

## Galicia: The Undiscovered Troy

by Andriy Lyubka



*Buchach Panoramic View*

We arrive in the town of Buchach at one and the same time with Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes (globally known as S.Y. Agnon, a Nobel Prize winner in literature). It is on the eve of the first autumn chill, but eight and a half dozen years later. The Jewish author described his impressions of staying here in his novel *A Guest for the Night*. As for me, I take this as a guidebook, like Schliemann who excavated the site of Troy while carefully reading Homer. For my part, I am trying to discover the lost Buchach in the present reality.

I go amiss, for Agnon and I appear to find ourselves in different places. Well, it seems to be all here—Koloyeva Street, the spring from which imbibed the Polish king Jan Sobieski, the hotel where the writer stayed, and the sites of the former Great Synagogue and the Beth Midrash (today, they host the market stalls and shops). There is the Jewish kirkut, the burial place called *okopysko* by the locals. The landscape and the setting are the same, but the theatre is staging a different show performed by a different acting troupe. The scale is about the same, as both in the time of Agnon's visit to Buchach, and in our day. The town has only a few thousand inhabitants. The ethnic composition of the population has changed dramatically. While a hundred years ago Jewish citizens prevailed, today it is almost an entirely Ukrainian town.

The artistic truths of Agnon's novel should not be implicitly trusted. Even though the Jewish population was in the majority in old Buchach, the town still had many Ukrainians and Poles, not to mention a Ukrainian peasant sea raging around it. But the lyric persona of *A Guest for the Night* failed to notice all of that. He came to a Jewish town where everyone, from the hotelier to a shopkeeper, was his fellow believer. The seven hundred page long book only mentions the Gentile several times, casually, as a passing shadow. At this point, it would be worth noting that Agnon visited and described Buchach at the turn of the 1920s and the 1930s. It was a turbulent time when nationalism was ascendant in all communities.

Nationalism is a peculiar kind of optics, illuminating your own and shrouding in darkness the stranger.

All of this reminds me of the Polish tours traipsing around Galicia, their borderland Atlantis. They inspect the mansions, churches, cemeteries, and market squares of the cities, weaving a narrative about Polish history and the Poles, as if they alone lived there. The opening statement of the excursion obviously will always be about a multicultural paradise, in which Poles, Jews, Armenians, and Germans peacefully coexisted, and somewhere in that list Ukrainians will be found, but then the narrative continues for Poles only. This approach to narration is not different in methodology from the Ukrainian version of popular history, where others are presented as visitors and temporary occupants of these lands. Each of the three main versions of Galicia—Ukrainian, Polish, and Jewish—is complete in itself but considers itself to be more complete than the others. In part, all of them are mutually conflicting, and none of them separately is worthy of portraying the entirety of Galicia as a *genius loci*.

It is interesting to note that I was invited to a literary residency in Buchach to commemorate Agnon (in simple terms, to live in the town for a week) as an outsider, someone from beyond Galicia. The newcomer's eye often records something the locals stopped noticing long ago. And here is what I discovered. There is no longer a Jewish Galicia. There is no Polish Galicia. Ultimately, there is no Ukrainian Galicia, either. There is none of Galicia. There is no administrative unit called Galicia. The surveys mention some sort of impersonal west of Ukraine, as if we have any homogeneous western region at all. When you arrive in any Galician region, you are welcomed to the specific oblast, not to Galicia. There is no Galicia. It has been erased from the map and forgotten.

And then you sit quietly in the Buchach district library. The residency organizer introduces you to the audience and incidentally claims that the viewpoint of a non-Galician on Buchach might be new and interesting. And then you suddenly realize Galicia is indeed alive—unseen, and hidden as some secret arcane knowledge for the initiated. It is to be found in the conscience of its people, in the slips of their tongues, in the pungent September smoke rising from the burning leaves in each garden. We cannot perceive it but this does not imply it is absent.

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