



## Book Review

**Volodymyr Muzychenco**, *Volodymyr ievreiskyi. Istoryia i trahediia ievreiskoi hromady Volodymyra-Volyns'koho [Jewish Ludmir. The History and Tragedy of the Jewish Community of Volodymyr-Volynsky]*, third edition, Revised and Expanded, Novovolynsk: Format, 2021, 432 p. ISBN 978-966-2557-07-7.

Reviewed by **Vitaliy Skalsky**, Institute of History of Ukraine, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine, E-mail: skalskyw@ukr.net. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0270-264X>

<https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2022-0024>

The historical bibliography of the city of Volodymyr is not too extensive: there are books by Ivan Teodorovych, Oleksandr Tsynkalovsky, Bronislaw Galicki, Maksym Boiko, Yaroslav Isayevych and Adam Martyniuk, Mykola Bohush, Mykola Veremchuk etc., just to name a few. With some dozen publications altogether, the history of the Jewish community of Volodymyr is almost completely unexplored, with the exception of the memorial book: *Pinkas Ludmir* printed in Tel Aviv, in 1962.

In this review, I will write about *The History and Tragedy of the Jewish Community of Volodymyr-Volynsky* by Volodymyr Muzychenco, published in 2011 (the English translation appeared in 2015). The third publication discussed here, is the new, revised and expanded edition of the book.

After a foreword by the Ukrainian Judaism Association President Vitaliy Chernovianenko, a preface by the author, and the introduction, the book starts with the first recorded mentions of Jews in Volodymyr.

Muzychenco assumes that “the first Jews most likely appeared before the adoption of Christianity in this territory.” The author cites Oleksandr Tsynkalovsky, a famous local researcher from the mid-20th century, who found the first mentions of the Volodymyr Jews in the Arabic historian Ibn Hawqal’s works. Even though it can not be an easy task to locate the reference in Hawqal’s work, it would definitely strengthen the author’s claims.

Similarly, the author’s citations are generally lacking as other, early, written mentions of Jews in Volodymyr are cited from an academic article by Oleksandr Kulyk, or archaeographical publications of historical sources, and not from originals. Muzychenco refers to the Russian Jewish Encyclopedia, which mentions a letter from the Jewish community of Volodymyr to the community of the city of Stralsund dated from the 11th or 12th century. However, historiographers are only familiar with a letter published by Mykhailo Hrushevsky, from the council of Volodymyr to the council of Stralsund dated from 1324, and that text contains no mention of Jews. This fault could be due to the fact that the encyclopedia authors made an unfortunate

mistake, however if that is not the case, the letter from the 11th–12th century should be referenced appropriately, and in a scholarly manner.

The first mention of Jews in the Ruthenian chronicles is dated from 1288, and concerns the description of the passing of Volodymyr Prince, Volodymyr Vasylkovych.

Muzychenco continues his narrative based on quasi-academic literature, with several of his statements wanting proper citation. For example, the quote “[Prince Vytautas] granted Jews of Lutsk and Volodymyr the right to inhabit his lands” raises questions about the source of this statement.

In light of the above suggestions, I advise to prepare a publication focusing on the documents with the earliest mentions of Jews in Volodymyr with an appropriate academic analysis.

The author meticulously handpicks all mentions of the city’s Jewish community in academic publications, discusses the activities of the Kahal of Volodymyr and the Council [Vaad] of Four Lands, and pinpoints the location of the Jewish neighborhood. The author’s recording the names of Volodymyr Jews who headed the Vaad is significant, as they are worthy of being on the list of outstanding Volodymyr residents, along with other famous natives.

The subsequent paragraphs of the book are devoted to the spiritual leaders of the community: bringing the names of Yitzhak ben Bezalel (Gaon of Ludmir), Yitzhak ben Shmuel Ha-Levi (author of the book *Golden Lines*, the poem “Song of the Liberated Ones”, and the Jewish grammar book *Talk of Isaak*), and Efraim Naftali Hirsch to the attention of the unversed readers, not to mention many other natives of Volodymyr famous in the Jewish world.

Shlomo Gottlieb Karliner was one of the most venerated Hasidic rabbis, therefore, I would like to highlight his story described in the book. There is an “ohel” (the monumental tomb of Shlomo Gottlieb Karliner) not far from the city center, on the grounds of the Jewish cemetery that is now a park. The edifice needs to be explained to city residents, which was done on the pages of *Jewish Ludmir*, albeit with strong religious connotations, which is understandable, as Shlomo Gottlieb is revered as a saint in the community of Orthodox Hasidim. People would say about him: “He is a palm taller than the world”. Born in the town of Karlin, he came to Volodymyr in 1786 and immediately earned a high reputation among the local population. Today, his “ohel” is a pilgrimage shrine.

Furthermore, Muzychenco discusses Hannah Rachel Verbermacher, also known as the Maiden of Ludmir. Verbermacher is the world’s first woman-Tzadik. Verbermacher studied academic works and opinion-based journalism, and even literary works from Professor Nathaniel Deutsch. In my opinion, the Maiden of Ludmir is another notable personality of Volodymyr who has a right place in the book.

