

*Habsburg Bukovina: Jews at the Edge of Empire*

On the swings and roundabouts of historiographical fashion borderlands are riding high, their prominence fueled by a cottage industry of nostalgia for lost homelands. Along with porous borders, borderlands are seen as an integral element of the more benign age of pre-Holocaust central and eastern Europe, before nationalist aggression cast its long and deadly shadow over these regions. Emblematic of the relatively tolerant multi-national and multi-faith Habsburg and Ottoman empires (the Russian empire being conspicuously intolerant and its borders non-porous in this regard), borderlands were, in the words of the editors of a recent volume on the subject, ‘fluid and unstable’ in their ‘scope, definition, and meaning’ with ‘hybrid populations [and] ever-changing contours [that] reveal their protean nature’. ‘[B]ecause of their geographical marginality, borderlands are often the prime sites where contesting national myths, narratives, and identities are created...[they are] zones of coexistence and multiethnicity, and of violence and devastation’.

Protean indeed, and more than a little mystifying in their apparent capacity to be all things to all people. At the eye of this rhetorical storm lies a quotidian, if not mundane, truth: the regions on either side of east-central European political borders, whether Habsburg, Ottoman, German or Russian, were home to a mixture of peoples living in sometimes uncomfortable proximity to one another, and were as a consequence politically volatile and culturally dynamic. They fascinate historians and others because they were the flashpoints – or ‘shatterzones’ in the neologistic formulation of the just-cited volume – for much of twentieth-century Europe’s worst horror and for many of the most interesting and fraught inter-ethnic encounters of nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe; and because the geo-political conditions that gave rise to both extremes no longer exist. The states are no more, the people have been murdered or deported, or have migrated. These kind of borderlands survive only in the nostalgic imagination. From all these perspectives Bukovina was an archetypal borderland, and its Jews were an indispensable ingredient in what made it so. The Galician-born Israeli writer and literary

critic Dov Sadan, for example, called Bukovina a ‘small, but peculiar Jewish province... between cultures, states [and] nations, a microcosm of Jewish life’.

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When James Baker, author of a 1913 book called *Austria: Her People and their Homelands*, told Professor Charles Oman, President of the Royal Historical Society in Britain and Professor of Modern History at Oxford, that he (Baker) was going to Bukovina, Oman somewhat cryptically replied: ‘I know only one Englishman who has ever been in Bukovina, and *if* you get there you will be the second’. Baker made the journey safely and called it ‘a peculiarly interesting corner of Europe’. The historian A.J.P. Taylor dismissed Bukovina in the 1940s as a ‘forgotten province’. Taylor, typically exaggerating for effect, was making a serious point: if not forgotten, Bukovina was (is) unfamiliar to many people, including historians. Perhaps this should not surprise us. Divided today between Ukraine and Romania, it was a small territory at the very eastern edge of the Austrian empire, sharing borders with Russia, Romania and Hungary. Like its much larger neighbour Galicia, now part of Poland and similarly a much-discussed borderland, it no longer exists, at least not as a semi-sovereign geographic and political unit. In this sense, both Bukovina and Galicia were artificial constructs; they were created – as political territories - by Habsburg expansionism in the 1770s and they disappeared with the fall of the monarchy in 1918.

For Bukovina, geography was destiny and the perception that Bukovina was a borderland, on the periphery of the Habsburg lands and therefore of civilisation itself, ran right through the 140 years of Bukovina’s existence as a province. Carved out of Ottoman Moldavia, the area was imaginatively described by an early-twentieth century commentator as a ‘hotbed of savage tribes’ with ‘blood-soaked soil’. In 1850, newspapers and post from London or Paris took four or five days to arrive in Cracow; Czernowitz (Bukovina’s capital) was 300 miles further east. A periphery, however, is inherently relative, existing only in relation to a notional centre. And for Jewish history, which is self-evidently embedded in a number of contexts, the centre itself tends to shift about. For

example, the history of the Jews of Czernowitz belongs to the history of Bukovina, Galicia, imperial Austria, Romania, Ukraine, and the Soviet Union; for eastern and central Europe this is entirely typical. The same point is made in the presumably apocryphal story about an elderly man in the town of Mukachevo. A visitor asks him about his career, to which he replies: I was born in Hungary, apprenticed in Czechoslovakia, did military service in Hungary, married in the Soviet Union, retired in Ukraine. You're very well-travelled, says the visitor. No, says the man, I've lived in this house all my life!

