KOSHER KOALA

WINTER/ JULY 2022

UKRAINE SPECIAL EDITION

AJGS
L'dor V'dor

Holocaust Memorial Lviv
Photo: Dani Haski 2010

IN THIS ISSUE

FEATURES

As Kosher Koala goes to press, the war in Ukraine continues. Russian forces invaded Ukraine in March 2022. While Putin's military aims have not been realised, his forces have destroyed large swathes of the region and almost completely demolished some cities and towns. Also under threat are the archives, monuments and remnants of community structures in a region which has been contested by different empires over hundreds of years.

The territory of modern-day Ukraine is crucially important for many Jewish genealogists. Millions can trace our ancestry back to the region. This special feature will summarise the region's territorial history and examine the urgent work underway to protect artefacts and records– both on the ground and on the internet.

UKRAINE - GALICIA - RUSSIA - A TERRITORIAL HISTORY

While there is evidence of human habitation going back more than 30,000 years, Ukraine became a recognisable territory during the Middle Ages. It was a crucial part of 'Kievan Rus' - a loose federation of communities from northern and eastern Europe from the 11th to 13th century. Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine all claim 'Kievan Rus' as their cultural origins. The federation was destroyed by the Mongol invasion in the 13th century.

The furthest extent of Kievan Rus', 1054–1132. (Wikimedia: SeikoEn - CC)

Over the next 600 years, the area was contested, divided, and ruled by a number of external powers, including the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Austrian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Tsardom of Russia.

map of Ukrainian Cossack Hetmanate and territory of Zaporozhian Cossacks under rule of Russian Empire (1751) (Wikimedia: SeikoEn - CC)

The Cossack Hetmanate – a Ukrainian Cossack state officially known as the Zaporizhian Host – emerged in Central Ukraine in 1648. It was partitioned between Russia and Poland during the 18th Century, and eventually absorbed into the Russian Empire.

The 19th century saw the growth of Ukrainian nationalism, particularly in Galicia in the northern part of the territory, then part of Austro-Hungary. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, a Ukrainian national movement re-emerged. The Ukrainian People's Republic was formed in 1917. This was soon forcibly incorporated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, a founding member of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1922.

From 1932 to 1933, a devastating famine – known as the *Holodomor* – killed millions of Ukrainians. In 1939, Western Ukraine was annexed from Poland by the USSR. 50 years later, in 1989, the Soviet Union collapsed.

Ukraine reclaimed independence in 1991 and began developing its democratic institutions. But the country was politically torn between Russia and the West.

In 2013 protests erupted when a potential agreement with the EU collapsed under pressure from Russia.

Memorial to the Holodomor in Dnipro

Protests on Euromaidan in Kyiv - 11 December 2013 (Wikimedia)

In 2014, Russia took control of, and formerly annexed, Crimea. They also actively supported separatists in the eastern regions of the Donetsk and Luhansk (the Donbas region) in their conflict with the central Ukrainian government. In March 2022, these regions declared themselves independent republics, but these claims have not been recognised by the international community.

Throughout all the territorial upheaval, a vibrant and diverse Jewish culture flourished in the region. The World Jewish Congress posits that Ukrainian Jews comprise the third largest European Jewish community and the fifth largest world-wide, with Jewish populations concentrated in Kyiv (110,000), Dnepropetrovsk (60,000), Kharkov (45,000), and Odessa (45,000).

There is a documented Jewish presence in the region going back more than 1,000 years, with fluctuating community fortunes. By the 11th century, Byzantine Jews of Constantinople had familial, cultural, and theological ties with the Jews of Kyiv.

Polish–Lithuanian–Ruthenian Commonwealth or Commonwealth of Three Nations (1658) - Treaty of Hadiach. (Wikimedia: SeikoEn - CC)

During the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (established 1569), the Jewish community in the territory of Ukraine-proper became one of the largest and most important ethnic minority groups. The Jewish population of Halychyna (Galicia) and Bukovyna, part of Austro-Hungary, is estimated to have been close to 5% of the global Jewish population.

From 1648 to 1657, the notorious Ukrainian Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnytsky led a murderous rebellion, known as *Khmelnytsky Uprising*, accusing Poles of selling Cossacks as slaves "*into the hands of the accursed Jews.*" He led an army of Cossacks and Crimean Tatars who massacred large numbers of Jews, Roman Catholics and Uniate Christians. Some academics estimate that between fifteen thousand and thirty thousand Jews were killed or taken captive, and 300 Jewish communities totally destroyed.

But, during this tumultuous time, came the rise of a new movement – Chassidism. Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, known as the *Baal Shem Tov*, or *BeShT*, (1698–1760), encouraged a new fervent brand of Judaism, related to *Kabbalah,* in contrast to the prevalent overly formal rabbinism. This movement continues to

Tomb of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer in Medzhybizh, Ukraine (Wikimedia: CC)

profoundly influence today's orthodox Judaism.

The 18th and 19th centuries saw a further rise in antisemitic rhetoric and violence. Jews were blamed for the death of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in Constantinople in 1821 and the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. Blood libel cases, pogroms and expulsions prompted waves of mass migration to Europe, the UK and the US, and nascent Zionist settlements in Mandate Palestine.
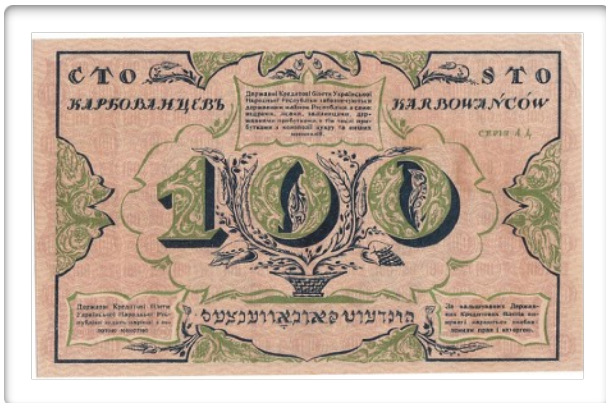
There was a glimmer of hope for the Jewish community during the time of the Ukrainian People's Republic (1917-1920). Yiddish was declared a state language, alongside Ukrainian and Russian, the Jewish National Union was created and the community was granted an autonomous status. Yiddish was even used on Ukrainian currency (pictured left).

