

Ostropol – a brief Jewish history

Neville Lamdan ©

1793 Map showing Ostropol and Stara Konstantinov



The town of Ostropol, in the region of Volhynia, is said to have been founded in 1576 by a Ruthenian (Ukrainian) prince, Constantine Basil Ostrog (1526 1608).¹

However, the name of the place, sounding like “Austro-pol(is)” [Austro-city], may suggest that it was established earlier by “Austrians”, coming from nearby Galicia (“ear-marked” in green on the map) or further to the west. Be that as it may, Prince Constantine Ostrog was one of the most powerful men of his day in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. At the height of his career, he served as the (military) Marshal of Volhynia and Voivode (civil governor) of the important Kiev Voivodship. He owned vast lands throughout the area, allegedly comprising some 100 towns and 1,300 villages.² In the 1560’s, he built an impressive castle, around which the town of Stara Konstantinov, bearing his name, grew. He certainly had it in his power to develop Ostropol, on the Sluch River, a decade later.



Prince Constantine Basil Ostrog
- putative founder of Ostropol

In view of its strategic location, Ostropol was frequently the target of marauding Tatar and Cossack bands, requiring it to develop its own defenses. By 1619, the town was fortified and 23 villages lay in its domain. In 1648, it found itself in the midst of the upheavals instigated by Cossacks, ostensibly trying to wrest their independence from the Poles. In June 1649, a Polish general succeeded in driving sizeable Cossack bands out of the towns of Kryvonosenka, Krasilov and Stara Konstantinov and bottling them up in the castle at Ostropol, where they put up fierce resistance. In return for safe passage out of the town, they agreed to a ceasefire. The Poles, however, are alleged not to have kept their part of the bargain, killing most the rebels. According to the Ukrainian version of the story, this breach of faith lay behind Bogdan Khmelnytsky’s broad campaign against Volhynia in July and August of 1649.³

At some point, probably in the 17th century, the Ostrog family relinquished possession of Ostropol, in circumstances unknown, to an old Polish princely family, the Lubomirski's, who had made an immense fortune in salt mining in the Cracow province. Following in the footsteps of Prince Jerzy Sebastian Lubomirski, a Grand Marshall of the Polish Crown (ca. 1546 – 1613), the Lubomirski's had gone on to acquire huge estates throughout south-eastern Poland and Ukraine, to become the third richest family in the realm. However, due to a multiplicity of descendants, the Lubomirski properties were progressively divided up and depleted. As a result, in the first half of the 18th century, parts of the town of Ostropol were owned simultaneously by various Lubomirski's and other land-owning nobles.⁴

Early in the 19th century, title to the town passed to another noble family, the Bninski's, who were originally Prussian counts. They too had acquired extensive properties throughout Poland.⁵ Then, later in the century, possibly when many Polish nobles forfeited their lands as a result of their abortive revolt in the 1860's against the Russian authorities, the title to Ostropol passed to an established Polish family of land and property owners, the Szwejkowski's.⁶ According to a 1920 report, at the end of the 19th century there were six other landowners with estates around the town, on whom many Jews were dependant for their livelihoods.⁷

Little is known of Ostropol from the Jewish point of view. This suggests that it was broadly similar to the tens of other *shtetlech* in Volhynia, with little to distinguish it from the rest. Its Jewish community was conceivably founded in the mid- to late-16th century, when other communities were spreading throughout the area. A century or so later, the community is said to have been destroyed in the notorious Khmelnitsky massacres of 1648-49.⁸ Better recorded is an incident when, in the course of those massacres, the famous kabbalist and *maggid* (preacher), R. Shimshon ben Pesach from Ostropol ("Shimshon Ostropoler") was murdered. A venerated sage, living in the town of Polonne (35 km. from Ostropol), he was driven into the synagogue there together with 300 members of the local community; wearing prayer shawls and in some cases death shrouds, they were systematically put to death, one by one.⁹

