

# Signs of life

Historians are chronicling former Jewish communities in Eastern Europe by exploring the region's long-neglected cemeteries

By **Bernard Dichek** *Kolomyia, Ukraine*

**IN A** Ukrainian parking lot surrounded by apartment blocks, Aharon Haver gets down on his knees to blow away dust from the pavement. Hebrew letters slowly appear on a limestone slab below. The letters show the name Frankel as well as fragments of birth and death dates in the 19th century.

This tombstone, desecrated by the passage of pedestrians and cars, lies in Kolomyia, a pre-World War II Polish town that is today part of western Ukraine. It is one of the last reminders of the Jewish community that once thrived here. But this marker of death, along with other abandoned gravestones, is turning out to be a source of vital information.

During the past summer, Haver and 15 other Israeli and Russian college students spent two weeks exploring the remains of Jewish cemeteries in western Ukraine. Their expedition was part of an effort to research the cultural heritage of the Jewish communities of Galicia and Bukovina,

pre-World War II regions in Poland and Romania, where more than a million Jews once lived.

"The Nazis ravaged the Kolomyia Jewish cemetery and used many of the tombstones to pave the grounds of the Gestapo headquarters," explains Hebrew University historian Ilia Lurie to the students as they tour Kolomyia, a city whose population was once half Jewish.

Unlike Kolomyia, the Jewish burial grounds in the nearby towns of Jablonow and Kosow remain largely intact. Those two graveyards were the main focus of last summer's expedition, led by Lurie and fellow historians Boris Khaimovich and Marina Bruk.

The research team cut away weeds and bushes, righted toppled tombstones, brushed away dirt from weathered Hebrew letters, and then meticulously listed and photographed the inscriptions. A map of the graveyards and the details of each individual tombstone, including its GPS

location, will be listed on an electronic database (<http://www.jewishgalicia.net>).

"The project is about much more than just cataloguing," explains Khaimovich, an expert in Jewish art, who has been studying tombstone engravings for more than 25 years.

"Tombstone inscriptions make up a language of their own," Khaimovich tells *The Jerusalem Report*. "By deciphering the text and images we can learn a great deal about how communities lived, their relations with their neighbors, the status of individuals, their economic level and religiosity, and many other things."

He points out that throughout the 700 years that Jews lived in Galicia, even though Yiddish and Polish were the main spoken languages, tombstone inscriptions were generally written in Hebrew. "This makes the historical texts readily accessible to a contemporary generation of Hebrew speakers."

During a trip to the Jewish cemetery



Aharon Haver blows away dust from a tombstone used to pave a Kolomyia parking lot

at Satanow, Khaimovich presents the students with an example of how a tombstone with a puzzling motif can provide insights into the mindset of people who lived several hundred years ago. Many of the tombstones in the cemetery show easily recognizable Jewish symbols, such as *menoras* and prayer books, but Khaimovich singles out one that depicts an illustration of three rabbits linked together.

The use of this imagery seems odd, says Khaimovich, because the symbol of the three rabbits was widely used in other cultures, especially among Christians who associated it with the Holy Trinity. “So why would Jews use it on their graves?” he asks.

There is no definitive answer, but Khaimovich has observed that whenever the symbol of the three rabbits is used on tombstones, at Satanow or in other Jewish cemeteries, one of the names of the deceased is Abraham, Isaac or Jacob.

“So the use of the three rabbits symbol apparently is connected to the three patriarchs of Israel, while the linked chain between them may refer to the cycle of life mentioned in the *yizkor* [memorial] prayer,” concludes Khaimovich.

Walking through the cemetery, the students come across other peculiar

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tombstones that capture their attention and stimulate discussion, including an elaborately engraved tombstone with a woman described in flowery Hebrew as being *pikchit vechachmanit* – clever and wise.

“I get the impression she was well

off,” says Shlomi Golan, a 23-year-old yeshiva student who smiles at the unusual choice of words. “Maybe this also tells us something about the status of women in those days that they also could achieve positions of prominence,” he muses.

Unlike the tombstones at Satanow, the inscriptions that the research team discovers at Jablonow and Kosow turn out to be less eye-catching. There are some interesting drawings but, for the most part, they provide only names and dates of birth and death.

Still, the researchers are satisfied with their accomplishments. “It is hard to find the words to describe what it is like to uncover something that no one has seen in hundreds of years,” says Marina Bruk, while cutting away two-meter high vegetation that has grown over much of the Kosow hillside cemetery. Bruk’s Jewish Studies and Hebrew language students at St. Petersburg State University have been regular participants in the

cemetery expeditions since they began in 2009. Her students, as well as the Israeli members of the contingent, note that the experience has changed their view of Jewish life in Galicia.

“I have to admit that I had a picture in my mind of the Jews living here as being pitiful,” says Golan. “But once you see the elaborate craftsmanship in the engravings and the ruins of some of the magnificent synagogues we visited nearby, it completely changes your impression.”

“When my friends in Israel heard that I was going to the Ukraine to study graves, they told me I was crazy,” says Refael Naftali, 23, a participant of Yemenite descent back for his second expedition. “But what I discovered here was an entire world that was unknown to me.”

“We don’t want to forget what was once here,” says Katya Karaseva, a Moscow University student, reflecting on the significance of the project. “Hopefully the lives of these people won’t disappear from the face of the earth. Their names will go down in history.” ■

The three rabbits symbol, seen on a tombstone at Satanow, is apparently connected to the three patriarchs of Israel



BERNARD DICHEK

## Personal project



BERNARD DICHEK

Expedition leader Boris Khaimovich (center) examines an inscription at the Jablanow cemetery with two students, Olesya Nekrasova and Tzvi Strauss

**Prof. David Wallach's** interest in the history of Galician Jewry began when he discovered documents about his grandparents in his parents' house after his mother passed away.

“One of the last things my mother said before she passed away was her regret at not being able to bring her mother here [to Israel] before the Holocaust,” says Wallach, a biology researcher at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot. “My mother never talked about her family who perished, and I realized that I knew nothing about them.”

Thus began a journey that took Wallach to his mother’s hometown of Maniava, where he tried to get the local village council to erect a memorial near the well where his grandmother was killed.

“When the village council turned me down I decided to do something else instead. As a researcher it was only natural for

me to think of promoting research about this region as a way of preserving my family’s legacy,” says Wallach.

In his own work as a biologist, Wallach has devoted decades of work to basic research, successfully unraveling key biological processes relating to the phenomenon of cell death. His discoveries have led to a number of scientific breakthroughs, including the development of a major life-enhancing drug.

“I believe in the importance of basic research,” Wallach tells the Report, referring to the type of research that aims to obtain knowledge without a predetermined application. In order to support basic research about Galician Jewry, Wallach established the Ludmer Project.

Besides documenting Jewish cemeteries, which is done together with the Jewish Galicia and Bukovina Association of Jerusalem, the project supports the study of Jewish culture by Ukrainian doctoral and post-doctoral students, who conduct part of their studies in Israel.

Teaching their young people about the cultural achievements of the Jews who lived with them, says Wallach, is a way of getting back at the Ukrainians for their part in the Holocaust and for refusing to let him build a memorial for his grandmother. The Ludmer Project is also currently supporting research by two Israeli scholars who are analyzing Hasidic texts written in Galicia.

Wallach is determined that the history and culture of Galician Jewry will not be forgotten. “If we abandon this legacy, it is almost like we are letting the people there die again. But if we seek out and preserve this rich heritage, there is a great deal that we can learn.”

**B.D.**