RESEARCH ARTICLES

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MEMORY ON DEMAND: THE JEWISH PAST IN TODAY'S HLYBOKAYE

In this article, we discuss the ways in which the memory of the Jewish past functions in today's Belarusian town of Hlybokaye: the contexts of its production and consumption, the key actors, forms and mechanisms. We take the restoration of the old Jewish cemetery by visiting activists and the installation of a monument to the famous townsman Eliezer Ben-Yehuda as case examples. We argue that only random representations of the Jewish past have been appearing in local knowledge and that neither local groups nor outside actors have so far stated demand for an overarching general local narrative about Jewish Hlybokaye. On the one hand, the Jewish theme in the local knowledge of today's town is secondary, while on the other hand, there has been occasional demand for it.

Hlybokaye is a small town in Vitebsk Region, Belarus, counting 19000 inhabitants as of 2020. Before the USSR annexed Disnensky Powiat in 1939, Hlybokaye used to belong to Poland. In the early 20th century Jews comprised about 2/3 of the town's overall population; these numbers grew to roughly one half of the population by the start of WWII [*Belova, Kopchenova* 2017]. After Hlybokaye fell under German occupation, the Jewish population was relocated into a large ghetto. A rebellion broke out, and all the Jews interned in the ghetto were murdered by the Nazis in August 1943. After the war was over, not all of the very few survivors decided to return to Hlybokaye, and some emigrated. New inhabitants were settling in the town − mostly villagers from Hlybokaye District and neighbouring areas.

In 2015 a field-working school was held by the Sefer Center[1] in Hlybokaye; folklorists and ethnographers participated in the school along with epigraphists and conducted interviews with the townspeople, primarily with the older generation. The researcher mostly focused on traditional perception of Jews, their everyday and ritual lives, by non-Jewish locals. In an introduction to a collected articles volume that was published as a follow-up to

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the field school, Olga Belova and Irina Kopchenova write: "After the war, Jewish life in Hlybokaye, as in other Jewish towns, has come to a halt. However the memory of Jewish life in Hlybokaye has survived in the many stories that the town inhabitants so generously shared with participants of the expedition for which we are very grateful [*Belova, Kopchenova,* 2017: 372].

One of the authors of the current paper participated both in the field school and the volume [*Savina* 2017], and the extensive Sefer archives, that we were kindly allowed to use at will, were of immense help to our investigations. Nevertheless, the very idea of this paper comes from critical reflection on those materials and the approach to local memory studies that stands behind them. What we are talking about is not a case of informants tending to researchers' focused interest by deliberately "turning the Jewishness up a notch" (see such cases in [*Petrov* 2015]). We were mostly interested in the contribution that colourful personal memorates make, or make not, to the understanding of what is currently happening in Hlybokaye to the memory of its Jewish past. Does this memory only exist at the individual memorates' level or does it leak into the public sphere, and if it does, then how does that happen and with participation of which institutes?

We visited Hlybokaye in 2019, intent on taking a closer look at the modes and forms of persistence of Jewish memory in a town that had fallen to the fate of many a *Jewish shtetl*. We consciously steered clear of the Jewish theme when talking to our informants, who were both local experts (journalists, tour guides, *kraeveds*[2]) and other inhabitants of Hlybokaye of various ages and occupations.[3] We asked our interviewees about contemporary Hlybokaye — its space, history and local cultural specifics, about economic, social and other processes. We paid visits to cultural institutions, war memorials, town parks and other notable objects; we went on town and museum guided tours — both institutional and conducted by town experts on our specific requests. The data from these talks and observations is what this paper is based on along with transcripts of the interviews from 2015 and publications on local events in Hlybokaye press and other news media.

The tradition of studying the everyday life of pre-WWII Eastern European shtetls as well as the memory about it from oral and written memoirs of the bearers of this memory (both Jews and their non-Jewish neighbours) is quite established in Jewish studies. Its founders are Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog who conducted their research on the basis of the memoirs they collected from immigrants from Polish and Ukranian shtetls into the US [*Zborowski, Herzog* 1952]. This methodology has been used, and is still being used, since then by many academics including those based in Russia.[4] Speaking of the more recent works, one could name a monograph by Jeffrey Veidlinger on pre-WWII Jewish life and life under occupation, written on the basis of interviews with long-term residents of small Eastern European towns, courtesy of the AHEYM archive [*Veidlinger* 2013].[5]

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[1] The SEFER Center for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization has been holding field-working schools in studying cultural heritage of Eastern European Jews since 2004. See publications based on field schools' materials at https://sefer.ru/rus/publications/field-materials.php?PHPSESSID=794c66877919455f3285966fcddbcfda

[2] Here and henceforth we will use this word, which is important for the discussion of local cultural processes. A *kraeved* (which translates as "local history expert/local historian") is an amateur researcher who studies the history, culture, and nature of his/her village, town, district, or region and popularizes this knowledge. The discipline of *kraevedenie,* literally "learning about a territory," is a practice that began in Russia and other Slavic countries at the beginning of the 20th century as a movement to study one's own locale or region. As a rule, *kraeveds* are seen as authoritative local experts.

