

# Ukraine

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My great-grandfather, Alexander Reiser, of blessed memory -- after whom my father is named -- was born in 1881 in the city Lviv in western Ukraine. According to an exhaustive family record, which traces our lineage all the way back to the 1700s, Alexander's parents and grandparents were merchants in the lumber business. They traded and exported all across the Pale of Settlement wood that had been chopped down in the dense oak forests of western Ukraine.

Over the past few weeks and months, as the tension in Ukraine has escalated into all out war, my great-grandpa Alex has often been on mind. Even though I never met him, and even though I have never been there, I feel, on some deep level that I cannot fully explain, a connection to Ukraine -- and in particular to the city of Lviv.

Of course, there are many reasons to feel concerned about the war in Ukraine. Like so many others, I am appalled by Russia's blatant disregard for the sovereignty of a neighboring nation. This unprovoked war represents not only a threat to Ukraine, not only a threat to the stability of Europe, not only a threat to NATO, but also, a threat to democracy and the rule of law.

Like so many others, I fear for the life of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, who has shown incredible leadership and bravery over these past few weeks -- and also fear for the lives of the Ukrainian fighters, whose resistance against the better-resourced Russian military has, at least so far, proven stronger than expected.

Like so many others, my heart breaks for the humanitarian crisis that has been unleashed -- with hundreds of innocent civilians killed, with estimates, as of Thursday evening, of more than a million people who have fled to neighboring countries, and a million more who are internally displaced, taking shelter in subway stations to avoid the bombardment of missiles. I urge the congregation to help provide humanitarian relief by donating toiletries, diapers, and first aid kits, which will be distributed through the AFYA foundation, and are being collected in bins outside the main entrance to WRT through this coming Wednesday.

But for us as Jews, our reasons for concern about the war in Ukraine are not only about geopolitics, not only about the humanitarian crisis -- but also, it is about our heritage. Even for those of us who do not trace our family's lineage there -- as I do, with my great-grandpa Alex -- Ukraine matters deeply to the Jewish people.

On Wednesday, President Zelensky -- who is himself proudly Jewish -- recorded a video message addressed to the Jewish people of the world. In it, he reminded us that Russia's attempt to erase Ukrainian history also, in part, erases Jewish history. Since the war began, missiles have fallen on the town of Uman, where the Hasidic master Rebbe Nachman of Breslov is buried -- and which has become a pilgrimage site for hundreds of thousands of Jews every year, who come to pray at the tomb of the revered rabbi. Missiles have also damaged the Babi

Yar Memorial Center in Kiev -- a memorial site dedicated to the unthinkable massacre that was perpetrated there during the Holocaust, in which, over the course of just two days, 33,000 Ukrainian Jews were dragged from their homes, shot dead, and thrown into a mass grave in a nearby ravine.

All across Ukraine, there are numberless places that matter to the Jewish people: whether it's the pilgrimage site of Uman, the ravine of Babi Yar, the vibrant synagogues and community centers that serve the approximately 150,000 Jews living in Ukraine today -- or, the dense oak forests outside of Lviv, where, a 150 years ago, my great-grandfather Alex's family earned their living.

To be sure, Jewish history in Ukraine has been decidedly stormy: darkened first by the Khmelnytsky Massacre in the 1650s; followed by centuries of Tsarist restrictions about where Jews could and could not live, and what professions Jews could and could not enter; forced military conscription, including for children; countless pogroms committed by our neighbors; accusations of blood libel (the medieval myth that Jews use Christian blood in order to make matzah) charged against us even as late as the 20th century; the mass shootings of the Holocaust (of which Babi Yar is just the most well-known example), carried out by Germans, but often assisted by local Ukrainians; the repressions of the Soviet era. The list of Jewish tragedies in Ukraine goes on and on and on.

