

Ukraine Without Jews

David Shneer

In the interest of time, today, unlike in the past, I will be speaking primarily in English, but everything originally written in Russian will be presented in Russian and English. Thanks to all of you for sharing this beautiful morning here in Babi Yar Park, as we commemorate the horror of what took place in late September 1941, and throughout Ukraine under German and Romanian occupation during World War II. Shortly before the liberation of his hometown of Berdichev, in which of the 20,000 Jewish residents of the town before the Wehrmacht arrived, only 15 were left alive, the already well-known journalist and writer Vasily Grossman put pen to paper as he produced one of the earliest literary responses to the still unfolding mass murder of Jews and others by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. He titled his essay, "A Ukraine without Jews," *Ukraina bez evreev*, as he spoke the truth about the racially motivated murders of Europe's Jews. At this point in the war, after the victory at Stalingrad and once Soviet society had grown more reluctant to name the racial motivation behind the mass killing of Jews, his own newspaper, *Red Star (Krasnaia Zvezda)* decided not to publish the full text, which in its English-translation runs to nearly 6000 words. That does not mean it did not appear. It was abbreviated and translated into Yiddish, as it appeared in the Nov. 25 and Dec. 2 1943 editions of the Soviet Yiddish newspaper *Eynikayt* (Unity). This heart rending meditation opens with a poetic image of geese soaring above the bloodshed below: Here is Grossman: "When our forces entered the villages of Left-bank Ukraine with a thunder of guns and grenade explosions, domestic geese rose up into the air. Flapping their enormous white wings, they circled above peasant huts, above lakes covered in water lilies, above fields and gardens. There is something uncanny in the arduous flight and the sharp, alarming, sorrowful cries of these domestic birds. It is as if they are calling the soldiers of the Red Army to witness the sad horrible pictures of life, as if they are rejoicing at the arrival of our forces, simultaneously weeping with joy and lamenting, even screaming, of massive losses and the tears and blood that have aged and salted the soil of Ukraine."

Когда под гром пушек и разрывы гранат наши войска входят в села левобережной Украины, домашние гуси поднимаются в воздух и машут своими большими белыми крыльями. Они кружат над хатами, над подёрнутыми зеленой ряской речками, над садами и огородами.

Есть что-то жуткое в этом тяжёлом полёте домашней птицы, в резком, тревожном и горьком крике ее, как бы зовущем красноармейцев взглянуть на скорбные, страшные картины жизни. Птицы словно рады приходу наших войск, и в то же время они плачут и стонут, они кричат о страшном горе, об огромных потерях; о слезах и крови, от которых седой и солёной стала украинская земля.

He then described the pain and anguish that ruled most of liberated Ukraine—villages cleaning up after the violence of German retreat or, worse, deadly silence in places (and people) burned to the ground. And after setting up a universal message of loss, sorrow, and silence, he asks about his Ukraine’s Jews. All he can do is lament:

“In Ukraine there are no Jews. Nowhere—not in Poltava, Kharkov, Kremenchug, Borispol, not in Iagotin. You will not see the black, tear-filled eyes of a little girl, you will not hear the sorrowful drawling voice of an old woman, you will not glimpse the swarthy face of a hungry child in a single city or a single one of hundreds of thousands of shtetls. Stillness. Silence. A people has been murdered.”

Нет евреев на Украине. Всюду — в Полтаве, Харькове, Кременчуге, Борисполе, Яготине — во всех городах и в сотнях местечек, в ячах сел ты не встретишь черных заплаканных девичьих глаз, не услышишь грустного гóлоса старушки - не увидишь смуглого личика голодного ребёнка. Безмóлвие. Тишина. Народ злодейски убит.

As he wraps up this angry cry at the racial genocide that took place in Ukraine, he asks with poignancy, “Where is the Jewish people? Who will ask the twentieth century’s Cain that dreadful question: where are the Jewish people who once lived in Ukraine? Where are hundreds of thousands of elderly people and children? Where are millions of people who three years ago toiled and lived on this earth in peaceful friendship with Ukrainians?”

Где еврейский народ, который жил на Украине? Кто спросит Каина 20го века ужасный вопрос? Где еврейский народ? Где сотни тысяч евреев, стариков и детей? Куда девался миллион людей, которые три года назад мирно жили вместе с украинцами, жили и трудились на этой земле?..

As we gather here today, I'd like us to reflect on Grossman's words of a Ukraine without Jews. Despite his pained lament at discovering the mass murder of Ukrainian Jewry, there *were* Jews in Ukraine during and after the war. Some survived in partisan units or on rare occasions in hiding. Others living under Romanian rule survived in camps, and many of them returned to their wasted homes. It is true that most Jews living in post war Ukraine were not necessarily from the places in which they now lived, but Ukraine was most certainly not without Jews.