Sadly, this renaissance was short-lived. More violence erupted and Soviet government policy led to further entrenched antisemitism.

During the Holocaust, the Jewish communities were utterly destroyed. More than one million Jews were murdered by the *Einsatzgruppen* and their local Ukrainian collaborators.

Following WWII, State sponsored antisemitism continued under Soviet rule. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, more than a quarter of a million Ukrainian Jews migrated to Israel.

Despite this, Ukraine's small, vibrant Jewish community persists. People with Jewish heritage are being elected to public office. In 2016, Volodymyr Groysman became Prime Minister. In 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky, a former actor and comedian, was elected President.

First of all, the current war in Ukraine gives us unique insight into the experiences of our ancestors. Whether they were fleeing Cossacks, pogroms or collapse of empires, we are witnessing in the daily news, an analogy of their experience.

Second, without a clear understanding of the border changes and geo-political upheavals of the past, we cannot accurately speculate on our ancestors' varied motivations for migration, nor work out where relevant documents may be stored.

The Ukrainian archives are in danger of being lost.

On March 29, Liz James, from AJGS-Vic, posted a message from the L'Dor V'Dor Foundation to the AJGS-Vic Facebook Page. It read:

> This morning we awoke to news of damage to the state archive in Mykolaiv, Ukraine… Mykolaiv archive is where our *Documentation of Jewish Records Worldwide* (DoJR) project started and where, in four short weeks, we discovered previously unknown historic documents of 15,000 Jewish lives… A scant 24 hours earlier, while the tragic and brutal attacks on the Ukrainian people, cities, heritage, and history continue, Anatolii Khromov, head of the State Archival Service of Ukraine (SAS) announced the signing of another agreement with *FamilySearch* — a continuation of a Memorandum of Understanding signed two years ago to digitize the SAS holdings.

FamilySearch had re-started digitisation programs of Ukraine's archives in June 2021. After only eight months of work, they had digitised and uploaded 4.8 million images of genealogical records. After a short hiatus, FamilySearch volunteers returned to their work, despite the ongoing conflict.

Heroes of Heritage and History — Ukraine
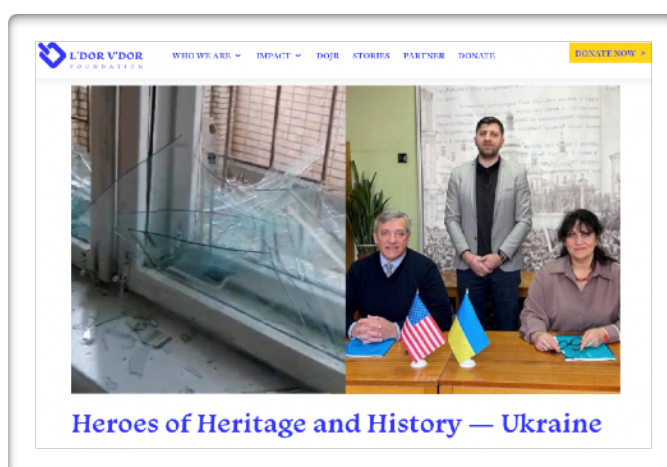
In April, *The Washington Post* reported on a network of more than a thousand volunteers working to ensure that Ukraine's digital culture was preserved. This

includes, among other things, websites dedicated to artists and poets, the history of Jewish towns in Ukraine and photographs of excavation sites in Crimea.
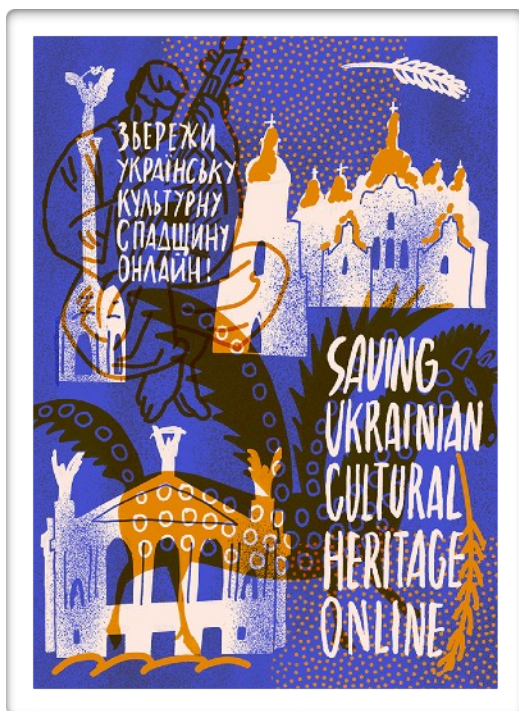
Calling themselves *SUCHO — Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online* — the volunteers, many of them archivists and librarians, are using a range of low cost, open-source digital tools such as Webrecorder and Browsertrix Crawler. By April, 2022, they had copied more than 25 terabytes of data to servers outside Ukraine.

Sebastian Majstorovic, a digital historian based in Vienna, is one of those volunteers. He and his friend, Quinn Dombrowski, an academic technology specialist at Stanford University, have helped to recruit, train, and organise volunteers wanting to help to archive Ukraine's historical websites.

