Lecture by Paul Robert Magocsi: Regionalism and Jewish Ukraine

[Editor's note: Prof. Paul Robert Magocsi gave the following lecture on March 28, 2019 at the Ukrainian Institute of America during a discussion of the book "Jews and Ukrainians: A Millennium of Co-Existence". The event was moderated by Adrian Karatnycky, Co-Director and Board Member of the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter. Prof. Magocsi is Professor of history and political science at the University of Toronto, where since 1980 he also holds the professorial Chair of Ukrainian Studies. He is also a UJE board member.]

The very topic of this on-going project, the Ukrainian-Jewish encounter, has from the outset raised several conceptual problems. First, can one legitimately speak of Ukrainians and Jews as if they are distinct, self-perceived corporate entities in the past as well as in the present? In other words, do individuals that others define as Ukrainians and Jews actually feel themselves to be part of a group; and do they somehow act in their daily lives in a manner that allegedly reflects and represents so-called group, or national, or ethnic characteristics? And what do we mean by Jews in Ukraine, or Ukrainian Jews? Is there such

a phenomenon, and if so, how does one define that phenomenon? And what are Ukrainians? Persons with definable Ukrainian ethno-linguistic characteristics, or all persons, regardless of ethno-linguistic origin, who are citizens of a state today called Ukraine?

For purposes of this discussion, let us adopt the following definitions, which, I believe, govern the understanding behind what we are calling the Ukrainian-Jewish Encounter. Namely, that "Ukrainian" refers to a group whose members speak Ukrainian and/or identify as belonging to the Ukrainian nationality. In general, I prefer to use the term *ethnic Ukrainian* to distinguish such people from citizens of Ukraine, who technically include the country's entire population, regardless of ethno-linguistic or national background. The terms *Jews in Ukraine* or *Ukrainian Jews* would seem to be at first glance somewhat easier to define. Namely, the terms refer to persons of Jewish religion or heritage who were born or live in Ukraine. But what about Jews of the historic past who lived at a time when Ukraine as a state did not exist? For purposes of these remarks as well and for the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter, a rather anachronistic approach is being adopted. Persons of Jewish background are designated as *Ukrainian Jews* or *Jews from Ukraine* if they have resided at some point in history on the territory of present-day Ukraine from earliest times to the present, regardless whether a state called Ukraine existed when the Jews in question lived there.

Such an understanding does *not* necessarily coincide with how each of the groups in question has perceived itself. Instead, there exists what may be called a perceptual disconnect. On the one hand, ethnic Ukrainians consider their historic homeland to have always been Ukraine, a territory which only in the course of the twentieth century became a clearly defined and eventually independent state. On the other hand, the Jews in question are part of a world-wide diaspora, one branch of which, called Ashkenazim, had until recently inhabited large parts of central and eastern Europe, including areas which—from their perspective—have only recently "become" Ukraine. In those cases where some more specific territorial origin is called for, the general and often vague terms that one encounters to depict the places where Ukrainian Jews lived are the Pale of Settlement; "Russia"; in more recent times the Soviet Union; or in the case Hasidic adherents, no geographic place at all, but rather some rabbinic dynasty with which one is associated, such as Belz (Rokeah), Bratslav, Chernobyl' (Tversky), Savran (Mosheh Tsevi), Zlotsev, Munkatch, Ruzhin and Sadagora (Friedman), or Vyshnits. Some Jews may identify with a specific region, such as Galicia, Bukovina, Carpathian Rus', or the Crimea. The point is that for Jews, the concept of a Ukraine is very rarely mentioned as an identifier to describe the origins of oneself or of one's ancestors. Russian Jew, Polish Jew, Soviet Jew, Galitsianer, Krymchak, a Belzer or Munkatcher dynastic follower, but likely not the descriptor—Ukrainian Jew.

Various regional and country names do, nonetheless, reflect real differences within what we are defining here as Ukrainian Jewry. In many ways, the Jewish cultural mindset derives from geo-political structures that date from the late eighteenth century to the outbreak of World War I. That period began with the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth,

which took place between 1772 and 1795. After the latter date Poland-Lithuania ceased to exist, and those lands which until at that time had belonged to the former Commonwealth and were annexed to the Russian Empire became part of what was known as the Pale of Settlement. Encompassing the present-day countries of Lithuania, Belarus, and most of Ukraine, the Pale had the highest number of Ashkenic Jews anywhere in the world. The nearly four million (1897) Jews in the Pale, including the estimated two million who emigrated from there to North America (especially to the northeastern United States) between the 1897 and 1917, described themselves—as their descendants do to this day—as Jews from Russia, or Russian Jews.

