

Star of David v. 3 crosses: writing the last chapter of a massacre

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President of the Canadian Jewish Congress, his parents were among the fewer than 100 Jewish survivors in Sambir

It's a surreal landscape if you know the history of the place.

Chickens wander about, picking at the garbage. Broken stones inscribed with Hebrew characters lie stuck in the ground. At one end stands a large brick wall, pockmarked with bullet holes. In front of the wall stretches a long barrow of raised earth. Set into the wall, a small plaque in Russian and Ukrainian blandly proclaims that, on this spot, "Soviet citizens were killed by Nazi fascism during the Great Patriotic War." At strategic points surrounding the barrow — a mass grave of Jewish victims of the Holocaust — loom three 10-metre metal crosses.

This is the ancient Jewish cemetery in Sambir, Ukraine.

Today, *Yom Hashoah ve Hagvurah* (Holocaust Remembrance and Heroism Day), Meylakh Sheykhet, a Ukrainian Jewish activist from Lviv, is in Canada at the invitation of both Ukrainian and Jewish community leaders. He is here to raise consciousness about the plight of Jewish monuments and to enlist support for their preservation as part of the patrimony of present day Ukraine. None is in more need than the Jewish cemetery in Sambir.

The history of this cemetery provides a portrait in miniature of the Holocaust and, perhaps, of the potential for remembrance to provide a path forward.

The Holocaust overtook the Jews of Sambir with ruthless efficiency. In less than a year, 10,000 Jews, nearly half the city's population, were wiped out. Fewer than a hundred survived. This destruction was accomplished through four main *Aktionen*, the Nazi euphemism for meticulously planned mass

murder, each deliberately coinciding with a major Jewish holiday and centred on the ancient cemetery.

In the first two *Aktionen*, in 1942, about half of Sambir's Jews were rounded up and brought to the cemetery, then packed into boxcars bound for the Belzec death camp. In the third *Aktion*, in 1943, 2,000 Jews were rousted out of their beds during the first night of Passover. They were brought to the local prison in Sambir, then marched in groups to the Jewish cemetery, where a huge pit had been dug. On arrival, each group was ordered to strip and jump into the pit, where they were shot by machine gun and covered with a shallow layer of earth, the living with the dead, as the next group entered.

The final *Aktion* occurred seven weeks later, on Shavuot. At 4 a.m., Sambir's remaining Jews were rounded up and sent, some on foot, some by truck, to a nearby forest where they, too, were mowed down

by machine guns and buried in a mass grave. Locals say the earth did not stop moving for three days.

After the war, the few Jews who had escaped left to start new lives. Sambir's Jews were all gone, but the story of the cemetery was not.

In 1974, Soviet authorities ordered the bulldozing of Jewish cemeteries in Western Ukraine. In Sambir, row upon row of tombstones — many dating back hundreds of years — were uprooted. Some were used in the facing for a candy factory. Most were consigned to yet another deep pit in the cemetery.

But, still, the saga was not complete. After the fall of communism, privately funded work began to rehabilitate the cemetery, and a Star of David was set into the ground near the mass grave. But, under the cloak of darkness, extremists dug up the Star of David and erected in its stead the three huge crosses that brood over the mass Jewish grave to this day.

Yet, this is still not the end. The last chapter is being written today in both Ukraine and Canada. Despite the obstinacy of local authorities and unhelpful judicial decisions, there's a growing perception that Ukraine stands at a crossroads and that issues such as the Sambir Jewish cemetery must be addressed tactfully and sensitively for Ukraine to take its place as a modern European state. Central and regional authorities in Ukraine have provided promising expressions of support, as has Ukraine's ambassador to Canada. As Meylakh Sheykhet's visit to Canada attests, Jewish and Ukrainian Canadian communities are engaged. Leading members of both major Canadian political parties have also pledged to work for a positive resolution.

Will the efforts succeed? The obstacles are many, but the resolve to even try is a victory of sorts. It's also a worthwhile lesson for *Yom Hashoah ve Hagvurah*.