The importance of their work was made apparent very early in the conflict:

> In early March, he [Majstorovic] happened upon the Ukrainian State Archive of Kharkiv's website. As Russia's invasion of Ukraine was gearing up, he was worried how long the site would remain active, fearing its servers would be susceptible to cyberattacks or shelling.
>
> He loaded the archive's website into Webrecorder's Browsertrix tool, and let it do its work. By early morning, it collected over 100 gigabytes of information, including the district's census records, criminal cases, and lists of people who have been persecuted in the region.
>
> Within hours, the website was gone. But still, its records remained. *[Washington Post, April 8 2022]*

Other international institutions, such as *The National Archives, UK*, are signing agreements with State Archival Service of Ukraine (SAS), to secure backup digital copies in their cloud storage. The SAS website is off-line at the time of writing.

One of the more novel projects is *Backup Ukraine*, a joint project of Danish UNESCO National Commission, Blue Shield Denmark and Virtue Futures.

Using their mobile phones, volunteers inside Ukraine can scan monuments, landmarks and buildings and upload detailed 3D models to the cloud.

This work could be crucial. Early in the month, UNESCO released a report stating that by the end of May:

> ...the organization has verified that 143 sites since February 24, have suffered damage ... a combined total of 65 religious sites, 12 museums, 27 historic buildings, 17 cultural buildings, 15 monuments, and 7 libraries...
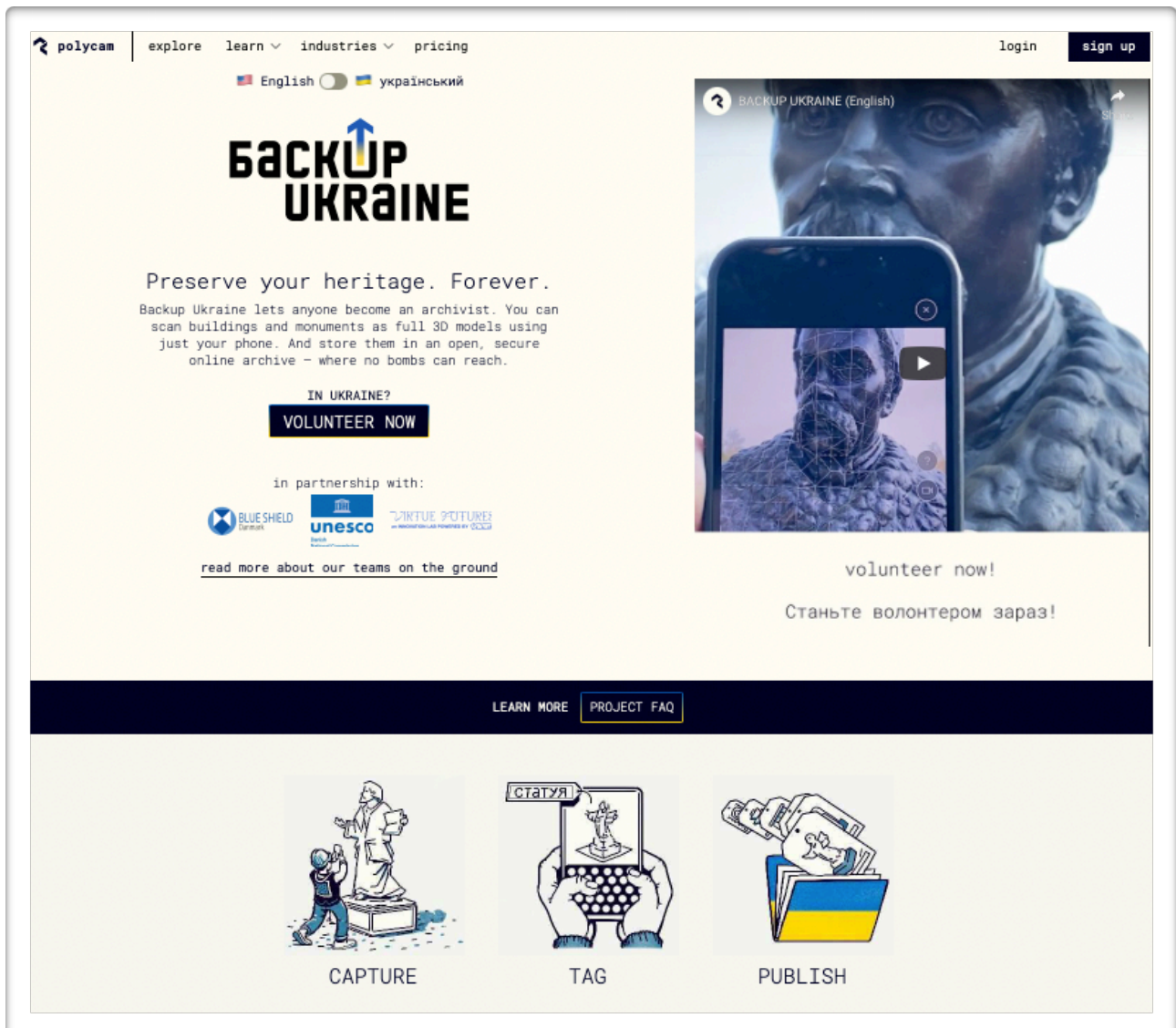
The damaged sites include Holocaust remembrance sites at Babin Yar in Kyiv — where between 100,000 and 150,000 Jewish residents of Kyiv, Soviet prisoners of war, communists, Ukrainian nationalists and Roma were massacred during WWII, — Drobytskyi Yar – where 16,000 Ukrainian Jews were murdered, – as well as museums, also called Houses of Culture, in Ivanivka, Lozova and Mariupol.

