

From the Baltic to the Black Sea, a region extends through Eastern and Central Europe where – in higher numbers than anywhere else in the world – Jews lived until their destruction by Nazi Germany and its local helpers. Galicia, Bukovina, Volhynia, Podolia and Bessarabia – where the images of this exhibition were taken – are part of this region. Today, these old cultural landscapes are part of Ukraine, Moldova, Poland and Romania.

Cities and villages in this region were and continue to be multi-ethnic communities. Ukrainians, Poles, Romanians, Jews, Russians, Armenians, Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Roma and other nations lived and are still living there – albeit in different ratios than before World War II. Jews in particular have shaped the region in a unique way.

During the German occupation in World War II, the Jewish population was almost completely wiped out. The region is still a landscape revealing the effects of genocide: overgrown Jewish cemeteries, ruins of synagogues, study houses, schools, cultural institutions and – sometimes marked, sometimes unmarked – mass graves bear witness to Jewish life and its destruction. What did survive, was eventually shattered by the Soviets.



Bild: Sylvia de Swaan

Christian Herrmann revisits Jewish heritage sites to document what is left. His analogue works are part of his long-term project Vanished World, a continuously growing online archive and travel log. The exhibition presents a selection of Herrmann's work.

More information: <http://vanishedworld.wordpress.com>



*Two synagogues, Burshtyn, Galicia, Ukraine, 2014*

**B**urshtyn – literally meaning amber in Ukrainian, Polish and Yiddish – was a *shtetl*, centrally located in eastern Galicia.

**I**ndustrialization under Soviet rule has shaped the present view of the town. A huge power station dominates Burshtyn's skyline. Soviet tower buildings have replaced older structures to an big extent. The remnants of Jewish life are hiding in the shadow of those buildings from the Brezhnev era – three synagogues and a cemetery.

**T**wo of the synagogues – built next to each other – are represented in this photo. While the older one serves as office and workshop of a mortician, the synagogue from the inter-war period is a quarry for bricks and a garbage dump now.



*Wall made of Jewish tombstones, Chişinău (Kishinev), Bessarabia,  
Moldova, 2016*

The Moldovan capital of Chişinău had two Jewish cemeteries – an old and a new one. After the deportation and extermination of Chişinău's Jews by Romanian forces during the Holocaust, the old cemetery was destroyed under Soviet rule. Its tombstones were smashed and given away as construction material – a typical Soviet practice. A few stumps of tombstones are still visible at the territory of the former old cemetery. The place is now a public park and a playground.

Most of the tombstones have been used to build walls. One is surrounding a Christian cemetery, a second one the new Jewish cemetery – represented in the photo. A third wall has been demolished; the fate of the tombstone fragments is unknown.



*Chernivtsi (Czernowitz) Jewish cemetery, Bukovina, Ukraine, 2014*

The Jewish cemetery of Chernivtsi (Czernowitz) is with 50,000 burials one of biggest still preserved Jewish cemeteries within the territory of the former Soviet Union. Comparable cemeteries in Odessa, Vilnius or Lviv were destroyed in correspondence with a Soviet law that allowed leveling of burial sites when they were not in use anymore.

Chernivtsi's in 1866 established Jewish cemetery is a unique history book. It reflects traditional Judaism, assimilation under Austro-Hungarian rule, two World Wars, persecution under Romanian rule and transformation of Jewish life and identity during the Soviet era.

The cemetery faced waves of destruction when Romania reconquered Bukovina in 1941, during Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign against "Cosmopolites" and after Ukraine's independence when criminals searched for valuables.

Since 2008 voluntary services are involved in annual clean-ups. The mortuary hall is under renovation since spring 2017.



*Chernivtsi (Czernowitz) Jewish cemetery, Bukovina, Ukraine, 2015*

Chernivtsi (Czernowitz) has a rich heritage to which Jewish writers contributed in German and Yiddish language. Still meaningful to readers in Germany, Austria and beyond are Paul Celan, Rose Ausländer, Itzik Manger, Selma Merbaum and many others. None of Chernivtsi's celebrities has been buried in the local Jewish cemetery. Their graves are in Paris, Dusseldorf, Tel Aviv and in the case of Selma Meerbaum it is an anonymous and unmarked mass grave at the former site of Mykhailivka concentration camp in Podolia.

Chernivtsi underwent a nearly total exchange of population during and after the war. The former multi-ethnic community became predominantly Ukrainian and Russian speaking. But the city's new residents open up for the past since Ukraine's independence. The “Paul Celan Literature Center” and the “Meridian Czernowitz” festival indicate the rebirth of Czernowitz' myth as a capital of diversity and tolerance.



