Same Space, Different Stories: German and Jewish memories of Bukovina after the Second World War

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Abstract

This article explores the themes of unity and disunity with regard to German and Jewish memories of Bukovina after the Second World War. Although one often reads in the literature that Bukovina was home to a large number of minorities, notably Jews and Germans, who lived together peacefully and harmoniously, I demonstrate the extent to which this 'unity' was challenged by the violent experience of the war and the Holocaust. I show that despite similar means and modes of commemoration and references to the same place and time, the stories told by German and Jews about the region were very different. Looking at the features of post-war approaches to Bukovina among Jews and Germans, I argue the 'disunity' results from both different experiences and different conceptions of Germanness. I conclude with some thoughts on Bukovina as a physical and memorial landscape in the present and the future.

Keywords: Bukovina; German-speakers; Germanness; memory; displacement

Sharing Space: Germans and Jews in Bukovina

The historical region of Bukovina (1775-1918), the easternmost province of the Habsburg Empire, was also its most ethnically diverse. No ethnic group represented an absolute majority. Ukrainians were dominant in the north and Romanians in the south; but Germans, Jews, Poles, Hungarians, Gypsies, Russians and others lived in more or less mixed settlements throughout.[1] As a

province under Austrian administration, however, German was the vehicle for upward mobility and German-speakers dominated politics, culture and the economy. This German-speaking ruling class was a loosely defined group made up of members of the imperial administration drawn from all over the empire and belonging to a wide range of ethnicities. As nationalism progressed in Bukovina as elsewhere, however, self-defining ethnic Germans and German-speaking Jews became its main representatives.

Bukovina is therefore not only celebrated for its diversity but also widely thought of as the ultimate site of German-Jewish symbiosis (Pollack et al., 2008). Over the course of the nineteenth century, in a bid to further the Germanisation of the region and secure their hold on power, the Austrians had promoted both Jewish immigration and assimilation to German culture. By the turn of the twentieth century, Jews represented 10 per cent of the overall population. Yet they often constituted over 30 per cent of the urban population and a majority in the capital Czernowitz. The city was at once a Jewish metropolis and a centre of German culture in the region. In 1875 Europe's easternmost German university was founded there and, as the writings of Karl Emil Franzos reveal, the reigning 'diversity under German dominance' was particularly beneficial to the Jews (Franzos, 1889). Fred Stambrook has described the period from 1880 to 1914 as a 'golden age' for the Jews of Bukovina, arguing that they were 'the most fortunate Jews in East Central Europe' (Stambrook, 2003:14). For this reason too, the region is often celebrated for its tolerance.

Yet the rise of extreme ideologies and two world wars destroyed the relatively peaceful coexistence of different religious, national and social groups in the area. In 1918, following the breakup of the Habsburg Empire and the redrawing of the map of Europe, Bukovina became part of Greater Romania. It also ceased to function as an independent province. Policies of Romanisation and growing anti-Semitism disrupted existing social, economic and cultural relations (Glass, 1996; Hausleitner, 2001). The Second World War marked its definitive disappearance as a political unit. Split between Romania in the south and the Soviet Union in the north at the end of the war, its capital lying in the Northern half became Chernovtsy – a city of the remote Soviet borderland.

The real destruction wrought by the war, however, was that of the communities that had once lived there. In 1940 the Soviets invaded the north of the region. Members of the different ethnic groups were repatriated to their respective, putative, homelands starting with the 80,000 ethnic Germans, known as Bukovina Germans, who were brought 'home to the Reich' by Hitler (Jachomowski 1984; Kotzian, 2005). Under the Soviets, a number of Bukovina Jews were deported to Siberia but worse was to come a year later with Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union and Romanian re-annexation of the north of the region. From 1941 the Jews of Bukovina were summarily murdered or deported to work camps in Transnistria in what has come to be known as the Romanian Holocaust (Mihok & Benz, 2009; Ancel, 2012). These measures carried out by the Romanians in their alliance with the Nazis resulted in the death of two thirds of the pre-war Jewish community of Bukovina, some 60,000 people.

The Second World War, therefore, marked not only the end of German presence in the region, and a new beginning for Bukovinian German-speakers away from their 'homeland' Bukovina, but also discredited the concept of German-Jewish symbiosis which had been a cornerstone of Bukovinian identity. The war seemed to have confirmed the necessity of the congruence of ethnic and

territorial borders (Bergen, 2005). In accordance with this, most of the Jewish Bukovinians sought to rebuild their lives in Israel, while the majority of ethnic Germans found refuge in West Germany. However, the war did not only divide Germans and Jews spatially but according to a symbolic victim/perpetrator dichotomy, which placed them on opposite ends of the spectrum of violence. Indeed, despite common displacement, the experiences of Germans and Jews from Bukovina are deemed incommensurable (Yavetz, 2007). Though they did not necessarily face each other in the conflict, Germans and Jews from Bukovina belonged to radically opposed 'communities of experience'. This meant that in the highly politicised contexts of the Cold War and even thereafter, the stories told about the shared space were very different. While for the Jews it was a matter of compensating for loss; for the Germans, on the other hand, it was one of compensating for guilt or complicity.