With Russia attempting to rewrite history and erase Ukraine's distinct cultural identity, the efforts of this global network of volunteers and institutions is doing everything they can to ensure that Ukraine's cultural memory, including its important Jewish history, is kept alive for future generations.
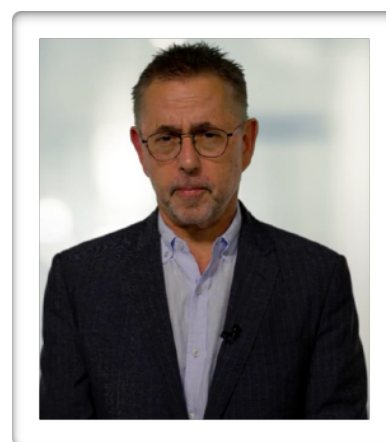
NORMAN SWAN'S FAMILY STORY

When Russia invaded in March and began bombarding Odessa, on the shores of the Black Sea, the ABC News website featured an account by Dr Norman Swan, of his great grandmother's experience.

My great-grandfather died in the Odessa pogrom of 1905. My great-grandmother escaped with her children – including my grandmother – on a ship they thought was headed for America. Family lore has it that it took them a while to realise they'd actually landed in Glasgow.

ABC Health Broadcaster Dr Norman Swan (Screenshot)

Dr Swan tells the story of retracing his ancestors' journey from the neighbourhood of Moldavanka in Odessa to the tenements of Glasgow. When his guide took him to the streets his family had lived in in Odessa, he observed:

I had the overpowering sense that I'd been there before. I've since shown friends photographs of Moldovanka streetscapes and asked them where they think I took the photos. They all say the same thing: Glasgow. … They'd fled pogroms. They'd scraped every kopek for the tickets. They'd sailed across strange seas and unbeknownst to them had been dumped in Glasgow because the Jewish quota for America had been filled. Only to find that Glasgow looked just like home.

You can read the full story on the ABC News website.

Left: Moldavanka, Odessa Right: Belfast, Ireland

Adele Rosalky describes her grandparents' migration from Mariupol to Brisbane, via Harbin. Adele, President of the Australian Jewish Historical Society ACT, now lives in Canberra.

I was only 19 when my grandparents died, too young to understand the importance of recording my family's history. Now that my own parents have died, I, like so many others, have been searching for details about my ancestors, extracting facts, fables and imperfect memories from my cousins (my thanks to Graham, Julian and Julie) – always wishing I had retained more information, documents, and stories.

Isaac & Stacia Eshensky
Circa 1927 (Adele Rosalky)

The families of my grandfather Joshua — known as Isaac Eshensky (Yehoshua Zvi ben Eliezer Menachem) — and my grandmother Stacia (Wolfavna) Simkin had lived in what is now Ukraine, then Russia, for decades. I have seen a statutory declaration signed by Isaac that states his actual name as Efim Gersh Lazarof Eshensky or Logatka (named after a town in Russia).

He was born on 25 March 1894 in Mariupol, Zhdanov, Russia, and attended a yeshiva, rather than a Russian state school. Isaac spoke of leaving home before dawn to walk to the yeshiva, and not returning until after dark. He later undertook an apprenticeship as a tailor (for which he had to pay his teacher) producing uniforms for the Cossacks. The Cossacks having taught him to ride, he became an expert horseman, apparently doing trick-riding.

My grandmother, Stacia (Wolfavna) Simkin, was born 10 November 1895 in Orloff, and lived in Trubtschewsk. She and Isaac married in Mariupol in 1913.

In the Tsarist era, before the Bolshevik Revolution (1917), Isaac faced conscription. To avoid military service, the couple escaped from Russia on the Trans-Siberian railway, to settle in Harbin, China – a common route for Jews at the time. Stacia's aunt Rachel lived in Harbin, where her family owned a large department store called Eskins. All

Harbin Synagogue
(Vintage Postcard, Public Domain)

family who later came to Australia travelled via Harbin.

Isaac and Stacia's first child, William, was born in Harbin on 25 April 1914. Isaac was not able to set up a business in China, so he, along with a group of other Russian Jews, left by boat, from the port of Dalian, and set sail for to Australia, where they alighted at the first stop, Brisbane. These Russian Jews formed the foundation of a Jewish Community in South Brisbane – although I only remember Isaac and Stacia attending the Brisbane Hebrew Congregation at the Margaret Street synagogue from the 1950s onwards.

Their second child, my aunt Rose, was born in Brisbane on 2 December 1915.

Eshensky Clothing Factory circa 1930
(Adele Rosalky)

Isaac was initially employed in a clothing factory, run by Ike Freedman, in Fortitude Valley. By the 1930s, he had set up his own factory, which he owned until his retirement. It was located off Elizabeth Street on the second floor above a Globite suitcase factory. During World War II, Isaac landed contracts to manufacture uniforms. He did well financially, but on one occasion a fire damaged the stock days before it was due to be delivered. While some thought the timing suspicious, a police investigation did not find any evidence of sabotage.

My cousin Julie vividly remembers attending a performance of 'Fiddler on the Roof' with her parents and our grandmother in the 1960s. The show reflected Stacia's life story in Russia. She became so upset that the family had to leave the theatre. Julie suspects that Stacia might have had a sister who stayed in Russia after marrying a non-Jew.

Isaac knew first-hand the hardships experienced by immigrants and he assisted them whenever possible. My cousin, Graham Eshensky (son of Isaac and Stacia's third child, Henry) has noted that when strangers have heard his surname, they tell him how Isaac assisted their family in some way. One many told him how Isaac had sponsored his grandfather from Ukraine.

Isaac also employed migrants in his factory, including two Holocaust survivors.

Many of these stories have only come to light since Isaac's passing, and this is probably the way he wanted it. My father Earle (married to Isaac and Stacia's fourth child, Anne) always referred to Isaac as 'a very fine man'.

Isaac died in November 1969 with the names Joshua Isaac on his gravestone and the words 'Loved and respected by all'. Stacia predeceased Isaac, having passed away in January of the same year, her gravestone reading 'She doeth good all the days of her life'.