And yet, despite these many tragedies, Jewish history Ukraine is also incredibly rich. The number of Jewish luminaries who were born or lived in what is now Ukraine is staggering: the Baal Shem Tov, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, Sholom Aleichem, Shai Agnon, Ahad Ha'am, Chayim Nachman Bialik, Golda Meir, Natan Sharansky -- to name just the most well-known few. The Jews of Ukraine were impressively culturally productive. Together, they pioneered three major innovations in modern Jewish life -- without which, the Jewish world as we know it today would likely be unrecognizable: the Hasidic revolution, the flowering of Yiddish literature, and the Zionist movement.

What was it, we might ask, about the Jewish experience in Ukraine that, despite our people's stormy history there, we nevertheless were able to be so culturally productive? Why is it that these three major innovations -- Hasidism, Yiddish literature, and Zionism -- all were born in Ukraine?

To help us answer this question, we need a crash course in modern Jewish history. It is a story that can be told in two contrasting parts: the Jewish experience in Western Europe (places like France, Germany, and Austria) contrasted with the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe (places like Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine).

Let us begin with Western Europe. For the Jews of Western Europe, the modern era begins with the French Revolution and its battlecry of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* -- or "liberty, equality, and brotherhood." The centuries of inequality between the nobility and the peasants gave way to the ideals of the Enlightenment: the rights of citizenship, equal protection under the law, democracy.

And as these ideals spread across Western Europe, the walls of the Jewish ghettos gradually came down. Our ancestors were emancipated and granted equal citizenship under the law.

But in exchange for their citizenship, the Jews of Western Europe were expected to participate in the majority culture of the nation. They needed to speak French, look French, and act French. Gone were the days in which one's primary group association was with the Jewish community. Identifying as French, or German, or Austrian had to come first.

The Jews of Western Europe adapted accordingly. It was there that our own Reform Movement was born, out of a desire to make our worship services look and feel more like the Protestant services of our German neighbors -- with prayers in the vernacular, instrumental organ music, and mixed seating for women and men. It was there that modern Jewish philosophy flourished, with thinkers such as Moses Mendelssohn and Martin Buber -- mirroring the esteemed German intellectual tradition of Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche. For the Jews in Western Europe, emancipation created the need for them to fit in.

All of these developments stand in sharp contrast to the experience of the Jews in Eastern Europe. For them, the modern era begins not with the French Revolution and emancipation. Rather, for the Jews of Eastern Europe, the modern era begins with a historical moment that has resonances to today. It begins with the Russian annexation of Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine.

As the Russian Empire expanded westward, it newly found itself with control over many ethnic minorities: including Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians -- and Jews. In an effort to organize this jumble of groups, the Empire relied on the medieval institution of social estates -- categorizing people into different groups, each with its own a differing set of rights and responsibilities. Unlike the Jews in the West, who, after being emancipated, had to minimize their Jewish group identity, the Jews in the East were moved in exactly the opposite direction -- and were now politically defined specifically as a group.

And it is this difference between West and East -- this sense of collective Jewish identity -- that caused the Jews of Ukraine to be so impressively culturally productive. Although their collective identity was forced upon them as a political status, it nevertheless led to our three major innovations in modern Jewish life: the Hasidic revolution, the flowering of Yiddish literature, and the Zionist movement.

Let us consider each of them in order. First: the Hasidic revolution. In the 1700s, Jewish life in Eastern Europe was in disarray. Under the burden of heavy taxes, the community did not have enough money to properly fund the yeshivas where rabbis would train and study. As a result, both the scholarship and the leadership abilities of the rabbis began to suffer -- and the community began to grow disillusioned with them.

And it was into this leadership crisis that the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, was born. He developed revolutionary ideas about Jewish life. To him, it did not matter that the yeshivas

were weak. He taught, instead, that prayer is more important than study, that the heart is more important than the mind, that joyful piety is more important than Talmudic erudition, that the simple Jewish commoner can be as close to God as the greatest learned sage. Unlike the religious Reformers in Western Europe, who had worked to make Judaism more closely resemble their Christian neighbors, the Baal Shem Tov in Ukraine worked to make Judaism more closely resemble the life of the everyday Jew. Hasidism attracted followers by the millions.