In the wake of the Cossack atrocities, Jews in Volhynia and Podolia developed a disposition towards messianism in the hope of receiving some deliverance from the outrages they had experienced. Indeed, R. Shimshon Ostropoler's brother-in-law, R. Isaac Mokhiach, saw the calamities in apocalyptic terms, describing them as part of the unremitting tribulations that Jews would endure prior to the coming of the Messiah.¹⁰ The superstitious read into the Hebrew abbreviation of Khmelnitsky's name (KhMYL – חמ"ל) a portent, claiming that it stood for "*Khevlei Moshi'ach Yovow'u La-owlom*" ("The birth-pangs of the Messiah will come unto the world").¹¹ And when word of a (false) messiah, Shabtai ben Zvi, spread from the Ottoman Empire in the 1660's, it was seized upon by a ready following in Volhynia and Podolia. We can only assume that some Jews in Ostropol were affected by this end-of-days atmosphere as well.

Recurrent and ongoing massacres, especially during the Haidamak Cossack uprisings in the 1730's, kept the deep yearnings for salvation alive among Jews and made Volhynia and neighbouring Podolia highly receptive to the advent of Chassidism. This was especially so, given that the Baal Shem Tov (the founder of the Chassidic Movement) established himself in the 1740's in Medzhybyzh, a town some 41 km. south of Ostropol. Indeed, in the literary collection entitled the

“Deeds of the Baal Shem Tov”, there is a tale that he once drove a pious Jew back to Ostropol just before the Sabbath, thus bringing Chassidism to the town in person.¹²

Wooden synagogue, Ostropol, 1900's



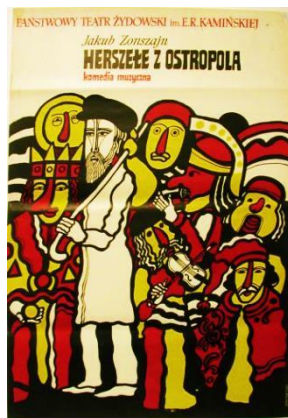
Baal Shem Tov's "shtibl" Medzhybyzh, ca. 1900



Ostropol gained a real claim to fame when Rabbi Boruch of Medzhybizh, the Baal Shem Tov's grandson, took a certain “Hershele of Ostropol” into his court to entertain him and apparently to help relieve fits of anger and chronic depression. “Hershele” is remembered fondly in Jewish folklore as a loveable prankster and jester, and has been the subject of several works by leading Yiddish writers, up to and including Itzik Manger and Isaac Babel, as well as a hero of the Yiddish theatre and more recently of a film.¹³ He, more than anyone, put Ostropol on the map, as it were, even though he was born elsewhere and only worked as a *shochet* (ritual slaughterer) and/or a butcher in Ostropol, before joining the court of R. Boruch.

Ostropol itself might have been the inspiration or source of another literary reference. It is sometimes claimed, without any authority being cited, that the town may have been the model *shtetl* for S. Ansky's famous Yiddish play, “The Dybbuk” [The Demon], written 1913-16 and premiered in Warsaw in 1920.¹⁴ The play is set in “Brinitz” (which sounds vaguely like Brinski, the one-time owners of Ostropol) and in “Miropol”, a real town 37 kms. from Ostropol.¹⁵ S. Ansky (a pen-name = Shloyme Zanvl Rappaport, 1863-1920) was a pioneering Jewish ethnologist and folklorist, who worked Volhynia and Podolia before World War I. If the claim is correct, could it be that S. Ansky saw in Ostropol an archetypical *shtetl* in Ukraine in the pre-War era? Or less innocently, could he have regarded Ostropol as a metaphor for a *shtetl* or *shtetlech* seized of a demon of some kind that had to be exorcized?

**Poster for “Hershele of Ostropol” (1930's?)
at the National Jewish Theatre in Warsaw**



**Poster for “The Dybbuk” (1920)
played by the Vilna Troupe in Warsaw**



The numbers of Jews living in Ostropol are difficult to ascertain or trust. The following is a tentative reconstruction of the numbers, which seems to make sense. It is based on four sources of unknown reliability (except perhaps for the figure for 1897, drawn from the Pan-Russian Census of that year).