The Mariupol my grandparents knew over 100 years ago is long gone. But sadly, a new generation of refugees is today experiencing the same displacement. Modern Mariupol has been destroyed in less than a year. Let's hope that, with time, these refugees are able to return and re-build and if not, find a new safe and happy home just as my grandparents did.
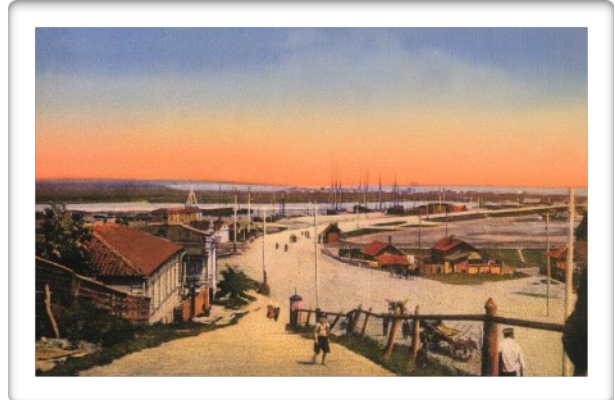
Old Mariupol (Wikimedia)

GARY LUKE'S FAMILY STORY

Long time member Gary Luke's grandfather was buried in Ukraine over a century ago, killed in a battle to push the Russian forces out of Ukraine.

My father, Simon Sekel, wrote the following in his life story.

> How do you write about a person you never knew?
>
> My Father died before I was born, so I have had to put together little fragments of information, relying on assessments and opinions of those who knew and lived around him. During my early years this was difficult, as the subject of Father was almost "taboo" in our family, in an attempt to save Mother further grief.

What we do know is my father's father, Simon Szimpler, was born in Jablonka, on 17 November 1882. He was killed in action on 9 October 1915.

In the late 1800s Jews resident in the Austro-Hungarian Empire were permitted to change their surname. As a staunch nationalist, my grandfather changed his from Szimpler to Szekely.

As my father wrote in his memoir:

> Father was a Reserve Officer in the Austro-Hungarian Army, and, as he was strongly patriotic, he immediately joined his unit on the first day of the First World War. I know very little about his war-service record, except that he was decorated twice for exceptional bravery. Late in 1914, while fighting on the Russian front, he received a head wound and was released from the Army. He returned home to recuperate, but as soon as he felt well enough, volunteered to return to action.

> On 19th October 1915 he was shot, and killed, near the town of Luck [ed note: today Lutsk] (near Rovno), which is now in the Ukraine.
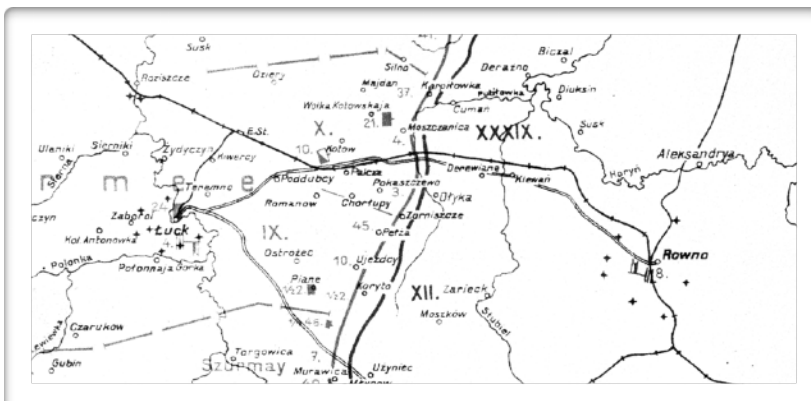

Luck, today Lutsk, postcard (Wikimedia)

> While Father had been at home recovering from his head wound, the fifth child was conceived. I was born about three weeks after Father's death, and named Tibor. Mother had not been told about her husband's death, as it was feared that her grief may upset the pregnancy.

> The local "barber", Mr Hajczak, ... had also served as Father's "batman" during the First World War, and had been an eyewitness to Father's death. Father had been on horseback, urging his unit forward in a battle, when he was hit in the abdomen by a mortar shell. He died immediately. When Mr Hajczak returned to Jablonka he gave Mother some of Father's belongings - his watch, and some medals.

Map of the battle from the official war history of the Austro-Hungarian forces, a multi volume set held by the archives of the Australian War Museum, similar to the Australia war history by Bean.

AWM: R940.3439 O85 LIB43922

Mother was not informed of Father's death until some time after I was born, and Mr Hajczek only told me the details when I was about twenty.

In Jewish tradition a son must not be named after a living father. After Mother was advised of Father's death, Tibor was re-named Shimon. So I became Shimon ben Shimon. (People have often been surprised to hear called in the Synagogue when I have been called to the Torah).

In 1935 Simon Sekel joined a Hanoar Hatzioni training scheme on fishing boats at Gdanya, hoping to receive a British agricultural permit for Palestine. The training scheme was cancelled partway through, so instead he obtained employment as a labourer on a tramp steamer picking up loads on spec, port to port, hoping it would land somewhere in the Middle East where he planned to abandon ship and get to Palestine. My father continued his story:

Mother … received another shock during my absence. The War Ministry archives department, in Vienna, had sent a letter with a sketch showing where Father was buried, following his death 22 years earlier. It seems that someone had been sifting through the war records, and had found the information. The place was near a village called Putilovka, between Rovno and Luck, in what is now the Ukraine.

For me this news had a very strong emotional significance. Not only had I never known my father, but I did not know where he was buried. At least, now, I would be able to know where his body was. At last I might be able to stand near his grave, say Kaddish, and finally feel that I'd really had a father. Mother wanted to have Father's body exhumed, and brought back to the Jewish cemetery in our area, but it could not be found.