[3] The exceptions to it were Tatsiana Saulich and Margarita Kozhenevskaya whom we interviewed in their capacity of professional experts in Jewish history of Hlybokaye.

[4] See collected works: *Dymshits* 1994; *Lukin, Khaimovich* 1997; *Lukin et. al.* 2000, and individual articles: *Amosova, Nikolaeva* 2006; *Amosova, Kaspina* 2010a, 2010b.

[5] The Archive of Historical and Ethnographic Yiddish Memories (AHEYM): http://eviada.webhost.iu.edu/atm-subcollections.cfm?sID=69&pID=162 (retrieved on 23.10.2020).

Alexander Lvov has criticised this approach, noting that a search for a normative *Jewish culture* associated with a "classic" pre-WWII shtetl is quite narrow as it overlooks contemporary *culture of Jews* of post-Soviet shtetls, which is a worthy and self-sufficient research object in its own right [*Lvov* 2008].

Another strand of research, more oriented towards the constructivist paradigm, considers contemporary representations of memory about Jews in former Jewish shtetls and city districts as results of activity by certain actors.

In some cases, the context for such activity is urban *symbolic economy* [*Zukin* 1995]. Given the general environment of cultural industry in places formerly boasting large Jewish population, specifically "Jewish" urban environments and events are created. Since the 1990s several European cities began articulating their Jewish past explicitly and filling urban space with markers of Jewish cultural presence, forming a so called Jewish-themed tourism [*Sandri* 2013] as a particular branch in the tourism industry. Eszter Gantner and Mátyás Kovács note a visible presence of Jewish culture in the form of themed festivals, tours, exhibitions, cafes, etc., in contemporary Berlin, Krakow, Budapest and Prague — the cities where Jewish population plummeted after WWII. The authors explore the situation of non-Jewish actors constructing a Jewish cultural urban space aimed at tourists as exemplified by these cases [*Gantner, Kovács* 2007].

Olivia Sandri demonstrates that urban space might play the key role in the development of these processes. In Vilnius, for example, where Jewish heritage sites are dispersed irregularly throughout the city, "Jewish-themed tourism" develops ineffectively. At the same time the Kazimierz district in Krakow attracts such crowds of tourists due to the effect of concentrated "Jewishness" and its fame of an "authentic Jewish place" that it draws some sceptical critique even, describing Kazimierz as "the Jewish Disneyland" [*Sandri* 2013]. Naomi Leite describes a paradoxical situation in her article on "Jewish Portugal", where Jewish population has been gone for five centuries, but the phantom Jewish landscape and the very lack of any material remnants of Jewish culture become the main tourist point of attraction. Practices of imagining, constructing and materialising of an absent Jewish presence shared both by the guides and the tourists are conceptualised by the author as *practices of surrogacy* [*Leite* 2007].

In other cases, where there are no active institutional actors in a town, such as tourism industry or a resourceful Jewish community, the townspeople might actively participate in the processes of constructing the image of the town as a former shtetl — under the right circumstances. Such was the situation in the smaller towns of Podolia, where some Jews survived the war and Jewish population was rather significant up until the 1990s. When visiting that region in the 2000s, some Russian researchers encountered living bearers of the cultural experience of a life in a "Jewish town", thought long gone without a trace in Europe. For example, the authors of co-authored works on the *local text* of Mohyliv-Podilskyi demonstrate how the idea of the Jewishness of the town becomes one of the dominant cultural connotations within the representations of local knowledge [*Alekseevskiy et. al.* 2008a; *Alekseevskiy et. al.* 2008b]. Alla Sokolova demonstrates how Podolia residents today easily take on the role of experts in local Jewish heritage, exoticizing "antique Jewish houses" while at the same time interpreting them in the local context by showing them off to Jewish tourists, researchers, and others interested in the culture and history of these places. Discursive manipulations aimed at turning "ordinary" houses into "monuments of Jewish antiquity" help draw attention to these buildings and perform a "mental reconstruction of 'the genuine Jewish townships.'" [*Sokolova* 2007]

Hlybokaye has neither a Jewish community nor Jewish families, nor "Jewish-themed tourism", nor any objects in its urban space marked as "Jewish heritage".[6] So how does Jewish memory function in a former Jewish town in these circumstances? Who produces and who consumes it? Who interiorises it and in which cases? In pursuit of answers to these questions we will limit the scope of our article to two cases of addressing the Jewish past in post-Soviet Hlybokaye.

1. The discovery of the Green America

International commemoration. In the late 1980s Hlybokaye, like many cities and townships of post-Soviet Europe where Jewish population used to be significant pre-WWII, saw a large-scale movement by Jewish emigrants — their former Jewish inhabitants and their descendants — to clean up and memorialise Jewish burial sites. This initiative started with Rakhil Klebanova, a Hlybokaye-born Israeli who contacted her fellow townspeople all over the world, and Tatsiana Saulich (Deputy Chair of the District Executive Committee) agreed to supervise the project despite district authorities' indifference.[7] An active community comprised of immigrants from Hlybokaye and several Jewish townspeople formed around the young and enthusiastic official. First and foremost, the group took up the reconstruction of the old cemetery. Enthusiasts from abroad financed the works and local municipal engineering and public services professionals carried them out.