In addition, the book dedicates a separate chapter to the synagogues. The Grand Synagogue is well known to city residents, however, it was destroyed under the

Soviets but the residents of Volodymyr still remember it. Meanwhile, the lesser synagogues and temples are almost forgotten and their locations unknown. Yet, an Austrian map from 1917 shows relevant landmarks of three synagogues in Kovelska Street, which have not survived to this day.

Historically, the 19th and early 20th century was a time of demographic and economic growth in the Jewish community of Volodymyr, which implied modernization. This meant that the Jews, too, opened schools, built hospitals, owned mills, factories, and grocery stores, opened photo studios, founded political parties and newspapers. The Jewish community cared for the infirm and the impoverished. Nevertheless, undoubtedly, Jews were also persecuted in the Russian Empire also affecting the status of Jewish communities in Volodymyr. Unfortunately, the First World War interfered with the progress yet, after the war the Jewish community of Volodymyr became even stronger despite all the pressure from the Polish authorities. Little did the Jewish population know at that time what awaited them ...

The chapter on the Holocaust is the most taxing part of the book to both, the reader and the reviewer. The Second World War in the city began on September 1, 1939, causing tens of thousands of deaths in Volodymyr, too. Before the war, the city had been home to a population of about 25,000 of which only 7000 remained. The war triggered an exodus of 12,000 refugees, mostly Jews from western and central Poland. Many civilians tragically died in bombardments and political prisoners were executed by firing squads in the Volodymyr prison. Almost all Volodymyr-based entrepreneurs, teachers, doctors, lawyers, officials, judges, and servicemen were exterminated by the Nazis.

The war also resulted in two regimes of occupation: the Soviet, and the Nazi one. In the Nazis' Holocaust almost the entire Jewish community of Volodymyr of thousands was exterminated with only a few dozen Jews surviving. It was a time for the "Righteous Among the Nations" to take action. During these atrocities, several ethnic and religious communities were lost: the German Lutherans left on their own, and the Polish Catholics were displaced by the Soviet authorities in the aftermath of the war.

Many residents recorded the first Nazi bombardment of the city in their memoirs describing the epic scene of the Jew Sokuler running down the street while holding Ryvka, his dead daughter, in his arms.

Muzychenco does not sidestep the subject of Polish, Ukrainian, and Jewish collaboration with the Nazis in Volodymyr. The author writes about participation of Poles and Ukrainians in the Holocaust. And he writes about "Judenrat" (Jewish council) in Volodymyr too. Needless to say, not just the author but also the readers might find it hard to remain impartial in this matter.

Regarding the Holocaust: very few historical texts of Ukrainian cities name the direct perpetrators in the extermination of Jews. This is why it is important that Muzychenco lists at least some of the Holocaust perpetrators in Volodymyr. The

names of “Gebietskommissar” [Regional Commissar] Wilhelm Westerheide and his assistant Johanna Altvater, who became one of the protagonists in Wendy Lower’s book *Hitler’s Furies*, are well known. They were also put on trial after the war. In addition to them, the book mentions the Chief of Police Novynsky, Hans Wimer (commander of the firing squad that carried out the executions), police officers N. Zaychuk, I. Leskovsky, S. Maksymuk, and T. Sokhatsky, gendarmes Hrihov, Krauze, Braune, and Buh.

This list is followed by memoirs of survivors through almost 40 pages, and just this long is the description of those who rescued them: the list of the righteous mentions 87 people who managed to rescue 120 Jews from the Nazis. These pages should be read and reread, with the slogan “Never Again!” in mind.

Ethnographic publications tend to be increasingly multidisciplinary with authors combining all sorts of information about a population. In my opinion, this approach often produces a strange amalgam of history, economic essays, political agendas, and so forth. However, I argue that the attempted multidisciplinarity requires specific research and presentation methods. In my view, history and fiction should remain separate.

The Volodymyr Jewish community has an almost 1000-year-old history. These years translate into scores of generations and thousands upon thousands of people. Among them are rank-and-file citizens, as well as outstanding personalities. The appendix of “Outstanding Jews of Volodymyr Volynsky” appears at the end of the book, featuring 17 biographies of varying length, depth, and quality. This kind of addition to academic publications is a welcome feature; therefore, I am looking forward to read a much more expanded glossary as a separate publication in the not-too-distant future.

In sum, during the Holocaust, the city of Volodymyr lost much of its identity, culture, and history: synagogues and Jewish holidays vanished from the cultural space. The words “Shabbat”, “beit midrash”, “matseva”, “mikva”, and “tzadik” disappeared from daily use and soon became “foreign”. The Jewish aspect of the city’s history has been forgotten over several decades. The secularized Christian community became wary and suspicious of a random Jew in the city streets, sometimes even displaying animosity; antisemitism has started to surface.

The publication of *Jewish Ludmir* returns the Jewish presence to the city and debunks the clumsy stereotypes of Jews.