The Pale referred to those imperial Russian provinces (Volhynia, Podolia, Kyiv, Chernihiv, Poltava, Kherson, Katerynoslav, and Taurida in Ukraine) where Jews were permitted to reside. In effect, with few exceptions, the Russian imperial government banned Jews from residing beyond the Pale; that is, they could only reside legally in that part of Russian Empire annexed during the partitions of Poland (1772, 1792, 1795). Even within the Pale there were various restrictions on where Jews could reside, and beginning in the 1880s they were temporarily banned from moving as first time residents to rural villages. It was also within the Pale, and specifically in those tsarist provinces located in Ukraine, where the anti-Jewish pogroms of 1881-1882 took place. Although the loss of life was minimal in comparison to previous and subsequent pogroms, most historians consider the years 1881-1882, to quote Benjamin Harshaw, "as a major watershed in the history of Jewish culture and consciousness."[1] It was these events which set in motion large-scale immigration abroad and which convinced many secular Jewish intellectuals that the survival of their community must ultimately be sought elsewhere, whether by going to America by "returning" (*alijah*) to Eretz Israel.

Despite the restrictions and periodic violence, as in the Kishinev pogrom in 1903, there were places within the Pale where Jewish communities continued to flourish and even to increase in size. This is particularly the case of the Crimean Peninsula where, beginning in the 1880s, Ashkenazim from other parts of Ukraine and the Pale began to settle in large numbers alongside the Turkic-speaking Krymchak Jews and Karaites whose Crimean communities date from at least the thirteenth century.

In stark contrast to the Jews living in Russia's Pale of Settlement were those residents in present-day Ukraine who found themselves after the 1770s within the Habsburg-ruled Austro-Hungarian Empire. As in imperial Russia's Pale of Settlement, a very high percentage of Jews were among the inhabitants of the provinces of Galicia and Bukovina within the Austrian "half" of the Habsburg realm and in the historic region of Carpathian Rus' in the Hungarian "half". Jews in these areas were able to reap the advantages of Emperor Joseph II's reforms in the 1770s and 1780s, which provided legal equality for all citizens regardless of their religion. Emancipated Jews were able to take advantage of full freedom of movement and settlement anywhere in the empire, which allowed many of them, among other things, to improve their economic statuses. The more enterprising flocked to

universities, in particular the medical and legal professions, in which Jews excelled within pre-World War I Habsburg Austria-Hungary. When, in the 1880s, the danger of pogroms rocked the southern part of the Russian Empire, in particular Ukraine, Jews from Russia's Pale of Settlement sought permanent refuge by crossing the border and settling—at least initially—in Austrian-ruled Galicia and Bukovina.

When the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires ceased to exist in waning years of World War I (1917-1918) the Jews of present-day Ukraine found themselves in four new states: the Soviet Union, Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. Those in the former Russian Empire were now in the Bolshevik-ruled Soviet Ukrainian Republic of the Soviet Union. Soviet policies had both positive and negative impact on their lives. Religious Jews and their institutions were persecuted, and petty merchants and retail shop owners were put out of business. On the other hand, Soviet law lifted all legal restrictions against Jews as a group, with the result that hundred thousands were able to make successful careers in Soviet institutions, whether in government, university, scholarly research, or industrial management sectors.

Jews from Ukraine in former Austro-Hungarian lands found themselves after World War I in Poland—to which Galicia was annexed; Romania— to which Bukovina was annexed; and Czechoslovakia— to which Carpathian Rus' was annexed. During the subsequent interwar years of the twentieth century, the pre-World War I Habsburg tolerance was replaced by restrictions, especially in higher educational institutions, against the Jews of Polish-ruled Galicia and Romanian-ruled Bukovina, while in democratic Czechoslovakia Jews were able to achieve economic, social, and educational advancement that was not even available in pre-World War I Habsburg Hungary.