Second: the flowering of Yiddish literature. While the emancipated Jews in the West were learning to speak French and German, the unemancipated Jews in the East had no choice other than to more fully embrace their mother tongue -- the *mamaloshen*: Yiddish. They created a rich literary culture, teeming with Yiddish novels, short stories, poems, essays, newspapers, journals, stage plays, and songs -- with the Ukrainian port city of Odessa as its vibrant, beating heart.

Unlike the Jewish writers in the West, who composed serious, cerebral books of modern Jewish philosophy, the Yiddish writers in the East composed stories about the lives of everyday Jews: about Tevye the milkman and his daughters (written by the perhaps the most famous Ukrainian Jew, Sholom Aleichem), or a story about an incident of getting lost on the way to the train station, or about falling asleep in shul and accidentally missing the entirety of Rosh Hashanah. These were the stories of the people, written in the language of the people -- and they proved hugely popular.

Third: the Zionist movement. We tend to think of Theodore Herzl (who was from Western Europe) as the founder of the Zionist movement. But in fact, the vast majority of Zionist leaders and their followers came from Eastern Europe -- and many of them from Ukraine. Two of these Ukrainian Zionists were Leon Pinsker (who predated Herzl by 15 years, and to whom Herzl's ideology is deeply indebted) and the Ukrainian Zionist Ahad Ha'am.

Both Pinsker and Ahad Ha'am observed that the emancipation of Jews in the West had come with some negative side-effects. Pinsker pointed out that, even after they had been emancipated, Western Jews continued to face discrimination. True, they had been made citizens -- but they were second class citizens, at best. What's more, the Jews had very little power over their own emancipation. They had to passively wait until the state decided that it was ready to emancipate them -- and they might be waiting for a very long time. In his influential pamphlet called *Auto-Emancipation*, Pinsker called upon the Jews of Eastern Europe to stop passively waiting, take matters into their own hands, and establish a Jewish national movement.

Ahad Ha'am, for his part, also saw the negative side-effects of emancipation -- but from a different angle. He pointed out that emancipation also led to assimilation. As an antidote to this problem, Ahad Ha'am created the idea of Cultural Zionism -- the notion that the Jews should re-establish a Hebrew civilization in the land of Israel, from which a rich Jewish culture and a thick sense of Jewish pride would flow outwards to the Diaspora.

All three of these innovations -- Hasidism, Yiddish literature, and Zionism -- were pioneered in Ukraine. All three of them reflect the political status of the Jews of Eastern Europe -- who, unlike their Western counterparts, were not emancipated until the 20th century. On account of this, all three innovations are expressions of collective Jewish identity: the feeling that to be Jewish is, first and foremost, to be part of a group -- Hasidism, as the religion of the people; Yiddish literature, as the language and stories of the people; and Zionism, as the national movement of the people.

This is why the Jews of Ukraine were so impressively culturally productive: they understood themselves as belonging to a people -- a sprawling extended family.

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In every nuclear family, in yours as well as mine, there are certain places that we hold dear: the town in which we were raised, the beaches on which we have vacationed, the park where we proposed to our spouse, the cemetery where our parent is buried. These places are full of memories. These places have shaped who we are.

Even though I have never been there, and even though I never met him -- the dense oak forests of Western Ukraine, in which my great-grandfather Alex's family earned their living, shaped my family's story. The place will always be a part of us, and we will always be a part of it.

And what is true for our nuclear families is also true for the sprawling extended family that is the Jewish people. Even for those of us who do not trace our lineage to Ukraine, still it is a place that we cherish. It is a place that shaped the Jewish story. It is a place that produced our culture.

We Jews will forever care about Ukraine -- for there, we have known that to be Jewish is to belong to a group. To be Jewish is to be a part of a family.