

ספר זכרון וואלקאויסק

The Volkovysk Memorial Book



A Trilogy Comprised of

Wolkovisker Yizkor Book - Edited by Dr. Moses Einhorn, New York 1949
Hurban Volkovysk - Published by the Committee of Volkovysk Émigrés, Tel-Aviv 1946
Volkovysk - Published by Katriel Lashowitz, Tel-Aviv 1988

English Translation Prepared and Published by

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The Zelva Memorial Book
The Book of Remembrances
The Dereczin Memorial Book

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יצחק משה

Ten years ago, when I published the Zelva Memorial Book, this page bore the name of my children. In the elapsed decade, I have been blessed to see the arrival of a new generation. With God's good graces, this list will continue to grow.

The sentiment I wrote then continues to be appropriate. It is my hope that they, too, will come to read this book, with their parents, along with the other books, and come to understand the proud people from whom they stem, and the noble tradition to which they are heirs. For truly, they too, are now part of my most important legacy.

The Translator's Foreword

The publication of *The Volkovysk Memorial Book - A Trilogy*, is an important landmark in a cycle of personal endeavor that began with the translation of the *Zelva Memorial Book*, followed by the *Dereczyn Memorial Book*. This importance stems from adding to the English record, writings about a prominent city in the European Pale of Settlement, as opposed to a more rural town, or *shtetl*. During the early twentieth century, the population of Volkovysk exceeded 15,000, of which more than half was Jewish. Because of this, the Jewish community had a critical mass of human resources, intellectual capital and financial wherewithal, to create and sustain significant institutions of health, education and welfare. As a result, Volkovysk emerged as an important magnet city, and role model, for the many Jewish communities in smaller surrounding towns, that looked to it for both support and leadership. Therefore, it had a signal impact on the development of Jewish life and culture, and the Zionist Movement, in what is today Eastern Poland and Western Belarus.

A study of the social infrastructure in Volkovysk is very instructive, in large part, because it was very typical of Jewish communities of the Pale in the two centuries or so leading up to the Holocaust. That the Jews fell back on their own means to create institutions of health, education and welfare, reflects on both the backwardness of the extant autocratic regimes, and overt policies of anti-Semitism. What is equally of interest, is that in many instances, the Jewish institutions were harbingers of more general social change that emerged afterwards, as governments attempted to modernize themselves, and better address the needs of their people. Additionally, these institutions, because of their excellence, wrought changes in the way of life of the Jews themselves. To wit:

- The advent of a modern school system gradually displaced the very traditional *Heder* system of lower level religious schooling that had been a mainstay for centuries.
- The creation of a modern Jewish hospital at the end of the 19th century convinced even the wealthiest Jews, that medical care during illness was better gotten at that hospital, rather than at home.
- The availability of an Old Age Home created a means to provide the old and infirm with compassionate care outside of the framework of the individual family. This was especially important for those elderly with no immediate next of kin to care for them.

Volkovysk was a sufficiently sophisticated city to possess a well-developed, modern social hierarchy. At the very top were the *balebatim*, independent entrepreneurs and homeowners, some of whom were fabulously wealthy people and cherished philanthropists. The middle strata were composed of small-scale retail shopkeepers, tradesmen and artisans. The lower strata were composed of a complete spectrum of laborers, who either worked independently, or for a salary in a factory or office. The social differentiation is too readily recognizable, since human nature has really changed very little since the early hominids first began walking upright. A noteworthy exception to modern life was that rabbis, scholars and teachers were treated as a special class. Even though they were not materially wealthy, their intellectual and spiritual capabilities earned them special regard.

Volkovysk was a place of great intellectual and entrepreneurial vitality. An understanding of the achievements of this Jewish community is, therefore, an important element in creating a fuller portrait, of how cataclysmic the Holocaust was to the fabric of Eastern European Jewry.