*Great Synagogue, Drohobych, Galicia, Ukraine, 2012*

The towns of Drohobych and Boryslav became wealthy when oil was discovered there by the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. For a short time it made Austria-Hungary the third largest oil exporter worldwide. The Great Synagogue – once the biggest in Galicia – still testifies Drohobych's golden age.

The Galician oil fields raised the interest of the Germans during World War II when they realized they would never reach the much richer oil fields of Baku. The exploitation of Galicia's oil went hand in hand with forced labor and mass terror. But it was sometimes also life saving. Berthold Beitz, sent from Berlin to supervise the oil production, managed to rescue hundreds of his Jewish workers.

After the war, the Great synagogue became a furniture store. It was returned to the Jewish community some years after the independence of Ukraine and is currently under renovation. The facade has already been renewed and a prayer room reestablished. In the future it will serve as a culture center and exhibition hall, also hosting the “Bruno Schulz Festival”, honoring Drohobych's most famous artist and writer – known as the “Galician Kafka”.



*Plaszów concentration camp site, Kraków, Poland, 2014*

**P**laszów concentration camp was established by the German occupants in Kraków's suburb Podgórze on the territory of two Jewish cemeteries. Used in the beginning as a camp for Jewish forced laborers from Kraków ghetto, it grew quickly to one of the biggest camps in the south-east of Poland. Numerous prisoners died from starvation, diseases and mass executions. The number of victims is unknown.

**I**n 1993, American director Steven Spielberg shot parts of his movie "Schindler's List" on the ground of Plaszów former concentration camp.

**H**owever, less visitors come to Plaszów than to Schindler's former factory. The place is now a recreation area, in which parts of the former camp are still preserved. Walkers repeatedly reported human bone findings. Boards at the entrance of the site give interested visitors information about the still existing buildings and their previous function. Most of the remains are threatened by deterioration, so is the food depot of the camp which's fence is visible in the photo.



*Jewish cemetery, Stare Kutty, Galicia, Ukraine, 2013*

**S**tare Kutty is a small town at the foot of the Carpathians. Together with Kosiv and Vyzhnytsia it is part of a triangle of once famous Hasidic courts. Hasidism came up in what is now western Ukraine in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is still one of the most influential currents in Judaism, characterized by its spiritual and mystic depth, as well as by its easy accessibility for its followers. Hasidic communities are organized in courts, in which the rabbi holds a central position. Israel Ben Eliezer, known as the *Baal Shem Tov*, is regarded as the founding father of Hasidism. The mother of the *Baal Shem Tov* is believed to be buried at the Jewish cemetery of Stare Kutty.

**S**tare Kutty's Jewish cemetery has been cleaned-up during the last years. It is now fully accessible and attracts Hasidic pilgrims from all over the world.



*Trace of a mezuzah, Lviv (Lwów, Lemberg), Galicia, Ukraine, 2012*

A mezuzah is a Jewish home blessing, indicating a building is a Jewish home. It is a small capsule containing a parchment with Jewish laws, mounted on the right door frame of a house, apartment or room.

In Deuteronomy we read: And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes. **And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house, and upon thy gates.**

While many mezuzot are missing since the destruction of their owners, their traces are still visible in many places in Eastern Europe. This one was photographed in the old town of Lviv.



*Unmarked mass graves, Lysynychi forest near Lviv (Lwów, Lemberg), Galicia, Ukraine, 2013*

Immediately after the capture of Lviv by the Wehrmacht in 1941, the SS established a site of mass killing next to the village of Lysynychi. During six months, tens of thousands of people were shot, mainly Jews from Lviv and other towns in Galicia but also Poles and Ukrainians as well as in 1943 thousands of Italian soldiers. In 1944, the Soviet commission for the investigation of German war crimes located 42 ash pits in Lysynychi and spreading of human ashes over an area of two square kilometers.

Leon W. Wells is one of the few survivors of Janowska concentration camp and Lysynychi. He was forced to be a member of *Sonderkommando 1005* which had to remove the traces of German crimes by unearthing and cremating the corpses in 1943. According to Wells about 90,000 corpses were unearthed and cremated. By that time, Lysynychi became an experimental training ground for the cremation of thousands of corpses every day. A bone grinding machine was constructed to crush bones that could not be burned on low temperature. It was the prototype for a series that was later produced in Germany for other sites of mass killing.

In his memoirs Wells described the work like this:

Between the sand hill and our camp stands the machine for grinding the bones, and close by the machine a place has been leveled for the Ash Brigade. From now on, only the machine grinds the bones; the Ash Brigade merely picks out the precious metals from the human bone dust.



*Jewish cemetery, Mărculești, Bessarabia, Moldova, 2016*

**M**ărculești Colony was founded in 1837 as one of the Jewish agricultural colonies in Bessarabia. These were established by immigrants from Ukraine following the special edicts of 1835. The land used was leased to the collective for a period of 50 years and was later purchased by local Jews with money from the Jewish Colonization Association.<sup>1</sup> Today, Mărculești has no Jewish residents. The cemetery is the last reminder of the town's Jewish past.