In the course of the reconstructions that lasted for several years an abandoned overgrown cemetery took on its current appearance: new trees have been planted (pines mostly), preserved fallen headstones have been cleaned and put back down standing properly, a big flowerbed in the form of a Star of David has been laid out in the central part of the graveyard, and a stone memorial has been made by the front gates with "May the Grace of God Be with You" written in Hebrew and Russian. Later on, the cemetery has been paled with a metal fence and a sign in Hebrew, Russian and English has been put at the gates: "Old Jewish Cemetery Destroyed by the Nazis, 1941—1945". It is closed off from the public as of now.

Besides the reconstruction of the cemetery itself and the three memorials built at the sites where ghetto prisoners were murdered, another visible result of this memorialisation activity was that the relatives of Hlybokaye townspeople buried there, along with representatives of Jewish organisations and Belarusian and international officials started visiting these sites regularly. These visits, especially the earliest ones, were initially met with much curiosity from the locals. Many informants mentioned them, and both the contexts of the conversations and the extent of the speakers' knowledge varied greatly. We shall quote now interviews with two senior Hlybokaye inhabitants who attend memorial events themselves. In the first case our interviewee is a former official in the District Finance Department who has acquired some good knowledge on organisation of visits from abroad in the line of her duties.

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[6] Individual attempts at developing Jewish tourism in Hlybokaye have been largely unsuccessful so far. Kozhenevskaya had created a tour "A Walk through a Jewish Shtetl" during her employment in the local museum in 2017-2019, and only managed to present it 10 times or so by requests from visiting tourists, according to her own account. In June 2020 Belarusian and Israeli officials presented a tourist project titled "Paradise Lost: Life and Catastrophe in the Belarusian Shtetls" that dwelled on three districts of Vitebsk Region. A ceremonial unveiling of a memorial stone at the historical location of former synagogue complex was held in Hlybokaye on the occasion. Neither any new objects nor even a touring route related to the programme have been introduced in Hlybokaye ever since.

[7] Chair of the District Executive Committee is the highest position in the district executive branch. The chair makes most decisions together with the First Secretary of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR (District Committee). Both during the Soviet period and today, the municipal administration is subordinated to that of the district.

It's behind a fence on purpose, Jews come on the 24th, on the 24th of August. They used to come from Leningrad, and now I don't know even, must be from Germany... they come here, to this cemetery, from Israel, and then there's a rally of sorts here. The District Executive Committee come there to meet them. And they appoint a couple of people from the Committee who take them to this cemetery here, they pray there, and that's where the ceremonies are held as well (FM 1: Nina).

Another informant witnessed memorial events as an intrigued spectator. It is significant that she remembered about them on her own, in the context of a conversation about calendar rituals in general, called the memorial day of the ghetto victims a "holiday" and seamlessly actualised the cultural stereotypes that her conversation partners wanted to hear about in her story:

— [After speaking about the Orthodox Easter and the "Jewish Easter". — *M.L., N.S.*] Well, I'll tell you more. We have a holiday here, in the month of August, sometime in the beginning of August they come... we have this memorial here, there used to be a ghetto here, you see, just there, on Zaslonov Street, on Chkalov Street, there used to be a ghetto. So they always come here, they pray in a very curious way.
— How exactly?
— Well, not in the way we do, in a Jewish way. <...> and Regina Lvovna Pelsina [local Physics teacher. — M.L., N.S.] used to translate it into Russian for us. That all... they pray like "Our Father" goes, but they have another words there, but she says: "It's 'Our Father'", — that's what Regina Lvovna said. It was interesting, very very interesting (FM 1: Valentina)

We happened to hear a lot about visiting Jews when talking to younger inhabitants of Hlybokaye, who were no experts in local knowledge and were actually quite alienated from it, albeit they were rather laconic and visibly unsure in what they were saying. For example, a maid in our hotel who couldn't tell us anything about the town's WWII history, responded at once to a remark about the cemetery "looking good": "Yes, they're fixing it up a bit so, they used to not care much about that, but... Many relatives are coming here these days, their relatives, aye... There's some special day... some special occasion day, sometimes delegations come here even" (FM 2: Olga).

While to the members of memorial "delegations" and to the few solitary visitors coming to Hlybokaye out of interest in their own genealogies[8] the Jewish cemetery is national and family history in the flesh, the locals perceive the cemetery in the reflected light of the commemoration rituals they observe. One might say that to the visitors the cemetery is an alien place, but holding their own memory, and to the locals it's a familiar place of memory — but that memory belongs to strangers.

Folk toponymy as a historical source and a guidance to action. Reconstruction of the Jewish cemetery and an influx of "delegations" that made this particular part of Hlybokaye urban space notable and important led to a demand for a historical narrative about the location. A new name for the cemetery that was presented as an old ironic name entered the local history onomasticon — The Green America. It was borrowed from a short story of the same name by Leontiy Rakovskiy[9], a Hlybokaye-born Leningrad author [*Rakovskiy* 1927], or, to be more exact, from the second edition of this short story. The story was published in a small book along with the novelette "The Clock" by Anton Sobolevskiy, a descendant of

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[8] Scholars suggest various terms for this type of tourism: ancestral tourism, genealogy tourism, nostalgia tourism, personal heritage tourism, roots tourism (see, fox example: *Birtwistle* 2005; *McCain, Ray* 2003).