Year	1720's ¹⁶	1847 ¹⁷	1897 ¹⁸	~1914 ¹⁹	1923 ²⁰	1939 ²¹
J. Population	~300	1417	2714	~3,800	1,305	1063

For what they are worth, these figures suggest that at the beginning of the 18th century the number of Jews in town was very small but rising. One can posit that they climbed to something between 700 and 900 by 1800. That figure would allow the population to rise to over 2,700 by the turn of the century, on the assumption that Ostropol's Jewish population increased 3 to 4 times throughout the 19th century, in keeping with general trends among Jews throughout the Pale of Settlement at the time. From a high of 2,714 in 1897, the total dropped by more than a half by 1923, reflecting high emigration rates before World War I and tragic events during and immediately after that War (below). The numbers continued to decline steadily over the next 15 years (by almost 20% in all), to settle at just over 1,000 souls on the eve of World War II. If the author's Kantor family was at all representative of the whole, people departing Ostropol during those inter-War years moved mainly to locations elsewhere in Ukraine and the Soviet Union at large (emigration to the West having been all but halted).

Situated beyond the borders of Lita (Lithuania in the Jewish geographical sense) and largely prone to the anti-intellectual ethos of Chassidism, there was no flowering of *yeshiva* learning in Ostropol or in Volhynia generally in the 19th and 20th centuries. This is not to say that the place was completely devoid of scholarship. A rabbi from Ostropol named Chaim ben Zevulun Yaakov Permuter published a popular collection of sayings, based on biblical sources and beginning with the Hebrew letter "aleph", in Warsaw in 1814, which ran to a second edition published in Vienna in 1847. And in the inter-War years of the 20th century, a Rabbi Moshe Ostropoler was the "*Baal Musar*" (ethics master) at the famed Novardok *Yeshiva* at Novogradok in the former Grodno Gubernya of the Russian Empire.²²

According to a 1920 American Jewish Committee Report, Ostropol was still well off the beaten path on the eve of World War I. The nearest significant town remained Stara Konstantinov, about 25 kms. to the west, and the nearest railway station was 50 kms. away. Connecting roads to Ostropol were very bad and there were times in the year when the town was cut off from the surrounding countryside. The town's total population then numbered 10,000, of whom 3,800 were Jews, living in 390 houses. 40% of the Jews were artisans, followed by small traders (owning 90 shops). At the upper end of the economic scale, a small number were merchants and, at the other end, an equally small number were *luftmenchen* (Jews "living on air" with no fixed occupation).²³

As for Jewish intellectual, cultural and political life in Ostropol, one must assume that despite its relative remoteness, the town was not immune to the currents sweeping across Eastern European Jewry from the latter half of the 19th century onwards. As far as is known, no "*Yizkor Buch*" (Memorial Book) for Ostropol has been published. Hence, there is no ready account of the institutional and organisational activity that must surely have gone in the town at the turn of the 20th century and thereafter, in common with almost every other *shtetl* in the Pale of Settlement.²⁴

World War I bore down on Jews in Ukraine more cruelly than on those living in Lita and the northern reaches of the Pale. The Russian Front opposing the German forces (the "Western Front") oscillated throughout the War. In 1914, the Russians advanced beyond Ukraine deep into

Galicia (in Austro-Hungary) but in 1915, under heavy German pressure, they made a “tactical retreat” to a new north-south line, running roughly from Riga on the Baltic Sea to Czernowitz on the south-western border of Ukraine. Ostropol remained in Russia, at a safe distance from this line. In 1916, the Germans overran the Russian line from top to bottom, driving their way through the Russian defences and occupying a broad swathe of territory to the east, encompassing Ostropol. They were partly pushed back later in the year, when Ostropol reverted to Russia – and remained there until the end of the war.

In 1916, however, the Germans overran the Russian line from top to bottom, occupying a broad swathe of territory to the east, encompassing Ostropol. They were partly pushed back later in the year, when Ostropol reverted to Russia – and remained there until the end of the war.