**T**he *US Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad* describes the Jewish cemetery of Mărculești in its 2010 report on Moldova as follows: The 5,000 square meter area of the Jewish cemetery in Mărculești is surrounded by a broken masonry wall. The cemetery contains more than 1,500 stones which date from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The site has been neglected, however, and more than 75% of the stones are broken or toppled. The cemetery is rarely visited and there is no regular caretaker. The area is overgrown and the site has had some vandalism in recent years

**T**he photo was taken in March 2016; only a few weeks later big parts of the cemetery would have been inaccessible and hidden behind a green wall of rampant vegetation.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/pinkas\\_romania/rom2\\_00365.html](http://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/pinkas_romania/rom2_00365.html)



*Jewish cemetery, Mohyliv-Podilskyi, Podolia, Ukraine, 2016*

**M**ohyliv-Podilskyi is situated on the banks over Dniester River in Ukraine. During World War II, together with Otaci on the other side of the river, it became a transit point for Bessarabian and Bukovinian Jews deported by Romanian forces to camps and ghettos in what was called *Transnistria*. The deportees were either sent to places further east or remained in the destroyed city center which was declared a ghetto. Thousands died from starvation, mass executions or typhus. Repeatedly the Germans asked for workers to continue their building projects in the east. Notorious was *Durchgangsstraße IV* (transit road IV), a more than 2,000 kilometers long east west connection. While surviving in Mohyliv and other Romanian ghettos was a matter of coincidence, being in the hands of the Germans meant certain death as soon as construction works were finished.

**T**he Romanian Holocaust remains an internationally ignored chapter of history until the present day, in Romania itself sometimes even denied.

**T**he German-Jewish writer Edgar Hilsenrath has set a monument to the ghetto inmates by his ground breaking novel *Nacht* (Night).



*Jewish cemetery, Mohyliv-Podilskyi, Podolia, Ukraine, 2016*

**M**ohyliv-Podilskyi was founded in 1595 and governed by Polish and Moldavian nobility. Located at Dniester River it was an important trading point, which came under Russian rule in 1795. By 1897 its population had reached 32,440; with 17,000 residents. Jews were the biggest ethnic group in the city. In October 1905, the Jewish community suffered in a wave of pogroms. Under Soviet rule Jewish organizations were liquidated. Mohyliv-Podilskyi was incorporated into the region of Transnistria during the Romanian occupation in World War II, its Jewish population locked into a ghetto.

**A**ccording to the 1959 census, about 4,700 Jews lived in Mohyliv, which was 22.5 percent of the population. In the mid-1960s, the last synagogue was closed down by the authorities. The majority of Jews left in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, hoping for a better life abroad. Today, the small remaining Jewish community operates a synagogue and a small Holocaust museum as well as it maintains the Jewish cemetery, one of the biggest and most impressive in the region.



*Great Synagogue, Olesko, Galicia, Ukraine, 2015*

Olesko is a small town in Eastern Galicia. It is known for its imposing castle where Jan III Sobieski was born in 1629, King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, whose cavalry defeated the Ottomans at the gates of Vienna.

Jewish presence is documented for Olesko since 1500. In mid-19<sup>th</sup> century a Hasidic court was established; its dynasty was known as rebbes of Alesk. Today, Olesko has no Jewish residents. The current rabbi of Alesk resides in Brooklyn, New York.

Olesko synagogue is dating back to the second half of the 18th century, rebuilt in the first half of the 19th century. During Soviet rule the building was used as a workshop. Today, it is abandoned; the roof has already collapsed.



*Jewish cemetery, Orhei, Bessarabia, Moldova, 2016*

**J**ewish cemeteries are natural resources for its neighbors. While it was common during the decades after World War II to use tombstones as construction material, this practice has widely disappeared since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Still challenging is *black archaeology* and digging for valuables as well as metal theft.

**F**or farmers cemeteries are coveted pastures and a source for firewood. Goats, sheep, geese or horses are a common view on cemeteries. Often this is based on an agreement between local farmers and Jewish communities or descendants of former residents. Grazing animals keep the grass short and prevent the place from overgrowth. The practice is criticized by strictly religious Jewish communities. How to deal with heritage sites remains controversial.



*Jewish cemetery, Otaci, Bessarabia, 2016*

In 1893, of the 1,000 families composing Otaci's (formerly Ataki) population, 832 were Jewish. There were a synagogue and three prayer-houses. Under Romanian rule in 1930, of 3,500 residents 2781 were Jews. According to the Moldovan census of 2004, no Jews are living in Otaci today.