[9] L. Rakovskiy left Hlybokaye to pursue a university degree — first in Kiev in 1915, then in Petrograd in 1922. "The Green America" is his first collected works volume comprised of novellas and short stories about Belarusian shtetls, never reprinted in Soviet era. Since the mid-1930s, Rakovskiy had been mostly known as an author of monumental historical novels about outstanding military commanders.

one of the most famed Hlybokaye families[10], who by then lived in Moscow. Sobolevskiy writes in the introduction that the intent of the book is to "help the inhabitants of Hlybokaye in the 21st century learn in deeper detail some of their history concerning the town's Jewish population from the early 20th century" [*Sobolevskiy* 2000: 3].

When speaking about the Jewish cemetery "The Green America" is used not as a functional toponym but as an instrument of interpretation. The epithet "green" is explained to be an indication of the fact that the cemetery used to be thickly covered with trees pre-WWII, and the metaphor of America is interpreted in two ways. Firstly, America is a place of no return (Jews who had emigrated to America stayed there forever, like one could never return from one's grave): "...The Green America. This very name bears a strong shade of Jewish humour — a laughter through tears. People used to go to America in search of a better life and they never returned. The place of no return, that is, a cemetery, was called America in Hlybokaye" [*Shulman* n.d.].

Secondly, America is interpreted as the alternative for the unlucky (many Jews dreamed of leaving Hlybokaye for good and going over the water to America, but most of them only made it to the Hlybokaye cemetery): "Well, we have a Jewish cemetery here... it was called the Green America — people dreamed of getting to America but they usually only got as far as this cemetery" (FM 2: a guided tour "Hlybokaye: The Cherry Capital").

Apart from a beautiful name and an equally beautiful legend of it, the contemporary narrative about the Jewish cemetery includes a set of persistent composition elements. Here are three tellingly similar fragments: from the book "The Many Kilometers of Jewish History" by journalist Arkadi Shulman (that continues the passage quoted above) and from the two interviews, the first one with the above-mentioned Tatsiana Saulich and the second one with an ex-journalist with a local newspaper who used to write about the Jewish cemetery and visiting Jewish groups.

> The Green America was green no more after the war started. The Germans cut down the trees and used the *matseives* for pavements and building footings. Things proceeded in this manner until early 1980s. Afterwards a house was to be built with a footing made of tombstones. A preliminary design had been drafted. Fortunately, there were people who came forward and said that it was unacceptable to built anything on the graveyard, moreover, health and safety regulations did not allow for that either [*Shulman* n.d.].

> It was a very beautiful cemetery, very old, very green, there were a lot of trees planted there. And when the Germans came, they destroyed it all, absolutely. And when in the 1980s members of the Jewish community first came, those who came from these places, Hlybokaye townspeople, they headed for the cemetery the first thing, and when they saw what was happening... And there's a marketplace just across the road, as I've told you, so partly it were the Germans who did it, not our folk. <...> But our folk, they went on: one would come to the marketplace and hitch up the horses to it [tether a horse to a tombstone. — *M.L., N.S.*]. <...> So when they came there, when they saw it all, their first thought was, naturally, to put things in order in this cemetery (FM 2: Saulich).

> They [Germans. — *M.L., N.S.*] took all the valuable stones to Germany. They cut down all the trees. And they've been sending trains' loads of woods, that's how many of them we had here... like giant tall pine trees, of a very valuable kind. The Germans took everything. Then they poured some poison on this ground here, this ground here, I remember that even, I was 15 years old or so at that time, nothing grew here ever since. <...> It only started to grow somewhat in the 1970s maybe. So the people took up grazing cows there... <...> And so in

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[10] Anton Sobolevskiy's grandfather, Alexander Sobolevskiy (1886-1983), was a well-known Hlybokaye teacher, a *kraeved* and a leader of an underground intelligence organisation during WWII. Anton's uncle, Yuri Sobolevskiy (1923-2002) was the founder father of Belarusian geotechnics and the development engineer of the Minsk subway.

1974[11], when this one Klebanova took up this whole Jewish thing, they built this synagogue here[12] (FM 1: Lydia).

It is quite obvious that all these three passages share a common set of details as well as a universal narrative construction of *prosperity − destruction − oblivion − renaissance.* A beautiful, historically significant cemetery is desecrated, and emigrants originally from Hlybokaye work to restore its lost appearance, meaning and status in the urban space. The toponym itself, specifically the epithet "green" that indicates the image of the cemetery before its destruction, becomes the starting point for this plot structure. Shulman rhetorically plays with that in his remark that "The Green America was green no more..."

