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Identity Crises in the Borderlands:

The People and their Communities in Lili Jacob's Auschwitz Album

There is little visual documentation of Auschwitz-Birkenau from the war years. There are three photographs made clandestinely of nude women being led to the gas chambers and of the Sonderkommando sorting bodies after the gassing. There is also a series of photographs that were donated in 2007 to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., that document the lives of the Auschwitz camp staff late in the war. And then there is a series of photographs of Jews arriving at Birkenau in the spring of 1944.

This last collection of photographs comprises what is known as the Auschwitz Album (or the Lili Jacob Album)—essentially the only images of Jews arriving at Auschwitz (actually at Birkenau). Some of the photographs are familiar to many people. There is an image of two young boys in long wool coats that is in almost every Holocaust museum. And copies of many other photographs have become iconic images in books, articles, and exhibitions. The photographs from the Auschwitz Album have helped us to understand terms and expressions that have defined our understanding of the death camps, such as “the ramp,” “selection,” “sorting of victims’ belongings,” etcetera. There are, however, few studies of the album, its history, and the people in the album. Those that exist often focus on the photographs as unique documents that offers visual testimony concerning the murder of Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau and other death camps.

The research for my book project is still in the early stages. The project begins with the people we find in the Auschwitz Album and the story of Lili Jacob, a woman from the community of Bilky in Transcarpathia (western Ukraine). I am interested in questions of

identity, specifically how rural Jews living in Transcarpathia defined themselves and those around them. The project, however, is not strictly about nations, ethnic groups, or religions, instead I investigate how everyday people negotiated their lives and their identities in the borderlands (what some have referred to as the “shatterzone of empires” and others as “European Rimlands”) in twentieth-century East Central Europe. I am interested in how Jews understood their place in this region and how their neighbors viewed them. I am interested in the relations between Jews and non-Jews in Transcarpathia.

As with any study of a region in East Central Europe or in Eastern Europe, there needs to be an introductory comment about place names. At the moment I am referring to the region under study as Transcarpathia, even if some people continue to use the Czechoslovak designation of Subcarpathian Rus', and Hungarians call the territory Kárpátalja. This is a region that had belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary prior to 1918, when it was given to the new state of Czechoslovakia, only to be re-conquered by Hungary in 1938 and 1939. It became part of the Soviet Union in 1945, and since 1991 has been the western most part of Ukraine. Jews have lived there for hundreds of years, but the majority of them arrived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mainly from Galicia. Their neighbors have identified themselves and been identified by others as Rusyns, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Russians, Slovaks, Germans, Roma, etcetera.

To provide a sense of the territory, let me provide you with a dialogue that people familiar with the region would have heard some variant of:

"Where were you born?"

"I was born in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy of Emperor Franz Joseph."

"Where did you study?"

"In Czechoslovakia under Benes."

"Where did you do military service?"

"In the Kingdom of Hungary in the army of Horthy Miklos."

"Where did you work?"

"In the Soviet Union."

"Where did you retire?"

"In Ukraine."

"Wow, you traveled a lot!"

"Actually, I never left Mukachevo."

Studies concerning the Jewish inhabitants or concerning relations between Jews and others in Transcarpathia frequently present a positive image. Robert Magocsi points out that there were no pogroms in this region, and the Czech writer Ivan Olbracht has provided ethnographic evidence that Jews and Rusyns often respected each other's differences.

Yet it was in Transcarpathia where the first deportations of Jews from Hungary took place in 1941, and it was the first place in 1944 from which the Hungarians began to deport all their Jews. Transcarpathia was in the first zone of deportation. Perhaps an oversimplified question, but one that is driving my research at the moment is: what happened in the spring of 1944 in towns and villages in Transcarpathia? How and why did the local inhabitants all of a sudden decide to turn against their Jewish neighbors and participate in the deportations? Of course, these are fairly simple questions for difficult events, but survivor testimonies and scholars such as Randolph Braham often describe a "change" at that time.

I also define my work as a kind of micro study of one community, perhaps similar to the recent study of Buczacz by Omer Bartov. I am most interested in the community of Bilky, as an example of a Transcarpathian community, which is also where Lili Jacob is from as well as others we find in the album. Lili Jacob, the album, and Bilky are my main characters.