It is interesting to note, that not one, but *three* books, were created to memorialize the Jewish community of Volkovysk. In general, only one such book was prepared for a town, or city, in the aftermath of the Holocaust. In fact, many towns were so completely decimated, that no one remained to create such a record, and the memory of those martyrs could not even be preserved in the form of a written word. All three of these books

have been translated and presented here as a Trilogy. The components of the Trilogy are:

- ***Wolkovisker Yizkor Book - Edited by Dr. Moses Einhorn, New York 1949 (Yiddish)***
- ***Hurban Volkovysk - Published by the Committee of Volkovysk Émigrés, Tel-Aviv 1946 (Hebrew)***
- ***Volkovysk - Published by Katriel Lashowitz, Tel-Aviv 1988 (Hebrew)***

Dr. Einhorn's book is the definitive history of the Jewish Community, and from a structural point of view, it constitutes a classic 'Holocaust Memorial Book.' For this reason, even though it came chronologically second, it is presented in this Trilogy first. This book follows the familiar pattern of tracing the history of the city from its antiquarian roots, through modern times. It then portrays the evolution of the Jewish community, its prominent personalities and institutions. It finishes with important accounts of the Holocaust experience. This latter part contains a remarkable and perhaps unique necrology, created by *Yitzhak Tchopper*. In that necrology, he literally goes street by street through the city, enumerating every family that lived on that street, and giving an accounting of their fate.

The earlier volume, *Hurban Volkovysk*, had a more limited and immediate objective. It is mainly a repository of a half-dozen critical eye-witness accounts by survivors who were impelled to record their recollections while the horror was still fresh in their minds. One sees this urgency in the sharp, stacca-to-like impact of their clipped sentences, where setting down dates, facts, and events superseded the need for literary style or structure.

The final volume, *Volkovysk*, coming more than forty years later, is a testament to the need for the very cycle of endeavor that led to the creation of this Trilogy. In his foreword, the publisher *Katriel Lashowitz*, a survivor who fought as a partisan, tells of the insistent pressure from his granddaughter *Yael* for a more complete record of his background that she could read. For the younger Israeli generation, the facility in Yiddish is waning, and therefore, a useful reference like *Dr. Einhorn's* book remains behind an impenetrable language barrier. Like *Yerachmiel Moorstein* ם"י before him, *Katriel Lashowitz* undertook the creation of a meaningful history in Hebrew. In doing so, he relied heavily on the material in *Dr. Einhorn's* book. However, there is sufficient original material here to merit its inclusion as part of the basic telling of the life and times of the Jewish community of Volkovysk.

More importantly, the work of *Katriel Lashowitz* delineates the need to make these histories available in a language that can be understood, as we move into future generations. Indeed, *Katriel Lashowitz* expresses his desire to see his work rendered in English, so that Jews, and other interested readers in the English-speaking world, can have access to this record. It is my great satisfaction to have been able to render his work, along with the other two volumes, in English, and thereby create this Trilogy.

The task of translating from Yiddish into English is as formidable today as it was nearly twenty years ago, when I first undertook this duty. By having to deal with three independently written books, the task of creating a consistent, integrated whole has been made more complex.

The reader will be challenged by my use of italics. It has been my custom to utilize italics for setting off foreign words only. However, *Dr. Einhorn*, in particular, has made extensive use of italics to set off names of people and places when they first appear. I have not found a ready solution to this overlap, and so I ask the reader to be patient as both uses are to be encountered.

Nomenclature for *places* and *people* are a vexing problem. This was not as evident in prior works, because the frame of reference was a single *shtetl*. In dealing with a prominent city, there is continuous reference to a panoply of places. However, because of changes in hegemony over the course of centuries, there are at least four different equivalent names for most of the locations in the Pale: Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, and Belarusian.

Almost inevitably, the Jews had their own Yiddish variant, and there are instances of Ukrainian and German equivalents as well. In this, I have attempted to always use one that was correct in its own language, and footnote the name in other languages, when I felt it helped clarify the location.

Names are a special challenge in Yiddish. There often are several ways to render the Yiddish into English (Shykevich, Shykovich). I have settled on being *consistent*, rather than chase after the chimera of being *correct* (whatever that means!). First names are a special pitfall. In addition to a base name, there are all of the diminutive and affectionate forms that need to be catered for. So that the uninformed reader not be misled, these suffixes are set off from the root of the name with an apostrophe. For example, the choice for a girl's name in this volume is *Chana* (rather than *Chanah*, *Hannah*, or *Khana*). However, the reader will see *Chana'leh*, *Chan'tsheh*, *Chan'keh* as well. The purpose of this approach is to make it easier to identify the *same person*, who might be addressed differently in different parts of the text.

Two specific usages are worthy of mention. In apposition to the formal title of *Rabbi*, there is a Yiddish honorific of *Reb*. This honorific was often accorded to people without rabbinic ordination, out of respect for their personages. It is possible that someone in the text is referred to as *Reb*, but indeed was a fully ordained Rabbi. There is often no way to know this, and consequently, I accept responsibility for any inaccuracy in characterization that may have arisen in this fashion.