So, after spending five weeks at home, I said good-bye to family, and
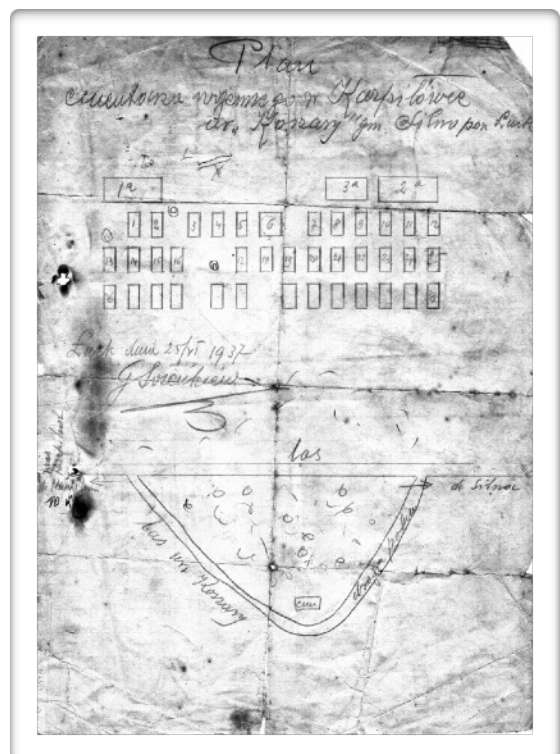
The map received by Simon Sekel's mother in 1937 (Gary Luke)

to tearful Mother and Grandma. I was again heading for Gdynia, but first travelled East, to find my father's grave. I thought I found it, and said Kaddish, but learned later that I had been in the wrong place. This was a traumatic experience - it seems that the exact location is no longer traceable.

After about a year of voyages he returned home for a few weeks, then joined another ship, eventually settling in Sydney in May 1938. He wrote his memoir in late 1991. In July 1993 my elder brother, Kevin, finally found and visited the burial site.

After finding the hamlets of Putilowka [Putylivka, Volyn Oblast] and Karpilowka [Karpylivka, Volyn Oblast], and after many enquiries by the student "translator", my son found a very old Ukrainian called Jakov, who guided the party through some desolate scrub-land to the actual place - the war cemetery. What they actually found were slightly raised mounds of earth, without any name-markers or fence in sight. Jakov described the battle noises, lasting many weeks, which he remembered since his very early childhood. He also explained how, during the 1939-45 war, the Nazis, as well as the locals, used every bit of timber, trees, fences, and even the crosses from the thirty-eight graves, for fuel, to combat the severe winters.

So it was my son Kevin, with his wife Jeayne, who found my Dad after seventy-eight long years. The emotions and feelings I went through I could not even attempt to describe. I remember sobbing after their telephone call, telling me what they had found.

Forest outside Karpylivka, Volyn Oblast, Ukraine (Wikimapia)

NEWS & VIEWS

MYSTERY SOLVED

AJGS
L'dor V'dor

In the October 2021 edition of Kosher Koala we asked for your help to identify a couple in an old photograph. In April, I received an e-mail from Dana Parker, from Indiana in the US.

Dana wrote:

The couple are my grandparents, Saul and Celia Rosenberg. It was taken not too long after they got married in 1942 as part of a series of photos my grandfather took to show their parents back in New York and Connecticut their new home in downstate Illinois. He was a doctor working for the Veterans Administration, and she was a homemaker. I suspect the photos were also taken to prove that they were doing well so far from home.

Saul & Celia Rosenberg

My grandmother Celia was the niece of Rachel Lemchen, who is the mother of Chatzkel Lemchen (Lemchinas). That's likely how these photos ended up in the cache, Rebekah would have likely sent copies out to her relatives, including Chatzkel's sister Gita.

My grandparents eventually moved back to Connecticut after World War 2, where they purchased a plot of land in a mountainous area of the state. They built a cabin on top of a hill they named "Rebekah's Hill". They had three children — my mother Hallie, my aunt Deborah, and my uncle Hiram. My mother is in regular contact with our branch of the family there in Australia, and has visited a few times.

Researching is a game of detective work. We're so lucky to have the foundational work of other researchers to build on. Today, with so many online resources available, we have instant access to billions of records from the comfort of our own homes.

But not all jurisdictions have such readily accessible records. And in some cases, the those that do exist are locked away, tantalisingly close, but out of reach.

One unusual resource which might help are surname lists.

The website *Middle East Eye* published a story in April on the motivation of Israeli diplomat, Jacob Rosen-Koenigsbuch, who has spent more than a decade compiling lists of Jewish surnames from Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt, Baghdad in Iraq and Damascus in Syria — all formerly home to large Jewish communities in the 19th and early 20th centuries — 'in the hope of saving them from being lost in the void of untold history."

The son of Holocaust survivors, Rosen-Koenigsbuch began researching his own family after his parents had died. As he worked in diplomatic postings in Middle Eastern countries, he began to realise the tools he relied on for his European research were simply non-existent in these territories:

In the case of Egypt, he also found that, despite recent literary and academic interest in the life of 20th century Jewish communities in the country, personal narratives were mostly absent. He believes that this gap in research is due largely to the short lifespan of those communities, as well as to the inaccessibility of most state archives.

To date, Rosen-Koenigsbuch has been able to trace 2,130 surnames of families who lived in Cairo in the 20th century, and 1,618 surnames of families who once lived in Alexandria. The lists are published at *Avotaynu* online.

To collect these surnames, he consulted people who were born in Cairo and were able to tell him the surnames they remembered. He also traced some surnames in personal memoirs, business and telephone directories, an index of people buried in

the Bassatine Jewish cemetery in Cairo, Egyptian Jewish weeklies and even circumcision registers.

He also used the invaluable _Les Fleurs de L'Orient_, a website managed by Alain Farhi, dedicated to tracking Sephardic ancestry within the Ottoman Empire and groups of Egyptian Jews on Facebook.

While these lists can be frustratingly light on detail, they do present clues to our ancestors' presence in a territory.

