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Another country heard from: a new Jewish Ukrainian history book

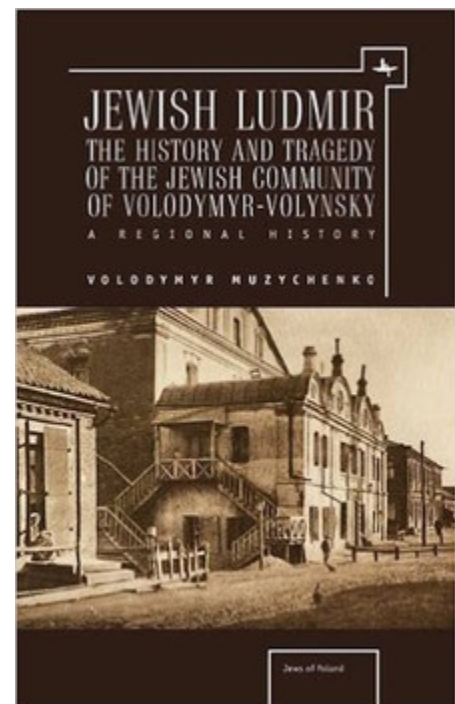
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Book: Jewish Ludmir: the History and Tragedy of the Jewish Community of Volodymyr-Volynsky, a Regional History by Volodymyr Muzychenko

Rating: ★★★★★

Jewish Ludmir by local tour guide Volodymyr Muzychenko's a finely tuned scholarly work that mines Ukrainian and Russian archives for materials previously unavailable to American scholars. As head of the local Jewish community, Muzychenko hosted a small group from Boston on a "roots" journey. After a brief and sketchy description, he was immediately able to take Harvey Budner to his ancestral home, the house of his grandparents as described to him by his parents. He also learned that his surname was a derivative of "barrel-maker." Immediately impressed, the good Doctor Budner, a psychiatrist who can spot a healthy mind without diagnostic testing, he heard about the 100-year-old structure from its present Christian occupant, who warmed to the local guide because of "his warm and accepting attitude toward his Christian neighbors, and they toward him." Returning to Boston, Dr. Budner's family showed Muzychenko's Ukrainian manuscript to a Brandeis University Anton Polonsky, who was so impressed that he soon supplied a translator Marta D. Olynyk.



Academic Studies Press

Thus began the publishing process that resulted in the present volume in English, full of period photographs, documents, and a painstakingly accurate transliteration of names, places, and events. Witness the close phonetic rendering of the 1648 - 1649 murderous pogroms perpetrated by Kmel'nytsky (spelled Chmielnicki in Western scholarship), who flayed the living skins of his victims. Eventually a thriving Jewish community was reduced to just two families. This Cossack, wanting to free Ukraine from Polish domination, told his followers that the Poles had sold them as slaves "into the hands of the accursed Jew." Jewish Ludmir, whose various historical names include, Volodymyr-Volynsky, Lodomira, and Wlodzimierz, recovered enough to foster a burgeoning population that numbered 60% Jewish occupancy by 1897. By 1934 of 27,117, 10,406 were Jews. The accuracy of this count is a testimony to the precise research by the author.

However, this was just one example of the pinpoint accuracy of the research. Another example more pertinent to 21st century feminism is the case of Khane-Rokhl Werbermacher (whose name indicates a family of weavers), widely known as the "Maiden from Ludmir" or the Ludmirer Moide in Yiddish, who was the subject of a speculative novel by Rabbi Gershon Winkler. It is surprising to learn that Muzychenko even included the 1996 New York Folks Bienne Yiddish Theater's commissioned musical production "The Maiden from Ludmir," which this reviewer was privileged to attend. He even spots the spelling error in her name in the laudatory New York Times review. However, he failed to note that Rachel Botchan in the leading role was not Jewish and had to memorize the lyrics like a new language. He did uncover new photographs of the Maiden's home, the *grünshtibl*, the Bet Ha-Midrash (*house of study*) from an obscure online memorial source in Hebrew and Yiddish by one Wladimir Wolynsk.

Newly uncovered sources includes her first mention as the first female Hassidic seer by the Russian historian Shmuel Abba Horodecky (1871 -1957) in his four volume Jewish History of Hasidism in 1909; he was the first to detail "her life as a Jewish woman who fought for equality with men in emotional in religious life." Additional new information includes:

- a map citing her visit to a Ukrainian Greek –Catholic convent, which had a major impact on her thinking;
- her behavior as a reclusive rabbinical figure and healer sought by many influenced the popular play by S. Ansky called the Dybbuk;

- a map of her grave in Israel, now the cite of many a pilgrimage by Jewish feminists world-wide;
- its restoration made possible by a fund begun by Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, father of Jewish Renewal:
- the story of her grand-daughter Chaya, whose family was murdered by the Nazis, but who lived in her grandmother's Israeli house until she died;
- the fact that her grandson Janusz Bardach, originally born in Ludmir, became a plastic surgeon and writer

Ludmir Maiden has inspired plays, poems, epistles, novels, and histories, which all perpetuate the brave life led by this important holy woman, who moved to Israel to continue her work and eschewed marriage. Because of this kind of scholarship, may more works continue to proliferate the feminine side of Hassidism now and in the future.

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