Even witness accounts by the townspeople who lived in Hlybokaye pre-WWII and during the wartime visibly reproduce elements of narrative stereotypes characteristic to the texts quoted above: "There was a Jewish cemetery next to... the marketplace, do you know when our town market is? There are... there are stones there, aye. There used to be beautiful agelong pine trees in that cemetery before the war, all over the graveyards, with graves between them. And immediately after the Germans came here, they cut down all the pines and sent those to Germany" (FM 1: Liudmila). A Hlybokaye townswoman who was born in 1937 told us a lot of stories and details from her memories of German occupation. Nevertheless, the "beautiful agelong pines" "sent to Germany" by the Germans here are no personal childhood memories but products of influence by contemporary texts.

Rakovskiy's publisher addresses, in a rhetorical manner, Lev Artur Simonovich, who was born in pre-war Hlybokaye and was one of the key sponsors of the reconstruction of the cemetery: "And I wish that Artur Lev, who made it so that pine trees were planted again on Jewish graves, remembered the "Green America" [*Sobolevskiy* 2000: 3]. Both these words, aiming to motivate a philanthropist from abroad, and other conversations about planting trees in the cemetery refer to Rakovskiy's story and make it a precedent-setting text not only in regard to the new name of the old cemetery, but in regard to its new appearance as well.

> When Rakhil Klebanova began all this reconstruction thing, when they were reconstructing the cemetery along with other Hlybokaye Jews, they planted trees there as well − so it turned out that it used to be green, you know, that Green America, so there have always been trees there − so that it would be as green as it used to be back then (FM 2: Kozhenevskaya).

Therefore, a campaign for reconstruction of the Jewish cemetery led to publishing of a book that launched a catchy toponym that both alludes to the "right" pre-war past of this place of Jewish-related memory and hints on its "fixed-up" present. This campaign also served as a reason to form a persistent historical narrative about the cemetery − from the Green America era to present day. And while the colourful narrative about the "old" folk place name is only used by a small circle of Hlybokaye intelligentsia, and only exists within guided tours, journalism and conversations with interested visitors, the narrative about the cemetery's fate was more or less internalised in the town's wider circles.

While studying the phenomenon of *alien graveyards* as exemplified by data from North Ladoga region and the Karelian Isthnmus, Ekaterina Melnikova writes about emotionalisation of old Finnish cemeteries by contemporary inhabitants of those territories (descendants of Soviet settlers): "'Shame', 'guilt' and 'regret' become, for some of them, the key instruments of symbolic transformation of a recently discarded and overlooked past into an important and valued 'heritage' of the present" [*Melnikova* 2019: 12]. As much as the situations with alien graveyards in former Finnish lands and former Jewish shtetls differ

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[11] The informant either had the date wrong or made a slip of the tongue; the events likely took place later.

[12] There neither is nor ever was a synagogue in the cemetery; the informant likely means a stone memorial by the front gates.

respectively, this effect is at work in the case of Hlybokaye as well: let us just remember the repeating "regret" about the destruction of the cemetery by the Germans and indecent treatment of the site in Soviet times. It might very well be that this very *empathic shift* is what influenced the persistence, popularity and reproducibility of the stereotypical narrative of the Jewish cemetery and its history.

2. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the famous townsman

Plavinski's endeavor. In 2012, a bust of the famous Zionist activist Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was unveiled in Hlybokaye along with eight similar monuments that comprised the so-called Alley of Famous Townspeople. A plaque on the pedestal reads "Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the creator of contemporary Hebrew". Back then, Ben-Yehuda was yet a new, unfamiliar character and the most recent addition to the local pantheon of historical and cultural figures.

Ben-Yehuda had caught the eye of local intelligentsia and authorities as a famous person with a connection to Hlybokaye several years prior to the unveiling of the monument, all thanks to the efforts of Henadz' Plavinski, a *kraeved* who took up studying and popularisation of Hlybokaye history back in the 1990s. He promoted his historical investigations, remarkably original and complex at that, via local media and public talks, while also giving numerous interviews to visiting researchers.[13] For example, Plavinski was campaigning for a local "canonisation" of two historical figures that were extremely different actually, including the nature of their connections to Hlybokaye respectively: Jozef Korsak (the "fundator" who was a partial owner of Hlybokaye lands in the 17th century) and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda.

In 2008 Plavinski suggested to create a memorial plaque dedicated to this famous figure of Jewish culture. He sent applications to local authorities, collected signatures for petitions, wrote articles on the matter in Hlybokaye newspapers. But the initiative had not been backed by the authorities back then − specifically on the grounds that there was almost no information on Ben-Yehuda's life in Hlybokaye. The Alley of Famous Townspeople project became the perfect occasion for Plavinski to go forth with his own project of memorialisation of Ben-Yehuda in Hlybokaye urban space. Some of our informants, while admitting that the monument's existence was only possible thanks to Plavinski's zeal alone, remarked ironically: "They created the monument so that he'd finally leave them alone for good, guaranteed. Not just a plaque on a house but a monument!" (FM 2).