As we shall see, this resulted in incompatible conceptions of the region. Yet while these can be related to different purposes and understandings of Germanness, they also reveal similar means and modes of commemoration among Jews and Germans and ultimately point to similar strategies and mechanisms for overcoming a violent past which can be expressed in terms of belonging, compensation and coherence. Moreover, as Dan Diner has argued, the pre-war German-Jewish symbiosis may have given way to a 'negative symbiosis' with the Holocaust (Diner, 1990). In other words, the passing time (generational change and shifting socio-political contexts) led to the formation of 'communities of identification' that challenge the traditional relationship posited between experience and identification. This paper thus explores some aspects of the complex nexus of unity and disunity, which characterises German and Jewish memories of Bukovina after the Second World War.

Tailoring the past to legitimise the present: Cold War memories

In both Germany and Israel during the Cold War, Bukovinian identity was mobilised for contemporary political purposes. Immediately after the war, 'homeland societies' (*Landsmannschaften*)[2] and their respective newspapers[3] were founded. But despite the focus on Bukovina, the emphasis was placed on belonging in what were described respectively as both the *new* and *ancestral* homelands of German and Jewish Bukovinians: Germany and Israel. The dominant nationalist and Zionist approaches meant displacement was conceptualised as 'return' or 'homecoming'. The organisations that coordinated the efforts of commemoration were therefore not 'diasporic' in the conventional sense of aspiring to a return: Irremediably lost and inaccessible, the 'homeland' Bukovina was a purely nostalgic object of longing.

Since stories about the past served to legitimise the present and secure advantages for Bukovinians as newcomers in their respective societies, Bukovinians framed their victimhood in the context of larger debates. Bukovina Germans cast themselves as some of the twelve million Germans who had been expelled or fled from their homelands at the end of the war, so-called 'expellees of the homeland' (*Heimatvertriebene*), and Bukovina Jews as Holocaust survivors and members of the 'surviving remnants' (*sheerit hapleitah*). In other words, the internal homogeneity of the Bukovinian communities in Germany and Israel in the post-war period had less to do with their shared background in Bukovina than the subsequent treatment and interpretation of their wartime experiences

as those of generic Germans and Jews. In fact, the specificity of their experiences as Bukovinians – whether it was resettlement under Hitler or deportations at the hands of the Romanians – were not given much attention.

This instrumentalisation and politicisation of practices of commemoration relating to Bukovina in Germany and in Israel during the Cold War was reflected in of the region. Two publications, which served as monuments to the communities, can be used to illustrate this point. The first is Hugo Gold's two-volume *History of the Jews of Bukovina* (1958 and 1962). This work conveyed the image of Bukovina as a 'Jewish Atlantis': the book commemorated those who died in the Holocaust but its main contribution was a detailed history of the Jews in Bukovina since the thirteenth century, listing all of the achievements, institutions and prominent Bukovinians of Jewish faith. The focus on an emancipated and middle-class Jewish universe portrayed Bukovina as a lively, urban and modern area. On the other hand, Erich Beck's *Bukovina, Land between East and West* (1963) portrayed Bukovina as an 'Island of Germanness'. Commemorating the specifically German (and only secondarily Austrian) contribution to the region's culture and development, this work presented many illustrations focusing on the rural landscapes and villages of southern Bukovina. The book described Bukovina as a pre-modern, deeply traditional and predominantly Christian, or in other words Western, area.

In both cases Bukovina was subject to idealisation. It was a positive source of identification to be opposed to and compensate for memories of war and suffering. But these tailored versions of the past also need to be seen in relation to the contested German and Jewish identities of the Cold War present. On the one hand, written in German, Gold's work drew on the ideals of *Kultur* (culture) and *Bildung* (education). In this sense, it referred to a better, humanist Germanness to be opposed to that of the Nazis. Beck's work on the other hand resonated with the romantic and conservative German ideal of the *Heimat* conceived of as a natural, innocent and ahistorical space and time. Here too, the reference to the positive role of the Germans in Central Europe can be seen as an appeal to pre-Nazi understandings of Germanness. In both cases, the emphasis was on a pre-war Bukovina. This was not only a form of nostalgic escapism but also a means of rehabilitating conceptions of Germanness underwriting what it meant to be Bukovinian in Germany and Israel during the Cold War. In other words, this tailoring of the past to legitimise the present tells us more about post-war West Germany and Israel than the region, which was the declared object of the depiction and also explains why the two projections were hardly compatible.