The lists on Cairo and Alexandria can be used in an analytical way to understand anything: are the families from North Africa, from Aleppo, from Italy, from Damascus… [are they] Sephardi?", Rosen-Koenigsbuch said.
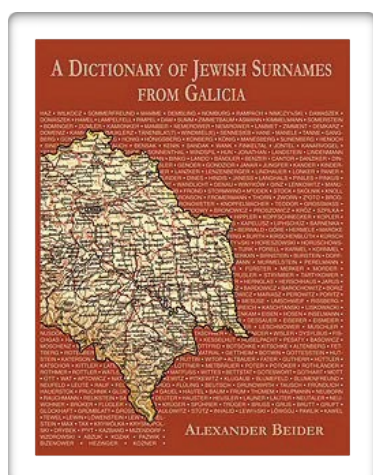
Avotaynu publishes an extensive collection of dictionaries of surnames with etymology, definitions and geographic distribution. These include a _Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from Galicia, the Russian Empire, the Maghreb Region, Gibraltar, and Malta and Italy, France and "Portuguese" Communities_ — all by Alexander Beider — as well as _German-Jewish Surnames_ by Lars Menk, _Bulgarian Jewish Surnames_ by Mathilde A. Tagger and

Sephardic Surnames by Guilherme Faiguenboim, et al.

Surname lists are a great way to understand your family origins and the etymology of your surname.
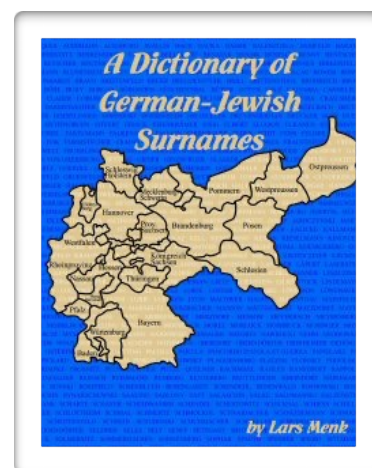
GOVERNMENT CONFISCATES MORE RECORDS DISCOVERED IN CAIRO

Gaining access to genealogical records in Egypt is an ongoing frustration, but recent events have infuriated those with Egyptian heritage even further.

Since the 2011 revolution, extensive work has been done to restore and revitalise Jewish heritage sites across Egypt. Prof. Yoram Meital, an Egyptian specialist at Ben-Gurion University's Middle East Studies Department, has spent the last five years working with what's left of Egypt's Jewish community — about 100 or so individuals —

documenting and conserving synagogues, cemeteries and other significant sites. Meital and his team are painstakingly photographing existing conditions, and creating a detailed database. He told _Ha'aretz Magazine_:

> I document the height of synagogue pillars, the state of curtains covering the ark (parochet), the writing on memorial plaques in synagogues and the names of people on name plates affixed to synagogue chairs...

His team are also collecting and preserving Jewish manuscripts, some of them rare and valuable, found in the course of their work.

In March, as they were clearing and documenting the historic Bassatine Cemetery, Meital's attention was brought to the existence of a previously unknown genizah (a repository for discarded documents, prayer books, etc, which need to be disposed of in a ritual manner).

At the end of the 19th Century, Cambridge scholar, Solomon Schechter, recognised the significance of a similar trove of some 400,000 documents and ancient fragments in a genizah in the neglected Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, in old Cairo. Now known as 'the Cairo genizah', the documents attest to the minutiae of life in Egypt's Jewish community for more than 1,000 years, and include religious texts and Talmudic and Rabbinic works — some in the original handwriting of authors such as Moses Maimonides.

Solomon Schechter studying documents from the Cairo Geniza, c. 1895 (Wikimedia)

The contents of the Cairo genizah paint a detailed picture of the economic and cultural life of the North African and Eastern Mediterranean regions, especially during the 10th to 13th centuries. While the ethics of removing the contents of the Cairo Genizah to universities in the UK might be debated today, there is little doubt as to their value. After more than 100 years, scholars are still sifting through them.

It's important to note that, unlike in the 19th century, when the contents of the Cairo genizah were removed to Cambridge and are now divided between academic collections around the world, scholars today are adamant they will not take

Egyptian historical documents out of the country. These documents are as much about Egyptian history as they are about Jewish heritage.

Unfortunately, almost as soon as the discovery was made, officials from the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities arrived and unceremoniously removed the documents, piling them into 165 plastic garbage bags. Meital told Haaretz "We can't say what's there and how valuable it might be." Despite protests from the local community, the fate of the documents remains unknown.

Sadly, the Egyptian government has form in confiscating documents. Just a few years ago, the government appropriated vital record books from synagogues in Cairo and Alexandria and took them to the National Archives. Despite warming diplomatic ties between Egypt and Israel and approaches from various organisations to fund digitisation and indexing, no access has been granted.

Who knows what genealogical treasures are contained in this newly discovered Cairo genizah? We simply need to keep the pressure on the Egyptian authorities to allow access to scholars, academics and researchers.

JRI POLAND LAUNCHES REVAMPED WEBSITE

JRI Poland have been busy during the Covid hiatus, modernising their website and search engine in a project they're calling NextGen.

While they have always been a reliable site with an extraordinary collection, technology moves fast and legacy systems eventually do need updating.

JRI Poland Executive Director, Stanley Diamond, made the announcement in *For The Record*, a newsletter JRI-Poland subscribers have been receiving since January 2021, which highlights new records, projects and people of interest to JRI supporters.

The JRI-Poland website's new landing page hosts blog posts and communications in a

News and Insights section, followed by links to information about the institution, their collection of records, and how to get started with your research.

In the menu in the top navigation bar are links to a new Town Explorer, with information about more than 1,800 towns and settlements indexed by the organisation, and *Project Explorer,* a new way to browse the projects currently underway.

The new Search tool is still in development, but the Legacy Search and Surname mapper are active and accessible from the site's navigation bar.