However, the situation on the ground was far from stable, as Ukrainian nationalists had begun to mobilise in 1916, with the intent of gaining independence from both the warring sides. The volatile situation was further aggravated by the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917, which was followed by civil war throughout large parts of the Russian Empire. In 1918 and 1919, the region of Ukraine turned into an area of chaotic and brutal conflict, with Ukrainians of various affiliations, Red (Bolshevik) and White (anti-Bolshevik) Russians, Cossacks, Poles, and even Romanian and French interventionist forces vying for control of the territory, or parts of it. Within this violent arena, a savage Ukrainian Civil War was fought, resulting in the proclamation of a Ukrainian People’s Republic. That ephemeral entity soon became embroiled in a Soviet-Ukrainian War, at the end of which all hopes of Ukrainian independence were totally crushed and the Ukrainian Soviet Republic was set up in 1921, as part of the Soviet Union.

In the course of these hostilities, literally hundreds of pogroms were perpetrated against the Jews of Ukraine. They resulted in the deaths of 50-60,000 Jews, countless more wounded and raped, innumerable properties and businesses looted and destroyed. It has been estimated that about 40% of the atrocities were perpetrated by Ukrainian People’s Republic forces led by Simon Petlura (despite his purported orders to halt the killings), 25% by the so-called Ukrainian Green Army and various Ukrainian nationalist militias, 17% by Bolshevik troops and 8.5% by men of the Red Army.²⁵ That is to say, Ukrainians were responsible for 65% of the pogroms, Russians for 25.5%, while the rest were committed by local thugs and criminal elements disposed to plunder and kill Jews with impunity.

The devastating pogrom that triggered off this blood-bath took place in Proskurov, only 59 kms. south-west of Ostropol, on February 15, 1919. Inevitably, Ostropol fell victim to the chain reaction of anti-Jewish violence that reverberated throughout the region. An American Joint Distribution Committee report of late 1920 recorded that “During the period of July, 1919 to October 1920, detached [Ukrainian and Russian] troops, bands of local peasants, Polish, Petlura and Socolov bands murdered 45 [Jewish] persons, wounded 120 and violated about 130 [in Ostropol].”²⁶ The Jewish population of the town had reduced by a quarter (from 390 families on the eve of the War to 300 in 1920). Of the 300 families remaining, 200 were “in extreme misery”, lacking means of subsistence and, in many cases, even shoes and clothes.

Trade and commerce, which previously had mainly been in Jewish hands, was badly hurt. The number of mills in the area (once a major source of employment) and commercial enterprises had decreased radically. The landowners’ estates, another source of employment for Jews before the War, had been broken up by the Soviets, and business was being conducted on a much smaller scale. As a result, many Jews were unemployed and starving. Credit facilities were non-existent and urgently needed, as were cooperatives to improve the supply of food.

130 Jewish children, including orphans, were in dire need. Numerous children were unable to attend school. Clean water supplies were inadequate. Sanitation, including public toilets, was totally defective. The public bathhouse, essential for public hygiene, was destroyed. Only one Soviet hospital with 13 beds functioned, but it was under-staffed and under-supplied, and thus of little help to the many Jewish sick and wounded.

Michael Mosenkis was born in Ostropol in 1909. He was brought to New York in 1919 as a boy of 10; as an adult he was a prominent Hebrew educator and an amateur artist. Despite all that he must have witnessed as a child in Ostropol during the dreadful years of World War I, he painted a bucolic picture of the town in later life. Memory deceives, nostalgia distorts!

Michael Mosenkis: Ostropol



In reality, as the 1920 JDC report cited above makes clear, Jews in Ostropol were living in devastating conditions and were probably utterly demoralised, if not completely traumatised. It is not known how long it took them to recover from their wartime experiences, if at all. As indicated above, their number in 1923 was 1,305. However, under Soviet rule the community continued to decline steadily, so that on the eve of World War II, the Jewish population in town stood at only 1,063. The community's experiences during that inter-War period under Stalin are unknown but they can scarcely have been positive or re-generative.