Remembering for the future: post-Cold War memories

The political isolation behind the Iron Curtain of the 'homeland societies' and the region itself facilitated the selective kind of remembering promoted by the communities of Bukovinians in Germany and Israel. However, the collapse of Communism made it possible to confront the memorial and physical landscape of Bukovina, and its history was rediscovered more widely. The memory practices of Bukovinians thus changed significantly after 1989. Memories were actualised, traces discovered and new meaning sought. But what did this mean for the German and Jewish conceptions of the region and their relation to each other? In other words, when meeting again in the same space, did the stories converge or remain different?

As with the memories of Germans and Jews during the Cold War, there were two different, dichotomised, reactions after 1989. The Germans emphasised that the region was 'Europe's forgotten region'. From this perspective, Bukovina had been a crossroads, a site of peaceful coexistence and an oasis of culture which should now be taken as a 'model for Europe'. Indicative of this is the following statement taken from the introduction to the book *Looking for Traces in the Future: Europe's forgotten region Bukovina* published by the Bukovina Institute in Augsburg in 1991 after the first official trip undertaken to the region by the community of Bukovina Germans: 'The participants of our journey went looking for traces […] traces of the togetherness of many peoples and religions […] we wanted to make the memory of this time and circumstances useful for the future of multi-ethnic Europe' (Hampel and Kotzian, 1991: foreword, my translation).

Clearly this vision was still dictated by the Cold War model of 'island of Germanness'. Yet this conception was adapted to the new post-Cold War circumstances and infused with optimism: 'German' was equated with 'Western' and 'European' and used to proclaim the region's 'return to Europe'; fifty years after the end of the war, Germans could redeem themselves by promoting the reconciliation of the continent. In the process, however, old images were not truly challenged. In fact, presupposing such parallels from the pre-war period not only underplayed the effects of the war, as before, but now also the legacies of four decades of Communism.

A combination of continuity and adaptation also characterised Jewish post-Cold War memories of Bukovina. The accessibility of the region led to a greater emphasis on Bukovina as 'Europe's forgotten cemetery'. The possibility of return brought home the fact that Bukovina was not only a centre of Jewish culture but also a shatterzone – the stage of the Holocaust and its lesser-known atrocities. The guiding principle for the rediscovery of the region was, therefore, the search for the traces of Jewish persecution. According to a tour manager in Israel who has been organising up to five trips a year to the region for the last decade, the value of his trips resides in the fact that, as a survivor himself, he knows where to take the participants and that, over the years, his knowledge has grown as his personal memories converge with those of the different survivors he has taken with him. Discovering the region means actualising memories of suffering and salvaging them as the key message for future generations.[4] For this Israeli tour guide and his tour groups, the visits confirmed that Jews had no place in Europe. Everything contemporary was evaluated negatively by comparison with what had existed before. In this sense, the return was still guided by a vision of the sunken 'Jewish Atlantis'. But in addition, the rediscovery was coloured by lasting resentment and some degree of *Schadenfreude* (Hirsch and Spitzer, 2011). Here too, post-war developments were not acknowledged in their own right.

Post-Cold War memories of Bukovina were still over-determined by the war and the post-war ideological contexts in which German and Jewish memories of Bukovina first formed. In fact, the encounter with the traces reinforced identification in terms of ethnicity and experience. Even when going back to the same space and confronted with the same traces, therefore, members of the two groups had similar approaches but very different agendas: they came to see what they remembered and not to discover what was, in fact, there. In both cases, therefore, return confirmed what they thought they already knew. The emphasis was placed on what was deemed to matter for the future in Germany and Israel. In this sense, the memories did indeed change and become actualised but the conceptions of the region did not diversify, converge or reconcile. Yet with

the collapse of Communism this was no longer a matter of isolated nostalgia: these multiple readings of the present through the lens of the past had very real consequences for the region itself and for the Bukovinian present.

Placing history

'Place' is space layered with different and therefore always divisive, contested and contradictory historical meaning. The tendency of modern states has been to territorialise history and homogenise discourses (Richardson, 2008). As John Tunbridge has argued, heritage claims can, therefore, be 'negatively implicated in perpetuating divisions and suspicions' (1998: 239). An area such as Bukovina – simultaneously a 'model for Europe', a 'shatterzone' and more still –, is a direct challenge to these practices. What are the prospects for a unified story about the region?