That Bukovina was 'burdened' by its peripheral status and associated marginality fits neatly with the notion of the Enlightenment's 'invention' of eastern Europe, in which a primitive eastern Europe functions an ideal foil for the self-perception of western Europeans as modern and advanced. In this context, Bukovina came to be seen as Austria's easternmost island of *Deutschtum* in a Slavic sea, as the border separating these distinct realms. Jews were a significant element of the post-Enlightenment east/west divide. When Austria and Russia, along with Prussia, dismantled the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the eighteenth century, they acquired large and unfamiliar Jewish populations. Upon learning that she had doubled her Jewish population by incorporating Galicia, Empress Maria Theresa of Austria expressed her 'horror and disgust'. Her son Emperor Joseph II, when he travelled to Galicia and Bukovina, supposedly commented that he understood now why one of his many titles was 'King of Jerusalem'. He described the Jews as insular, separatist, poor and unproductive. Such rhetoric was not unusual, since the Jews in eastern Europe were frequently regarded as a problem requiring a solution. Two strands converged here: on the one hand, the Enlightenment's harsh view of eastern Europe as primitive and alien; on the other hand, a very long tradition of anti-Jewish hostility (they were also primitive and alien). For the Austrians, the Jews acted as a lightning rod for a larger sense of unease about their new provinces: they were shabby, disorganised, far removed to the east – in short, they were the borderlands of empire and the Jews were the epitome of their marginality. On the other hand, it is worth recalling the dictum of the Austrian writer – and Galician Jew – Joseph Roth: 'The essence of Austria is not the centre, but the periphery'.

Where, then, do Bukovina's Jews fit in this picture? Part of the answer is to be found in the long-standing myth of Bukovina exceptionalism, where the region stands as a symbol of inter-ethnic cooperation, political moderation and cultural efflorescence. Again, this perspective is often a function of nostalgia for supposedly better and more peaceful times before the First World War. Here was 'multiculturalism, tolerance and the coexistence of diverse cultures', a veritable 'Babylon on the river Pruth', a city and region infused with what Otto von Habsburg (son of the last Habsburg emperor), called 'a synthesis of national consciousness with a higher...European outlook'. In a similar vein, the author Gregor von Rezzori offered the somewhat fanciful notion of Czernowitz as 'the melting pot for dozens of ethnic groups, languages, creeds, temperaments, and customs'. In this ethereal vision of Bukovina, the Jewish element is invariably indispensable, as both the principal beneficiary of this outbreak of harmony and tolerance, and as crucial to the creation and flourishing of the region's cultural dynamism. We can see at work in this the distorting mirror of the often unhappy post-Habsburg era: Czernowitz was an 'Austrian Jerusalem', a Jewish success story made possible by 'one hundred and fifty years of relative peace and quiet under Habsburg rule'; the city, and indeed Bukovina in general, were 'a paradise for Jews'. One historian called Bukovina's Jews the 'most fortunate in Eastern and East Central Europe'. (It should be noted that this view of Bukovina is not unique to Jewish collective memory and historiography, but is shared to varying degrees by the other sizable groups in the area -- Romanians, Ukrainians, Germans and Poles.)

As is true of most myths, this idealised reading involves a good deal of wishful thinking. But it is not only historians and nostalgic expatriates and their descendants who conjure up this vision; contemporaries did much the same. In 1907, for example, a Zionist correspondent noted that, such was the degree of independence and political respect that Jews enjoyed in Bukovina, the province was sometimes called 'Palestine'. A local journalist and lawyer wrote in 1901 that Jewish 'influence' was 'dominant in all spheres of public life' (a good thing, in his eyes!); this was the 'El Dorado of diaspora Jewry', a sentiment repeatedly echoed. Notwithstanding serious problems towards the end of the nineteenth century - poverty and unemployment, national conflict and a rising tide of

antisemitism - Bukovina was perceived and experienced by many Jews, both at the time and in retrospect, as a land that offered them an unusual sense of security and comfort.