The second has to do with reference to 'Israel,' the place. In Hebrew and Yiddish, the appellation *Eretz Yisrael* is free of political context. In English, one needs a bit of care, since the name 'Israel' standing alone, generally is used to identify the modern political state. Since much of the writing in this Trilogy is of times before the establishment of the modern state, I have resorted to two forms of nomenclature. I use 'The Land of Israel,' and also 'The Holy Land,' when I need to communicate about the Jewish presence in (what is today) Israel, before 1948.

It is in grappling with nomenclature that one is again reminded of the closeness of the bonds that tie together Jewish people with roots in this part of the world. It is not more than 10-15 miles from Volkovysk to Zelva and Dereczin, a distance that could be, and occasionally would be, walked on a long summer *Shabbos* day. That families married between these Jewish communities seems to go without saying. As a scion of a Zelva family, I am thrilled to see names like *Freidin*, *Ogulnick*, *Lantzevitzky*, *Bereshkovsky*, and *Salutsky* appear in the roster of Volkovysk residents. This record is also enriched by the names of people that created a major impact on Jewish life on a global level:

- ***Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor*** - Born in the shtetl of Rosh (about five miles from Volkovysk), he received his early religious training in Volkovysk. He eventually married *Sarah Raizeh Jesierski*, the daughter of a prominent Volkovysk family, and rose to become the leading exponent of the Lithuanian Rabbinate from his position as Chief Rabbi of Kovno. The Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University (RIETS) is named after him.
- ***Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzhensky*** - The last Chief Rabbi of Vilna, and acknowledged spiritual leader of Eastern European Jewry up to the time of the Holocaust. His mother was from the Einhorn family of Volkovysk, and he is named for his maternal grandfather, *Chaim Ozer Einhorn*.
- ***Dr. Samuel Belkin*** - Born in Svislucz, outside of Volkovysk, he went on to become the first President of Yeshiva College (now Yeshiva University).
- ***Yitzhak Shamir*** - Born *Yitzhak Yazhernitsky* in Ruzhany, he received his Gymnasium education in Volkovysk prior to making *aliyah* to the Land of Israel. He rose to become Prime Minister of the State of Israel.

- **Abraham Makov** - Son of a prosperous Volkovysk merchant family that was killed in the Holocaust, he survived to come to the Land of Israel. A uniquely skilled engineer, he was recognized as the 'Father of the Israeli Defense Industry.'
- **Moshe Saroka** - Born in Volkovysk and emigrated to Israel, where he is credited with the creation of the modern Israeli Hospital System.

I wish to extend thanks here, to a number of people, for helping to make this work possible. First, my thanks go to *Aviva Astrinsky*, Head Librarian of YIVO in New York City, who made a copy of Dr. Einhorn's *Wolkovisker Yizkor Book* available to me. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of her colleague, Yeshaya Metal, Librarian at YIVO, for his help in classifying Yiddish nicknames. A similar vote of thanks goes to my cousin *Shoshana Freidin*, of Tel-Aviv, and the Volkovysk scions *Rosa Rimon* and *Katriel Lashowitz*, in Israel, for providing me with the two Hebrew volumes. Hebrew is less of a problem, but every now and then, a modern Israeli writer will resort to an abbreviation that is perfectly understood by Israelis, but is a total mystery to an American. In this regard, I thank Shoshana's son, my cousin *Zvika Freidin*, for his patience in shepherding me through the nomenclature of the Israeli bureaucracy and military establishment. I am also indebted to Yale J. Reisner of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in Warsaw, Poland for helping me verify some of the more obscure locations and older historical facts documented by Dr. Einhorn. I also wish to acknowledge my loyal band of Yiddish linguists who help bail me out of tough spots. Once again, *Feygl Garber York* of Monsey, NY, and *Mildred Shapiro Ragosin* of Edmonton, Alberta, are mainstays to me in clarifying arcane Yiddish words. I found this especially true in this instance, where I needed clarification of the names of various trades and crafts that flourished in the 19th century, but became obsolete by the mid-20th century. A special vote of thanks also goes to my wife's cousin, *Oskar Kleinberg* of Toronto, Ontario, and my good friend and kindred spirit *Murray ("Muz") Praver*, for their timely and thoughtful contributions. I also wish to thank *Mark Swiatlo*, the Judaica Curator of Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida, and *Tomasz Panczyk* of Warsaw, for their peerless command of Polish, that proved indispensable in many key areas of the text.

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