Plavinski based his claims that the creator of Hebrew was a Hlybokaye townsman on the following grounds. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (born Eliezer Itzhak Perlman) was born not far from Hlybokaye itself, in the shtetl of Luzhki. He'd spent two years living and studying with his uncle in Hlybokaye as a teenager. Moreover, both of his wives were from Hlybokaye: Ben-Yehuda met his future wife while living at his uncle's, he learned Russian and French thanks to her, and they left for Jerusalem together. After his wife passed, Ben-Yehuda proposed to her unmarried younger sister as tradition required of him, and she became his faithful assistant in his activities. The narrative presented in the tours of the Alley of Famous Townspeople is constructed of these three points in their various combinations, depending on the audience and the guide's personal preferences. The first passage quoted below we heard on a tour of Hlybokaye, attended almost exclusively by primary schoolers, and the second one comes from a town walk organised just for us by a well-known and respected *kraeved*.

> He's not from Hlybokaye, of course, but he was important. His two wives were from Hlybokaye. And his mother-in-law as well. So they kind of listed him as a Hlybokaye person because of it. He is famous for creating the contemporary Jewish language that is spoken today (FM 2: "The Hlybokaye Connoisseur" tour)

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[13] Plavinski was interviewed by Mardalena Waligórska in 2013 (see fragments in: *Waligórska* 2014; 2016) and by Olga Belova, one of the supervisors for the ethnographic group of the Sefer field school, in 2015.

He's the person who revived Hebrew. He wasn't born here. There is a shtetl in 30 kilometers or so from here – Luzhki. He was from there, and you can still see the ruins of the synagogue that he'd studied in. But his two wives... sisters they were, they were from Hlybokaye. And he'd lived in Hlybokaye for a year and a half or so, then he left for Palestine. And when his first wife had died, he married her sister. So these two sisters, they were from Hlybokaye (FM 2: Walking tour)

Some local historians consider the biographical connection between Ben-Yehuda and Hlybokaye to be too fragmentary and/or insufficiently documented – and, therefore, far-fetched or exaggerated. Therefore, Plavinski resorts to the method of meanings building to prove the depth and importance of this connection both for Ben-Yehuda and for Hlybokaye, and relies on several arguments for that.

Firstly, he speaks of the key role that Hlybokaye had played in Ben-Yehuda's personal becoming by vesting him with specific local energies: "The lands of Hlybokaye granted Eliezer such power that he was able to perform a miracle: Jews were speaking Hebrew again, at home and in the streets, and confessing love in Hebrew" [*Plavinski* 2013].

Secondly, Ben-Yehuda's campaign for Hebrew revival is presented by Plavinski as an example of one's service to their nation, which is especially relevant in contemporary Belarus, where the problem of national language is one of the pressure points in the ongoing popular dispute: "The pioneer in creating and achieving a national idea: One's Own Country, one's own Language. Language is what cements a people into a nation. The name of Lazar of Luzhki, a man from Hlybokaye, is a living reminder to the Belarusians how one should cherish their mother tongue" [Ibid.].

Thirdly, the monument to Ben-Yehuda itself reminds Plavinski of Jewish character and of premonitions of the fate of Jewish people: "He does look like himself... the sculptor who made it was quite good... The monument is made like that, I'm telling you... Like... Very modest. Very self... very self-sufficient, the monument is, and here, look, he's looking downwards like "Our history is terrifying"... He's full of sorrow, but he's full of pride as well..." (FM 1: Plavinski).

Therefore, Plavinski's rhetoric fits Ben-Yehuda into three contexts simultaneously: namely, local (Hlybokaye), national (Belarus) and ethnic (Jews) context, which helps argue for acceptability and significance of the act of memorialisation that has taken place.

Among other local brands. Magdalena Waligórska explores Plavinski's endeavor and the very fact of the unveiling of a bust of Ben-Yehuda along with other initiatives related to revitalisation of Jewish heritage and commemorative projects dedicated to Jews in various Belarusian cities. Placing these cases within wider political context of contemporary Belarus, Waligórska concludes that in recent years Jewish heritage is increasingly being used both by the authorities and the opposition as an important element in constructing of a national narrative [*Waligórska* 2016: 351]. Therefore, Waligórska interprets the decision by Hlybokaye authorities to install the bust of Ben-Yehuda as a political gesture in line with the state politics of presenting Belarus as a country that shares European values of tolerance and respect towards ethnic and religious minorities.

Such interpretation of the group of facts concerning the memorialisation of Jews in Belarus is quite convincing. Nevertheless, shifting the focus of research from national level to local level allows to interpret the installation of a monument to a great Zionist in a former Jewish shtetl as more of an act of urban development rather than an ideological message.

In the 2010s, Hlybokaye authorities led by Oleg Morkhat, Chair of the District Executive Committee, made active local branding and urban development their policy. In less than 10 years more than 40 sculptures and a large-scale festival with a pretence to be considered an international event have emerged in Hlybokaye. The locals speak of it a little tongue-in-cheek. Among other things, Hlybokaye now has two new brands: *Hlybokaye cherry* and *Baron Munchausen*. The "Hlybokaye: The Cherry Capital of Belarus" slogan was specifically drafted for a local brands competition, and an annual Cherry Festival has been held here

since 2013, while the legendary baron got promoted to a local symbol after journalists discovered a grave in the old Koptevka cemetery belonging to certain *Ferdinand u<nd> Wilhelmine von Műnchhausen.*