The myth of Bukovina exceptionalism, and of its Jews, is also bound up with the idea of borderland, resistant to easy definition. Numerous geographic and cultural markers have been proposed. Bukovina has been described, for example, as the 'northern border zone of south-eastern Europe'. Or, in a description nicely encapsulating both capital city and region, a 'Black Forest village, a Podolian ghetto, a minor Viennese suburb, part deepest Russia and part most-modern America'. The writer Karl Emil Franzos notoriously conceived of the surrounding region as 'semi-Asiatic', but thought of Bukovina as a 'flourishing little piece of Europe', akin to Switzerland with its 'atmosphere of peace and understanding between peoples'. (Regarding Franzos, though, it has been said that learning about the region from him is like learning about Japan by watching Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado.) Finally, Czernowitz has been seen as part of an urban milieu found uniquely at the eastern edge of the Carpathian mountains, a conduit for transmitting ideas, goods and people between central and eastern Europe, between eastern and south-eastern Europe, and even between Europe and Asia. One contemporary went so far as to call the city part-European, semi-Asiatic and partly Trans-Caucasian!

These efforts to reach all points of the compass are reflected in Jewish perspectives. The Jews here, according to one local writer in 1901, were an almost indefinable mixture of Galician, Polish, Romanian and Russian Jewries, along with a thin veneer of German Jewry (making them civilised in his eyes). Another wrote that the local Jews were 'neither eastern nor western European', but something unique unto themselves. These difficulties of definition emerge from the collision, and partial melding, of different types of Jewish worlds, for which a long-standing and convenient shorthand is 'eastern' and 'western' European Jewries. In more concrete terms, this means that Jewish society here was characterised by an uncommonly intense coexistence of east and west, by a familiarity born of proximity: small physical distances mitigated the effects of vast cultural differences. The hasidic kingdom of Sadagora (the Jewish Vatican, as it has been called) was, after all, virtually a suburb of Czernowitz.

This brings us back to the characteristic mixing of populations in borderlands. Bukovina was unusual in that no single nation or ethnicity dominated (as Poles did in Galicia). Instead, the five largest groups - Ukrainians, Romanians, Jews, Germans and Poles - maintained an uneasy equilibrium. As the influential *Czernowitzer Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote in 1906: 'Bukovina is the only land in the monarchy where... Slavs and Germans, Jews and antisemites, Poles and Ruthenians, make pacts of all kinds' in a perpetual game of national 'chess'. The Habsburg state breathed life into its new land by supplementing the autochthonous Romanians and Ukrainians with German bureaucrats, teachers, farmers, artisans and merchants, Hungarian farmers and cattle-breeders, Polish artisans and foresters, and Jews. Population growth was exponential: from c.75-85,000 at the end of the eighteenth century to 380,000 in the mid-nineteenth century, and to c.800,000 just prior to the First World War. Bukovina had the highest proportion of Jewish population of any Austrian crownland, reaching a little over 100,000 just prior to the First World War, almost 13 percent. The capital Czernowitz had the highest proportion of Jewish population of any of the larger Austrian cities, with its nearly 30,000 Jews in 1910 making up approximately 33 percent of the city's residents; it was the fourth largest Jewish community in Austria, outnumbered only by Vienna, Lemberg and Kraków. The blend of a modernising eastern European Jewry rooted in traditional Jewish society with an acculturated western European Jewry, in a multinational context with no dominant nationality, led to the development of what was described by one local Jewish leader as 'a singular type of Austrian Jewry'. They lived, he declared, in a 'borderland embedded between east and west'.

This view of Bukovina Jewry, in turn, places it in the context of a broader and understudied phenomenon: Jewish regionalism. The Jewish regions of east-central Europe were differentiated from one another by an unruly grid of imagined borders (*pace* Benedict Anderson) which together created a pan-national realm that only partially aligned with formal political borders. Litvaks, Polaks, Galitsianers, Moravians, Silesians -- all developed distinctive and overlapping sets of identifications and commitments. In Bukovina, as elsewhere in this Jewish regional network, regional, national/ethnic and

state loyalties were all evident in some measure. Noteworthy in Bukovina was that Jews expressed a profound conviction of local belonging and of shared ownership in a great venture: Austria was building a new society at the edge of empire and Jews were involved from the beginning. This combination in modern Europe was rare.

It was surely no coincidence that such a novelty unfolded in a borderland.