the West. Can you give us an update on the current situation there?

The situation in Sambir has become a symbol of intolerance in Ukraine; but in fact the situation is quite different. The problem is not with Ukrainians, but with certain radical elements in Sambir. I have been active in Sambir since 1989. The town played a huge part in Jewish history in Ukraine. Sambir had a lot of communists who, when communism collapsed, overnight changed their coats and became Ukrainian nationalists. These radical elements put up three crosses on the site of the ancient Jewish cemetery, saying the Sichovi Striltsi cemetery has not been rehabilitated. But nobody forbade them from rehabilitating the Striltsi cemetery; they could've done this. So they invited a priest, put up three crosses, and blessed them on the Jewish burial site. The Church didn't sanction this. This wouldn't have happened if not for those former communists who became ultranationalists. The crosses are still there; I met with Cardinal Huzar, who gave me an official letter saying that this situation is the result of a misunderstanding, and that the crosses should be taken down. Obviously, because they were blessed by a priest, they can't simply be taken down. So we decided that I would do an analysis, to determine where exactly the Striltsi graves are located, so that the crosses can be put there. But there has been no initiative from the Ukrainian side. The Church is also not doing anything. Why should there be crosses on a Jewish cemetery?

And this question of Sambir, in fact, is not a question of Ukrainian-Jewish relations, but it has entered into this arena. And if there were an appeal from the Ukrainian community in Canada, as part of the global Ukrainian community, this would be very important. I am

² During WWII, the Citadel, a fortress built during Austrian times, was used as a camp for Jews and POWs. Thousands were murdered on that site.

³ After the collapse of communism, work began to rehabilitate the ancient Jewish cemetery in Sambir. During this work, extremist elements in the town put up three crosses on the site, which were then blessed by a priest.

delighted with the work of Borys Wrzesnewskyj (former Member of Canadian Parliament), and Paul Grod, (President of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress) who came to Lviv, and Jim Temerty (Chair of the Board of Directors, Ukrainian Jewish Encounter Initiative), in this area. This is first of all a question for the Church, because the authorities should get involved, but they won't.

Can you describe the situation with the Jewish cemetery at Berdychev?

In Berdychev there is a terrible situation. During Soviet rule, half the Jewish cemetery was built over with garages, the other half was a flea market. Since independence, a petroleum station has been built there. The land was rented out and there are attempts to privatize it. We had a seven-year long court case, where we proved that this territory is a cemetery. But because of corruption in the court system, and corruption in the local authorities, we haven't been able to have this land designated a heritage site. Although we won many court cases and appeals, one judge, in one sitting, in our absence, decided a seven-year long case to the benefit of the business interests. We went to the Kyiv Court of Appeals, which returned the case to the lower court, which again ruled against us.

All of this reflects negatively on the Ukrainian state. This is not a problem of the Ukrainian people; this is why the voice of the Ukrainian community – an open, clear protest, is very important, because this would be the voice of the Ukrainian people, and not the voice of that segment of society that is not Ukrainian in the sense of Ukrainian dignity, Ukrainian morality. These are people who take advantage of the legacy of Soviet rule to enrich themselves. It is very important to talk about this; the Berdychev question is fully corrupted - according to Ukrainian law, land can only be privatized or rented if there are no legal disputes as to this land. But in Ukraine, nobody pays attention to this.

Another instance that garnered much attention in the West was the issue of the Golden Rose Synagogue in Lviv⁴. What is the current situation?

With regard to the Golden Rose, the problem is essentially the same as in Berdychev. The Ukrainian community in Lviv was fully supportive of the fact that nothing can be built there, that the site needs to be preserved. But what happened? How does destruction of heritage sites take place? The state provides very little money for protecting heritage sites. The municipal authorities, especially in a place like Lviv, which has such a unique history; it is really a "museum city" – should look for funds – international, local – in order to protect heritage sites. Instead of this certain segments of the city fall into disrepair, the authorities are told, look, nobody's doing anything – let's give it to a businessman; he'll do something. But business doesn't know how to protect heritage sites – it builds things that will bring maximum profit. Buildings that were designated heritage sites are destroyed. And nobody wants to listen to the Ukrainian intelligentsia. And nobody wants to listen that there's legislation,. And so a group of people makes a lot of

⁴ Built in the 16th century, the Golden Rose Synagogue is one of the oldest in Ukraine. Destroyed by the Germans in 1943, the Golden Rose was designated a World Heritage Site in 1998.

money off this. At the Golden Rose, we stopped construction. We have eight court rulings in our favor.

What was being built on the location of the Golden Rose?

A hotel for Euro 2012. But we were able to get a court order to stop the construction, in large part because of Ukrainians. We based our case on Ukrainian legislation, and international agreements that Ukraine signed, on the fact that this site is protected as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. The position of the Ukrainian community was unanimously against construction. But, before we were able to stop the construction a great many objects were destroyed, taken out by trucks. And returning and renewing these objects is impossible now. In the West, this site would be restored, and there would be a large profit – people enjoy coming to Lviv to feel the aura of the old-world city. But the people who tried to build there aren't from Lviv; and the authorities argued that those who were building there had paid a huge amount of money for that territory. I told them, “is there any amount of money that can be compared to the importance of our cultural heritage?” This heritage was created in Ukraine, it is part of our common heritage.

However, thanks in large part to the Ukrainian community, Vera Lyaskovska, Iryna Kalynets and Yuri Shukhevych in particular, and the judges, who finally understood what the issue was about, construction has stopped. But city council is going back to court in support of construction, as our opponents. We're sure that with God's help, we'll win, but it's very difficult. So the fight for the rule of law in Ukraine should be in the focus of the Ukrainian community; in the same way that attention has been focused on Tymoshenko. The issue is not with Tymoshenko, what is important is that the opposition should have a right to exist. Only then can democratic rights be protected.

This is not a problem of the Ukrainian or Jewish people; it's a problem of certain interests, business interests. The Ukrainian community has always supported us. This is not a question of Ukrainian-Jewish relations, but rather a problem of administration, of the Ukrainian authorities not representing the people, of the authorities not carrying out their responsibilities as elected officials. First of all they should be thinking about how their actions will reflect on Ukraine.

What role do you see the diaspora having?

We need to unite our efforts; the voice of the West is very important. Ukrainians here have the right to have their voices heard in Ukraine. The assistance of lawyers, for example, would be very important. While there is no rule of law in Ukraine, the Ukrainian state will not be able to self-realize. Without the rule of law there is no independent Ukraine.

Our two peoples, who have a lot in common, should build our relations, without the intrusion of forces that seek to divide us, and together our two peoples should reach understanding and move forward. There is a lot of good in our common history. Ukraine is the cradle of Hassidism; and our peoples lived together in neighborly relations for centuries. Jewish culture, Jewish life, flourished in Ukraine. It is very good to hear Ukrainians say that there is no Lviv without the Jewish community; but the conditions to

protect this history need to be created. Ukrainians should say their piece. And the local community is helping us – we also need the voice of the West supporting us.