Three points can be made in this regard. The first concerns generation. As the 'generation of experience' disappears, the responsibility for the stories and the traces passes on to the next generation. This generation is not emotionally involved in the same way. Many now embrace the multicultural past even if, as has been pointed out, this is conveniently the case once multiculturalism is no more (Meng, 2011). Nonetheless, as one can witness in Bukovina today, the coexisting traces are being integrated as part of a larger heritage – German, Jewish, European, Ukrainian, Romanian and so on. Members of the younger generation of all backgrounds seem to be able to develop a pluralist historical consciousness and are increasingly aware of the fact that contemporary Chernivtsi was once Russian Chernovtsy, Romanian Cernăuți and German and Jewish Czernowitz. They recognise that these cannot be clearly separated in the physical landscape of the city today in which these histories all have their 'place' (Heymann, 2010).

The second point is that for the last twenty years, not only those who have personal memories of Bukovina (the 'community of experience') but a wider 'community of identification' has become interested in the history of Bukovina as an area of German-speaking Central Europe – German, Austrian and Jewish – and in its destruction as well. The initiatives to clear the Jewish cemeteries have been led mainly by Germans,[5] the publication of Jewish survivor accounts in German has been especially promoted by German academics[6] and the many collaborations that have developed between Israel and Germany are evidence of an effort to take responsibility for the past and promote reconciliation. Some scholars argue that this is still achieved for the wrong reasons. Martin Hainz mentions Germans' search for redemption (Hainz, 2010) and Michael Meng argues that a redefinition of Germanness to integrate the Jews still effectively excludes other 'others' (Meng, 2011). Yet following decades of official silencing of minorities and their past in Eastern Europe, the enthusiasm surrounding the multicultural heritage is to be welcomed (Irwin-Zarecka, 1990).

Finally there is a third phenomenon, which deserves mentioning. Many Bukovina Jews of the first generation welcome the friendships and the attention from Austria and Germany as well as the commemorative initiatives from Ukraine and Romania. Several of the survivors I have interviewed received awards from Austria and Germany and were very proud of this.[7] The notion of a 'good German' cropped up again and again in interviews with Jews from the region. This trope has a purpose: for these Jews whose identity was based in the

German-Jewish symbiosis of Bukovina, the Holocaust caused a particularly deep biographical rift. The war required them to turn their backs on those who their ancestors had admired and revered. Getting to know 'good Germans' today, then, restores, if nothing else, the coherence and the unity that was missing from their narrative of identity.

Taking as its starting point Bukovina, an area famously shared by Germans and Jews, this article has explored some of the changing ways in which members of the two groups have conceived of the region in the aftermath of displacement, the Second World War and the Holocaust. As we have seen, Cold War German and Jewish memories of the region were very different, determined by the need to create belonging in new contexts and compensate for the violence and suffering witnessed, experienced and in some cases exerted. The use of the past by the 'generation of experience' revealed attempts to justify the present and shape a better future. In many ways, Bukovinian Germans in Germany and Bukovinian Jews in Israel adopted similar methods of selection – remembering and forgetting. The contents of their memories remained, however, largely incompatible. Most interestingly, German and Jewish memories of Bukovina appealed to different values and relied on different conceptions of Germanness. Yet as the final section suggests, the transition from agents of remembering, belonging to a narrow 'community of experience', to the constitution of a wider and more diverse 'community of identification' among following generations heralds a diversification, convergence and ultimately a reconciliation of conceptions of the region and its history. In the process, a broadening of German and Jewish identities can also be expected which ultimately is more in tune with what Bukovinian identities were actually like before the war.

Endnotes

1 Census of Bukovina, 1910: 395,000 Ruthenes (Ukrainians); 273,000 Romanians; 169,000 Germans; 36 000 Hungarians; 10,000 Poles; 102,900 Jews (Colin, 2008).

2 *Die Landsmannschaft der Buchenlanddeutschen* in Munich (1949) and *Chug Oleh Bukowina* in Tel Aviv (1944).

3 *Der Südostdeutsche* newspaper of Bukovina Germans and *Die Stimme* newspaper of Bukovina Jews.

4 Interview with author in Tel Aviv, June 2013.

5 See the work of the organisation *Aktion Sühnezeichen* in Ukraine. Cf., for instance, http://www.jewish-heritage-europe.eu/2013/02/09/volunteers-help-clean-cemeteries-in-ukraine/%E2%80%9D [accessed 8 September 2013].

6 See for instance the collection of witness testimonies published by Prof. Erhardt Roy Wiehn in the series *Shoàh und Judaica* from Konstanz with Hartung Gorre Verlag.

7 Interviews with the author, Tel Aviv, June 2013.

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Biography

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