In the late 1980s and through the 1990s, with the Soviet Union collapsing, many people living in Ukraine saw an opportunity to make Ukraine an independent state like it had been right after World War I, if only briefly. Jews in Ukraine were cautiously optimistic about their long-term future in Ukraine. The organization Rukh, originally a perestroika era civil society organization dedicated to an independent, multinational Ukraine for all of its citizens, was spearheaded by a multiethnic group of leaders interested a state that protected civil rights for all future Ukrainian citizens. Unfortunately, when an independent Ukraine came to be in 1991, it was overseen by former Communist Party bosses more interested in Ukraine for Ukrainians, albeit with protections for national minorities, but not a state inspired by a commitment to civil rights. With a collapsing economy and a nationalizing nation-state, many Jews in post-Soviet Ukraine chose to leave the country, some to the U.S., others to Canada, Germany, but most to Israel. But even after the mass emigration of the late 1980s and 1990s, Ukraine still has one of the largest Jewish populations in the world, today numbering more than 100,000.

The 2004 Orange Revolution that swept Viktor Yanukovich out of office and installed Viktor Yushchenko as president was widely heralded in Western Europe and the United States as a triumph of democracy over Soviet-style corruption. It may have been that. But it also swept into power a leader ever more committed to a Ukraine-for-Ukrainians approach to state building, as statues to Ukrainian national heroes like Bohdan Khmelnytsky and even Stepan Bandera went up across Ukraine, characters known in Jewish history as violent haters of Jews. In 2010, Yanukovich was elected back into power

until, once again, a more violent revolt led to his ouster in February 2014, triggering the most profound crisis to face post-Soviet Ukraine.

I'm sure most of you know what has been happening in Ukraine. It is ugly, sad, and has brought a level of violence to the country unknown since World War II. After the ouster of Yanukovich, who fled to Russia, Putin annexed Crimea, after a plebiscite of Crimean citizens led to a 97% "yes" vote on annexation. It was clear though that the crisis in Ukraine was only beginning. And then, early this summer, eastern Ukraine went up in flames.

Ukrainian Jews, mostly Russian speaking and seeing themselves as more connected to high Russian culture than to Ukrainian culture, with important exceptions, are caught in the middle. No one wants corrupt leadership like Yanukovich, who earned a whopping 4% vote of confidence. Going back is not an option. Western leaders from Obama to Merkel decry Putin's machinations in eastern Ukraine as neo-imperialism as they support the fledgling Ukrainian government led by the candy baron Petro Poroshenko, who himself looks to Europe for inspiration. And yet, these Western leaders likely have little awareness of the nationalism that drives many of those who support Poroshenko. Does Putin fan the flames of hysteria about Ukrainian anti-Semitism and neo-fascism in order to gain support for Russian ambitions in Ukraine? Of course he does. Do Ukrainian leaders celebrate the victory of Poroshenko, whom some suggest has Jewish roots himself, over his more nationalist opponent Yulia Timoshenko, who had the support of far right Ukrainian nationalists. Of course, they do.

And yet, never before in the recent history of Ukraine has there been the potential for Grossman's phantasmagoric vision of a "Ukraine without Jews" to come true. The areas of Lugansk, Donetsk and Mariupol were once home to more than 25,000 Jews, but thousands have fled the region since hostilities began. The Jewish Agency for Israel recently opened a new center in Ukraine assisting Jews who fled the eastern part of the country. The crisis in Ukraine and the increase in anti-Jewish attacks have prompted hundreds of the country's Jews to seek ways to immigrate to Israel. A Jewish Agency center, which includes a Hebrew-language course, has been set up in Dnipropetrovsk, southeast of Kiev, an area where many Ukrainian Jews have fled to. Lines for emigration continue to grow and Ukrainian Jews have the support of an Israeli state ready and willing to bring them out of Ukraine.

We sit here privileged to live in the peaceful calm of Colorado, likely singing praises that we don't live

in the places from which you and/or your ancestors came. I'd like each of you to close your eyes and take a moment to listen to the sounds around us in this place, Babi Yar Park, created more than 30 years ago to commemorate an event that happened 73 years ago. I'd like you to reflect on Grossman's words that I opened with, the sounds of birds flying over head, and contemplate what it would mean to have a Ukraine without Jews, not because of many Babi Yars, which specifically targeted Jews for mass murder, but because Jews in Ukraine were choosing to leave their country for greener pastures.

I imagine some of you have family or friends in Ukraine right now, likely wrestling with the very difficult question of whether to go—and join the growing movement of new emigrants heading to Israel—or to stay and fight to make Ukraine a place in which to imagine a future state that protected all individual citizens' rights. All of my grandparents left Ukraine nearly a century ago. I'm grateful that they made that choice. So why should I expect people today not to make the same choices my family made. Who are we to judge?

And yet, I am despondent thinking about Grossman's vision coming true, especially in the idea that his vision would be realized, not because of the mass murders that we are commemorating today, and not because a state ordered Jews to leave, which has been all too common in the Jewish past. Instead Ukraine could lose its Jewish population, because Jews in Ukraine decided that *not* living in Ukraine was a better choice than staying. May we see the day when all people are free to live wherever they choose to and to find the courage to make changes in their communities and societies so that they and their neighbors feel peaceful and secure, now and into the future. Thank you.