Last year I began research concerning this project in earnest. I had a sabbatical from my teaching job in the United States, and thanks to support from Fulbright, the Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe in Leipzig, and from the Fondation pour la memoire de la Shoah I was able to spend a lot of time in Ukraine, Israel, Hungary, and Germany. With support from the Fondation I was able to return to Transcarpathia in the spring of 2019 and stay until the end of the summer. I already speak Hungarian, but a lot of time in Ukraine I spent on studying the language. In the summer I continued my research in the Transcarpathian State Archives in Berehovo and Uzhhorod. I also visited the village of Bilky many times and conducted interviews. In the summer I was finally able to solve a couple of mysteries: First of all, whether Lili Jacob had returned or not to Bilky in the 1990s. The former mayor still insists that she was there, but local records make it very clear that she was not. Secondly, after many discussions (both official interviews and informal conversations) I was finally able to determine where the large synagogue of Bilky (a building designed by the same Hungarian architects who designed the synagogue in Uzhhorod) used to stand. It was probably torn down in the 1950s; this needs more investigation. Perhaps the culmination of the spring/summer research trip was a tour that I led in Bilky for local inhabitants and local tour guides. I showed people where the former Jewish sites, including the large synagogue in Bilky, used to be and described Jewish life as it would have existed in their community.

My goal in this very short paper is not to provide you with any conclusions, but to give some general impressions. Let me make a couple of observations that relate to people's sense of belonging/identity in the years before 1944.

In my reading of the 1930 Czechoslovak census records for the town of Bilky I came across many interesting revelations. I was looking for information about the family of Lili Jacob, but I also read the material broadly. Shortly before beginning this reading, I had met in Uzhhorod Alexander Bokotey, whose family had come from Bilky. So I kept an eye out for

Bokoteys, of which there were a lot more than Jacobs. Alexander told me that members of his family were well to do Hungarians in Bilky. So I found it telling that some Bokoteys in Bilky registered in 1930 as Hungarians but others as Rusyns. It is true that they probably were of a higher status, since most of them could read and write—two skills that were recorded in the census reports.

One might also think that Jews and Rusyns (or all non Jews) lived in different parts of the town. This was not the case. Many Jews lived in the central part, but Jewish families could be found in all sections of Bilky. And it was not uncommon to find Jewish households next to Rusyn households. This may not mean a great deal, but it could suggest that the dividing line between Jews and non Jews, which was, of course, very clear in religious terms, was perhaps not as obvious in other terms. Locals may not have seen “belonging” to the majority or a minority as that crucial.

I will not elaborate on this here, but this issue is extremely important for ideas regarding belonging in this region, because of the multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-religious nature of this borderland. Transcarpathia was controlled by Hungary, then Czechoslovakia, then Hungary again (and after 1945 by the Soviet Union and then Ukraine). Before 1945 the majority population—the Rusyns—were not the ones making decisions about the territory. This meant that Rusyns and Jews, despite their religious, ethnic, and linguistic differences shared the position of being governed by someone else, which was beginning to mean something in the new atmosphere of nation states. Both Rusyns and Jews also shared the status of being very poor—something that scholars frequently point to when they want to explain the lack of antisemitism in the region.

School records from the interwar period can also perhaps tell us something. It was common that Jewish children attended state schools, which before 1918 would have been Hungarian and then afterward Czechoslovak. It is true that Jewish boys went to Cheder, but this was in addition to regular school. After 1918 in a town such as Bilky there was a

Rusyn school and a Czechoslovak school. I went through many of the school records for the Czechoslovak school in that town. The overwhelming majority of the students in the Czechoslovak school were Jewish, but not all. It is also worth noting that in the Czechoslovak school the children learned Rusyn and sometimes other languages. Not all the Jewish children received high marks in Rusyn, but some did. This, of course, does not mean that they identified with Rusyns, but it does mean that they probably interacted with Rusyns and Rusyn children outside of school. One of my interview partners in Bilky was able to point out many homes where Jews had lived before the war based on whether or not families in those homes had children his age. He always came back to the comment: we played together.

I would also like to mention that the majority of Jewish inhabitants of Transcarpathia prior to the Holocaust spoke Yiddish at home. And it has been documented in various memoirs that it was not entirely uncommon for Rusyns to learn some Yiddish in order to communicate with their neighbors and work partners. This is very difficult to document, but it seems to have been true.

As I mentioned earlier, I am not presenting conclusions, but rather impressions from some of my research. This is a longer book project, for which I will continue to do research. After returning to the United States in August I have been preoccupied with other projects, but I will return to Lili Jacob and Bilky in the spring and begin to outline the chapters for the book. I am so grateful for the support from the Fondation that allowed me to conduct a great deal of my research in Ukraine. Thank you!