In the recent promotional campaigns of new Hlybokaye brands a common scheme is implemented that invariably includes three components: 1) a (quasi)historical figure and a motive for their connection to the town/district; 2) a tangible sign within urban space — a sculpture; 3) mass events with performance elements (see *Kupriyanov* 2018 for similar mechanisms in local branding). In the case of the "cherry capital" the historical figure was Boleslaw Lapyr, a local selectionist who bred a cherry variety that could adapt to Hlybokaye climate; a bust of him is installed in the Residency of the Cherry Queen, and a sculpture of the cherry itself can be found in the main Hlybokaye street. As far as Munchausen is concerned, a monument to him is also installed in Hlybokaye, and the performative component is provided by the character's inclusion in the mass celebrations of the "Cherry festival": the central event of the festival is a parade through the town centre led by costumed figures — the Cherry Queen and Baron Munchausen, her companion.

The idea of introducing Ben-Yehuda into this circle of locally significant characters predates the era of active branding and first emerged in a completely different context; as we have already mentioned, the first attempts of bringing it to life were made in activist mode. Yet after this endeavour was accepted by local authorities, the above-mentioned scheme of city branding was implemented with all the before-mentioned components in place — the only difference being due to specific addressing. The point is that the brand "Ben-Yehuda, the famous townsman" is aimed at official (Jewish) delegations rather than at the mass tourist or the locals.

Unveiling of the Alley with the bust of Ben-Yehuda led to a number of actions aimed both at evolution of the narrative of a newfound fellow townsman and at conversion of it into an event. In 2014 in the village of Luzhki, the actual birthplace of the hero, a stone with a memorial plaque was installed, and after the ceremonial opening the participants travelled to the bust of Ben-Yehuda in Hlybokaye. Ben-Yehuda's great-grandson along Israeli ambassador in Belarus, chief representative of Sokhnut (Jewish Agency) in Belarus and twenty people more attended both events.[14] The delegation was received with all the ceremony that local tradition could possibly manage, including participation of city leaders, actors from the Hlybokaye folk theatre "Teryoshka" in Belarusian national costumes offering the guests bread and salt, and girls from the exemplary drummer ensemble "Vivat" clad in hussar's jackets and busbies. In 2017 a group of Israeli tourists attending the annual memorial day of the victims of Hlybokaye ghetto in the end of August singled the bust of Ben-Yehuda out of other route points and had a photoshoot arranged next to it.[15]

The local Hlybokaye brand "Ben-Yehuda, the famous townsman" reaches its addressee through a dedicated channel of connections with Jewish organisations — much like what happens under a D2C marketing strategy (*direct-to-consumer)* which is mostly known for its orientation towards a specific consumer group.

Ben-Yehuda as the convenient other. The choice of characters for Alley of Famous Townspeople, which seemed to have been taken pretty seriously by the authorities, was made more difficult by political and ideological situation. From the local authorities' point of view, political activists of Belarusian nationalistic persuasion were the least welcome characters, while some intelligentsia considered these figures among those most worthy of remembrance. A previously mentioned *kraeved* commented almost aphoristically upon it: "It was not easy to end up in there. Everyone and their dog here are nationalists" (FM 2:

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[14] See more at: https://jewish.ru/ru/news/articles/168897/ (retrieved on 23.10.2020); https://archive.9tv. co.il/news/2014/09/14/185121.html (retrieved on 23.10.2020)

[15] See more at: http://vitvesti.by/obshestvo/bolshaia-delegatciia-iz-izrailia-posetila-glubokskii-raion. html (retrieved on 23.10.2020)

Walking tour). We don't know anything about the dispute on the selection and who took part in it, but, regardless, Vaclau Lastouski ended up being on the pantheon of those worthy of a bust. Lastouski was an author and historian, one of the creators of literary Belarusian language, and this is what reads on the plaque under the bust of him. Nevertheless, Lastouski is also known as the first Prime Minister of the Belarusian Democratic Republic created in 1918; because of this, he was persecuted and shot in 1938, which the curt inscription on the monument fails to mention whatsoever.

It is quite plausible then that Ben-Yehuda, actively promoted by Plavinski, was accepted by the authorities because Lastouski and him made a very good pair: an alien, Jewish nationalist figure provides a convenient international backdrop for a local, Belarusian nationalist, and, given the correlation between their achievements listed on their respective plaques, shifts the emphasis from Lastouski's political activism to his linguistic endeavours.

Moreover, Ben-Yehuda is the only one among the "famous townsmen" who performed deeds worthy of remembrance in history outside of any of the national contexts that Hlybokaye might identify itself with (be it the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, pre-WWII Poland, the USSR or the contemporary Republic of Belarus). But the background knowledge of "historical" – as in "past brought to closure" – Jewish presence in the town has apparently been enough to motivate and legitimise the inclusion of an alien hero into the local pantheon.

Since the bust was installed, nobody but Plavinski, the ever-inexhaustible enthusiast, has promoted Ben-Yehuda in local knowledge. The creator of Hebrew is not particularly familiar to Hlybokaye townspeople either as a famous townsman or a sculpture (except with *kraeveds*, journalists, employees of cultural and tourist enterprises and some local officials), and can compete with neither new local brands nor decades-old town symbols – such genii loci, for example, like Pavel Sukhoi, the Soviet aircraft designer, or painter and ethnographer Yazep Drazdovich ("the Belarusian da Vinci").