In World War II, the Nazis entered Ostropol on July 10, 1941 and over the next year put an end to the Jewish community in the town. Rather than holding the Jews in a wartime ghetto, they dispatched them elsewhere for extermination. 581 Jews (that is, over half of the total in 1939) were executed at Stara Konstantinov on June 24, 1942. Another 73 were murdered in the nearby town of Lyubar at about the same time. The ultimate fates of the rest of the community (perhaps some 300 Jews) are not known but it may be assumed that few of them survived.

The military situation was only reversed in the first quarter of 1944, when the Russians launched a massive offensive against the Axis forces in the Ukraine (the "Dnieper–Carpathian Offensive", 24 December 1943 - 17 April 1944), led by General Georgy Zhukov. On 6 March, Marshall Josef Stalin announced that the "Red Army" had penetrated a 175 km. stretch of the Western Front and taken a significant number of towns, including Ostropol.

But it was too late - a 400-years long Jewish presence in Ostropol had already been extinguished.

¹ Article on "Ostropol" in Ukrainian Wikipedia (translated)

² Wikipedia article on "Konstanty Wasyl Ostrogski" at < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konstanty_Wasyl_Ostrogski >

³ Article on "Ostropol" in Ukrainian Wikipedia, cited above.

⁴ See, for example, Kalik, Judith, *Sceptre of Judah: The Jewish Autonomy in the Eighteenth-Century Crown Poland* (Brill, 2009), pp. 62-63.

⁵ *Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego ...* [Geographical Dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland ...], (Warsaw, 1880-1902), vol. VII, pp. 694-695..

⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁷ Records of the American Joint Distribution Committee for the Years 1919-21, File 233, Poland, Report: Polish Ukraine, 1919-1920/Ostropol = undated report [late 1920] on the situation of Jews in Ostropol, posted at < http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/ostropol/_pages/holocaust/joint_report_1920.html >

⁸ Spector, Shmuel (Ed. In Chief), *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust* (Jerusalem & New York, 2001), entry for Ostropol

⁹ Dubnow, Simon M. (trans. L. Friedlander), *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland from the Earliest Times until the Present Day* (Philadelphia, 1916, 3 vols.), iii, pp.148-149

¹⁰ Scholem, Gershom G. & Verblowsky, R. G. Zvi, *Sabbatai Sevi, The Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676* (Princeton, 1973), pp. 92-93

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*

¹² Cohn, Tzvi Meir, *Baal Shem Tov - Rabbi Yisrael Ben Eliezer: The Legendary Kabbalah Master*, vol. v, pp. 14-17, "The Speedy Journey"

¹³ Cf. various collections of stories about Hershele in other languages, including Kimmel, Eric A. *The Adventures of Hershel of Ostropol* (Holiday House, 1981[2018])

¹⁴ E.g. see brief description of Ostropol on the JewishGen's KehilaLinks page at < <http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/ostropol/> >

¹⁵ See *Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust* (Yad Vashem Jerusalem, 2009), vol.1, 485, entry for "Miropol"; cf. several other reference works

¹⁶ Kalik, Judith, *Sceptre of Judah: The Jewish Autonomy in the Eighteenth-Century Crown Poland* (Brill, 2009), p. 65

¹⁷ *Ha-Intseklipediyya ha-ivrit* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 1978-1980), vol. 1, col. 957

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Loc. cit.*

²⁰ *Ha-Intseklipediyya ha-ivrit, loc. cit.*

²¹ Spector, *loc. cit.*

²² Avrohom Birnbaum, "My Years in Novardok": An Interview with Rav Grainom Lazewnik shlit"a", in *Yated Neeman* (n.d.) at < <http://www.yated.com/-my-years-in-novardok--an-interview-with-rav-grainom-lazewnik-shlit-a-0-280-0-.html> >

²³ Records of the American Joint Distribution Committee for the Years 1919-21, *loc. cit.*

²⁴ See, for example, the catalogue for the extensive *Yizkor Book* collection at the 42nd Street Public Library in New York at < <http://yizkor.nypl.org/> >

²⁵ Gergel, Nahum, "The Pogroms In the Ukraine 1918-21", *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* (New York, 1951)

²⁶ Records of the American Joint Distribution Committee for the Years 1919-21, *loc. cit.*