The new search form is quite a departure from the original. Instead of having a choice of four fields to start your search, you simply start with the surname and (optional) first name of a person and a town. There is the choice to add a second person, but this might needlessly restrict your search. Once the initial search runs, you can then filter the results by date, record type, Town of Register or Town of Event. The number of records in each filterable category is visible enabling you to drill down easily. It's simple and intuitive. When you do a direct comparison of the dataset, it all matches; it's just displayed differently.

You can beta-test the new *JRI-Poland* search tool on the website. If you haven't already, you might need to create an account on the new system, even if you had one already for the legacy site.

If you've used *FamilySearch* lately, you will have noticed they have updated their search interface as well.

Once again, it's a simple start with name, date and location fields. You can choose to add more information by tapping the More Options button. Your search results are displayed in a table and a column on the Right-Hand Side appears, where you can edit your results. A series of links along the top allows you to filter by collection, birth/death/marriage data and/or location, amongst other things.

A preferences button gives you options to customize the presentation of your results — so you can choose between a fixed width table or a data sheet, depending on how big your screen is and/or display the default data view or reduce/increase the amount of information displayed with the 'Minimal/All Information' options. You can also select language options and an export format if you want to download the resulting dataset for later analysis.

FamilySearch has one of the largest, freely accessible genealogical data collections. But finding the one record pertaining to your ancestor is still a 'needle and haystack' mission, no matter what kind of interface you're using.

In April and May 2022, *MyHeritage* added more than 1.3 BILLION records to its collection. Many of these will be of interest to Jewish genealogists. The records are part of 37 collections from the USA, UK, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Scotland, Spain, Switzerland and Ukraine.

They include an index of Jewish prisoners from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany, an index of more than 150,000 Jewish individuals who resided in Romania during World War II, and an index, with more than 200,000 entries, of Jewish birth records from parts of the former Hungarian counties of Bereg, Máramaros, Ugocsa and Ung, now part of Ukraine with

An index of Jewish prisoners from the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in Germany	29,097 records	Search collection now
Germany, Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp Prisoners		
An index of Jewish birth records from parts of the former Hungarian counties of Bereg, Máramaros, Ugocsa and Ung, now part of Ukraine	204,316 records	Search collection now
Sub-Carpathia, Jewish Birth Records		

You can read more about this update and search individual collections via the *MyHeritage blog*.

Not to be outdone, *Ancestry* added over 2 billion records in the first half of 2022, including more than 150 million records from the 1950 US Federal Census — although most of these are yet to be indexed. They added 813 million records from European phone books, as well as 115 million records pertaining to France and her territories, which, along with other business directories, might help you track your family across the continent.

Both MyHeritage and Ancestry require subscriptions to search most of their datasets, although they both have some free collections.

WORKSHOPS & EVENTS

AJGS hosted some fascinating presentations over the last few months, including a session highlighting advances in research methods.

RECENT EVENTS

BELONGING - DIANNE JOHNSTONE

In June, AJGS member **Dianne Johnstone**, pictured left with her birth mother, recounted her journey of discovering her birth family, after, at the age of 50, uncovering the fact of her adoption. While she had the privilege of finding her birth mother and half-siblings, it took several more years to uncover the name and fate of her birth father. Her story is one of love, hope and resilience across continents.

HOBART SYNAGOGUE ONLINE ARCHIVES

In May, AJGS and AGJS-Vic co-hosted an online talk by Jeff Schneider, pictured right, from Hobart Synagogue. Jeff introduced viewers to the Hobart Synagogue's Digital Archive, detailing the technical and logistical efforts made during the pandemic. The archive offers a treasure of early Jewish communal records, with much of the data entry and transcription crowd sourced during pandemic lockdowns.
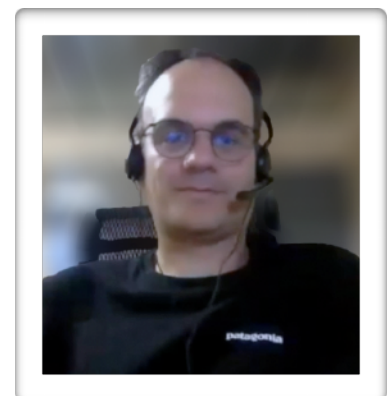
Both presentations can be viewed online at either our Video on Demand page or directly from our YouTube Channel. Members receive a monthly newsletter with details of all upcoming events.

UPCOMING EVENTS

THEN & NOW - MARK TEDESCHI

Due to the inclement weather in Sydney we had to postpone the talk by long-time member, Mark Tedeschi QC AM, scheduled for July 3rd, 2022. Mark has done extensive research, over many years to re-build the family tree his mother-in-law remembered from her childhood home. This tree connected her to the Bal Shem Tov and, by extension, to King David.

Mark's talk will be rescheduled as soon as possible.

AJGS/ AJGS (VIC) PRESENTS NOLAN ALTMAN – PATRONYMIC NAMING AND CEMETERY RESEARCH – THEIR IMPORTANCE IN JEWISH GENEALOGY

July 28 10:00 am via zoom

Nolan Altman is Director for Data Acquisition at *JewishGen*. He began as a volunteer, doing data entry on various projects. In time, he was asked to become the Coordinator for JewishGen's Holocaust database and subsequently for the JOWBR (JewishGen's Online Worldwide Burial Registry) project. Nolan's work is currently focused on growing the JOWBR, Holocaust and Memorial Plaques databases.

RE-BUILDING YORK ST SYNAGOGUE IN 3D

14 August - 2pm Waverley Library, Bondi Junction

Join computer enthusiast, Zac Levi, and Great Synagogue curator, Jana Vytrhlik, for a virtual tour of York Street Synagogue. During lockdown, Zac Levi got bored... so he decided to rebuild the interior of York Street Synagogue inside his computer, in 3D.

This talk was initially presented at LimmudOz last year.