

The Cemetery in Buchach

Boris Khersonskiy



I came to Buchach, the fatherland of the famous writer Shmuel Yosef Agnon, where he was given a traditional Jewish education and where he became familiar with Hasidic legends that later, much later, he collected together with the philosopher Martin Buber. I also came to the legendary Buchach mythologized by Agnon; a small town, a shtetl, where Jews at one time turned up on their way to Jerusalem and fell under the spell of the beautiful places and the goodwill of the local population that seemingly thought that where there are Jews, there is life.

Agnon created this romantic type of Heavenly Buchach in the latter years of his life when feelings of nostalgia usually acquire immense force. For over ten years, this town had been in the hands (I want to say claws) of the USSR. Perhaps that is why, in creating the chronicle *A City in Its Fullness*, Agnon did not visit his small fatherland again? For the reality was not at all similar to the romantic, religious myth.



Monument to Agnon in Buchach

I look: How could the great writer have been creative in this direction after the Holocaust? I had a question: Is poetry possible after the Holocaust? Literature — is it at all possible? Philosophy? Theology? It turned out that all this is possible, even in those areas where this catastrophe occurred. Life is possible. But not everyone was able to take advantage of that opportunity.

The preponderant majority of Galician Jews were not able to use this opportunity. They were killed, tortured to death; their souls were extracted from their bodies along the lines of medieval dentistry. However, every century has its Middle Ages. My generation happily dodged these horrible events, these cruel times. My parents' and grandparents' generations did not. Even those who survived were so steeped in tragedy that they were incapable even of telling us children about this. I was twelve years old when my father's friend, who had come from Leningrad for a vacation in Odesa,

asked me where the artillery stores were in which the Nazis had burned ten thousand Jews (as it turned out, nearly twice as many). I replied: Did that really happen? That's impossible!

"Yes," said Uncle Natan, "it's impossible, but that was exactly the way it was.... But perhaps it is impossible even to talk about this. Because the KGB will view this as Zionist propaganda."

"What is Zionism?" I asked.

"Whom did your parents raise?" Natan asked rhetorically, sighing.

Soon, however, I already knew a lot, unfortunately. I knew the word *zhyd*, which someone wrote on my history textbook, a textbook that is worthy of such an inscription. My parents had raised a strange little boy who, in feeling that he was a Jew, converted to Christianity expressly in order to have this kind of split self-identification.

Those were the seventies, when the sermons of Father Alexander Men [a Russian Orthodox priest, theologian, and biblical scholar of Jewish parentage — Trans.] brought many of my co-religionists to the Christian Church. This was a typical example in which the desire for God merged with a youthful Fronde. But now this little boy is seventy-one, and on his very birthday, I am standing in Buchach's Jewish cemetery; to be more precise, on the ruins of this cemetery. The Jewish cemetery has the paradoxical name of Bet Chaim — place of life.

But as we see, death was the only "life" that fate had in store for the Jewish community of Galicia in general.



Jewish cemetery in Buchach

Everything was overgrown with blackthorn; you cannot reach the few surviving tombstones. The cemetery is fenced in or, rather, its territory. Here and there in the grass are chunks of gravestones with Jewish inscriptions or, rather, their fragments that will hardly be read by anyone, now that researchers from Israel and Germany have deciphered the inscriptions and created a catalogue of graves. The centuries — or, rather, fragments of centuries — stare silently at me, and I drop my gaze.

A good friend of mine, who had lived in Kozyn when she was a child, said that prior to reading Babel, she had never even imagined that Jews once lived in Kozyn. This relates to an excerpt from his *Konarmia* [Red Calvary], "Cemetery at Kozin," in which the author describes a strange cemetery with bas-reliefs of rabbis in fur hats with long beards and sidelocks, and gravestone inscriptions of great power, but like in sculpture, impossible in an old cemetery.

When I was reading *Konarmia*, even I knew that the Torah strictly forbids depictions of people, that gravestones of rabbis have one particular feature: palms with fingers spread apart indicate the blessing of the Cohanim, while Levite tombstones feature a jug from which water pours. Did Babel, who had at least a basic Jewish education, not know this?

Now I understand. Babel was creating a mythological cemetery, like Agnon later created a mythological Buchach, because to accept reality was impossible.

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