The Jewish cemetery of Otaci is situated in the village of Vălcineț (Volchinets). Its oldest part is surrounded by an earth wall, as it was common in the medieval cemeteries of Galicia. While tombstone decorations are modest in the many Jewish cemeteries of Bessarabian, the stones in Vălcineț cemetery are beautifully ornamented with lions, deer, unicorns and candlesticks.

Vălcineț cemetery is fenced in, its gate guarded by a farmer family living next to it. The cemetery is well maintained, there are no traces of vandalism.

Otaci synagogue was recently sold by the Jewish community, burned out and is expecting demolition.



*Old Jewish cemetery, Rohatyn, Galicia, Ukraine, 2013*

The first Jewish presence in the Galician town of Rohatyn is documented in 1463. In 1663, Rohatyn Jews received the right to settle in the city, build a synagogue and establish a cemetery. The so called old Jewish cemetery may date back to this time.

At the eve of World War II, 40% of the town's population were Jews. During the Soviet occupation from 1939 to 1941, a part of them was deported. During the German occupation Jews were forced into a ghetto, a small district in the center of town. They were partly killed in mass shootings at the edge of town or deported to Belżec death camp, where they were murdered upon arrival. Today, Rohatyn has no Jewish residents.

Both Jewish cemeteries had been vandalized during the German occupation and were later nearly fully destroyed. The stones were used to pave courtyards or to secure moats. Due to the initiative of a resident of Rohatyn, a former teacher, they return to the cemeteries. So far, 500 fragments have been saved.



*New Jewish cemetery, Siret, Bukovina, Romania, 2015*

**S**iret (Sereth) is situated in southern Bukovina, now a part of Romania and close to the border with Ukraine. When Bukovina became part of Austria-Hungary in 1774, 43 Jews were recorded as living in Siret. Due to immigration from Galicia, in 1880 Jews were already 3,122 out of a total of 7,240 inhabitants. Shops, workshops, and inns were predominantly Jewish. The Jewish upper class adopted German language and culture. After war, Holocaust and emigration, Jewish history ended in Siret in 2002 with the death of the last Jewish resident.

**S**iret has three Jewish cemeteries from different ages, known as the old, middle and new cemetery. All of them are well maintained and protected.



*Jewish cemetery, Vadul-Rașcov (Vadul-Rashkov), Bessarabia,  
Moldova, 2016*

Vadul-Rașcov is situated in the Moldovan borderland to Transnistria, a region which has declared its independence from Moldova, but couldn't survive without support from Russia. There used to be a ferry to the opposing Rașcov – it has been shut down since a long time. Also in Rașcov there is a Jewish cemetery and an impressive synagogue. The Dniester winds between the places. Borderlands.

Obviously, there is little information about the former Jewish population of Vadul-Rașcov. Swiss historian Simon Geissbühler writes: “There is only scarce information about Jewish Vadul-Rașcov. Vadul-Rașcov was a typical Bessarabian shtetl with a majority Jewish population. According to some accounts, the first Jews settled in Vadul-Rașcov at the beginning of the 19th century. Before World War II, Vadul-Rașcov had one church and seven synagogues. In 1930, there were nearly 2,000 Jews living here. (...) Vadul-Rașcov seems to have been the location of a Hasidic court.”

The comprehensive JewishGen database states: “There is no information on the fate of the Jews.”



*Bródno Jewish cemetery, Warsaw, Poland, 2015*

While Warsaw's Jewish population was wiped out, the Jewish cemetery in the suburb of Bródno survived the German occupation more or less untouched. It were the Communist post-war authorities who destroyed it. The gravestones were torn out and accumulated at a central point in order to give them away as construction material and to create a park on the territory of the cemetery. Today, this part of the cemetery is an ocean of stones.

Stones from Bródno cemetery have been used to build pavilions in public parks, frames for sandboxes and for the base of a Soviet war memorial.

The cemetery was recently fenced in and can only be visited with a special permission. In summer 2017, a museum documenting the cemetery's history will open. The cemetery will then be open for visitors again.



*Great Synagogue in Zhovkva, Galicia, Ukraine, 2012*

Zhovkva (Żółkiew) was founded in 1594 and is based on an ideal Renaissance city plan. Zhovkva Synagogue was built in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is an outstanding example of a Galician fortress synagogue. The permission to build a synagogue was given to Zhovkva's Jewish community under the condition to contribute to the defense of the city against invasions.

During World War II, the Germans blew up the synagogue. While most of the interior and roof was destroyed, the outer walls and much of the baroque ornamental details survived. Poor materials were used in post-war repair campaigns. As a result, the building gradually deteriorated and is in poor condition now.

Of Zhovkva's pre-war 4,500 Jewish residents only 70 survived the German occupation.