What conclusions can we draw and what recommendations may be made on the basis of the forgoing remarks? The first conclusion has to do with the very formulation, *Ukrainian Jewry*. If we are to use that concept as an analytical tool, then we must accept the fact of Ukraine's regional diversity and its significant impact on the country's Jewish inhabitants. Clearly, the frequently negative experience of Jews in Russia's Pale of Settlement during the nineteenth century is not the same as the flourishing world of Galician and Bukovinian Jewish life under Habsburg rule in the neighboring Austro-Hungarian Empire. And whereas pogroms were characteristic occurrences at certain times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in many parts of Ukraine as well as in eastern and central Europe in general, one territory in present-day Ukraine, Transcarpathia (historic Subcarpathian Rus'), never experienced pogroms or even other forms of violence which some Jewish historians classify as "excesses." [2]

A somewhat related conclusion—and recommendation—is what I would suggest is the need to move away from the simplistic notion that the historic past of eastern European Jewry is little more than the story of unmitigated tragedy. The Jewish-American scholar

Steven J. Zipperstein best summed up this problem in an essay on Holocaust historiography:

"In the absence of historical work, in the wake of fierce, definitive immigrant memories about what life back there was like, and in the aftermath of the Shoah, pervasive premonitions of horrors regarding Eastern Europe were conflated and granted a grim prescience: Nazi horrors and tsarist pogroms meshed in the often sparse, repetitive narratives that Jews tended to tell about this vast complex region. The distance between life in Vilna [the incredible intellectually productive world epitomized by the interwar YIVO Institute] and death in Treblinka tended to narrow in such accounts, as if these were differences in detail, not substance.[3]"

To the degree that Ukraine is part of this eastern European world, the manner in which its very name is treated becomes symptomatic of what Zipperstein is saying and, therefore, a matter of concern. Alas, stereotypes are hard to overcome, especially when they are embedded in a cultural discourse that goes back centuries. Hence, the medieval designation in Jewish sources for the Slavic lands in central and eastern Europe—including all of Ukraine—was *Knaan*, a term derived from Canaan with the implication that it was "the land of slaves." As Max Weinrich has reminded us, "the history of Yiddish and the history the Ashkenaz are identical." [4] Nevertheless, not in all periods nor in all places did European Jews speak Yiddish. I was particularly struck by Benjamin Harshav's discussion, in his excellent monograph, *The Meaning of Yiddish,* where he lists the various other languages used by Europe's Jews, from Italian to Russian to English and many others in between. Harshav's list excludes, however, one otherwise very influential language, which was not only spoken by large numbers of Ashkenazim but also was one which had an important impact on the later development of Yiddish. The unmentionable language not in Harshav's list was Ukrainian, since traditionally most Jews referred to it not by its name—as they did Polish, or Dutch, or Czech, etc.—but simply as "Goyish." [5]

Even within the Jewish world itself, the unmentionable Ukrainian lands took on especially negative characteristics. I have in mind here the *Galitsianer*, the term used to describe not only the Jews of the historic province of Austrian Galicia, but also—at least in terms of Yiddish dialects—Jews living father east in parts of Right Bank Ukraine. In contrast to "superior" German Jews and, although easterners, the "more sophisticated" Litvaks, the term *Galitsianer*—to quote the recent *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*—is a cultural identifier bearing, for the most part, negative connotations: . . . a troublemaker, a shrewd operator, a money grubber, a religious fanatic, a spineless compromiser, a speaker of popular vulgar Yiddish, and someone ashamed of his or her origins who liked to pose as an Austrian." [6]

Nomenclature, as we all know, has enormous symbolic as well as instrumental value. (After all, we are in Israel, not Palestine). The subject of our inquiry should be Ukrainian Jews, or the Jews of Ukraine. And place names, whether towns or historic regions should reflect

usage in the country where they are located today. To be certain, we should be aware of the reality of numerous name variants for virtually every city, town, and village in central and eastern Europe, but out of respect for present-day realities—not to mention practical matters—I would suggest we consider using Ukrainian names for places within the borders of Ukraine. To take but one of many possible examples, we should not be afraid to use L'viv (with perhaps the Yiddish alternatives of Lemberek or Lvuv in parentheses), but not Polish Lwów or Russian Lvov. With regard to historic regions, the more accurate Kievan Rus' or Carpathian Rus', should be used, not Kievan Russia or Carpathian Russia. Being more sensitive to terminology and its consistent use would certainly be of great help in our common efforts to eliminate unnecessary and at times harmful misperceptions.

Footnotes:

[1] Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)*,* p. 122.

[2] Elias Heifetz, *The Slaughter of The Jews in the Ukraine in 1919* (New York, 1921). The English-language edition of this book makes a distinction between *pogroms,* in which there is loss of life, and *excesses,* where there is only material damage.

[3] Steven J. Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry: Memory, History, Identity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), p. 94.

[4] Max Weinrich, *History of Yiddish Language*, Vol. I, New Haven, Conn.: 2008, p. 4.

[5] Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish,* p. xiii.

[6] *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe,* Vol. I, edited by Gershon David Hundert (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 567.