A Jewish character proved to be excellent material for targeted branding in contemporary Hlybokaye. On the one hand, he is well-received with the external target audience that the authorities are interested in. On the other hand, the character of a Jewish educationalist is unlikely to cause either political reservations or popular aversion, both due to his peripheral and secondary nature when compared to key town images such as the personae of Sukhoi and Munchausen, and due to the fact that the Jewish theme is perceived as neutral and organic in local context.

Conclusion

Let us imagine someone visiting Hlybokaye with an intense interest in memory of the town's Jewish past. They could have gone home impressed if they made it to Margarita Kozhenevskaya's guided tour of Jewish Hlybokaye; or if they happened to join an international Jewish group and visit three spectacular monuments and a reception organised by local authorities; or if they managed to get past the gates of the well-kept, green old Jewish cemetery. But at the same time, our imaginary tourist could have left completely disappointed, for in their walks around the town they would have found neither colourful Jewish architecture, nor stylised place names, nor souvenirs bearing the imagery of the Jewish Hlybokaye. Upon visiting the town museum, they would have learnt that Jewish presence in the town's history is only noted in two sections of the exhibition – the ones dedicated to religious diversity and professional occupations of the townspeople pre-WWII.

Moreover, only a few of the townspeople would have been able to show them the way to the Jewish cemetery. For example, Margarita Kozhenevskaya, who'd read several lectures on Hlybokaye's Jewish heritage both for schoolchildren and for adults while she was working in the museum, told us that both the children and the adults showed a lack, either complete or almost complete, of any basic knowledge about the Jewish aspect of local history. Both audiences were most surprised to learn Jewish etymologies of town place names, buildings

and toponyms well known to them. Even the cemetery with an unambiguous sign by the front gate proved to be unknown to some of them.

This is not about the general fact that the knowledge of Jews in the town's history is distributed unequally between local experts and "common" townsfolk. What we're talking about is that the memory of Hlybokaye's Jewish past is not out in the open within local knowledge. This memory is discreet and has yet to be formed as a more or less integral narrative that the inhabitants and visitors of the town would find commonly known or readily available.

Certain selected fragments of the Jewish past are constructed or articulated ad hoc, when a plot or an image from this past, or, to put it more exactly, a representation of it, (supposedly) meets a specific demand. In this article we've attempted to demonstrate this mechanism as exemplified by the two cases explored above (although the numerous instances and situations of actualisation of Jewish memory in Hlybokaye are not, of course, limited to them).

As these two examples show, the persons, groups and institutions who come forward with an idea, initiative or direct activism play the key role in this process. Such actors assume the functional role of the so called *agents of memory*, in the words of Paloma Aguilar [*Aguilar* 1999].

In some cases the agents of memory create the demand themselves. They might be researchers who came to Hlybokaye to study the epigraphy of Jewish tombstones and write down senior townspeople's memoirs of their Jewish neighbours; or people born in pre-WWII Hlybokaye and now living abroad, who initiated the reconstruction of the old cemetery and the installation of monuments to the victims of Hlybokaye ghetto; Henadz' Plavinski, an engineer who moved to Hlybokaye, developed an interest in local history and eventually discovered Ben-Yehuda as a fellow townsman, both for himself and for others; Margarita Kozhenevskaya, a Hlybokaye-born historian who took up the studies in Jewish history of Hlybokaye as an academic hobby. In other cases, the initiative requires an external stakeholder (who thus "creates the supply"). Among such people mentioned here in this article one could name Tatsiana Saulich who supported the emigrants' memorialisation project and became the key person for them in Hlybokaye; local authorities who organise themed events for Jewish delegations; tour guides and other local history experts who incorporate Jewish objects and plots into their narratives to a bigger or lesser extent, depending on the presumed interest in this topic with the audience.

Representations of the Jewish past that are thus created meet the original demand even when they're not constructed specifically "to order". In this context, the narratives about the Jewish cemetery and the commemorative activity of the visitors to it are even more conspicuous than the reconstruction of the cemetery itself: despite all the differences between their specific incarnations, their typical narrative structure and pragmatics revolve around the campaign for the reconstruction of the cemetery and the public attention on this campaign.

Another illustration to this is how, despite Plavinski's many efforts, a monument to the creator of Hebrew only came to be in Hlybokaye after local authorities saw a fitting context (the Alley of Famous Townspeople as a part of active city branding) and, which was even more important, a supposed target audience (official Jewish delegations). In accordance with this, an optimal format was decided on for the monument — a bust instead of a memorial plaque.

Therefore, separate representations of the Jewish past emerged, and continue to emerge, in contemporary Hlybokaye: official and vernacular narratives, urban objects, commemorative practices, elements of museum exhibitions, parts of guided tours of the town, etc. These places of Jewish memory (as in *lieux de memoire* in Pierre Nora's terms [*Nora* 1989]) remain scattered islets, each with a history of its own, that do not comprise an archipelago. This means that neither local groups and institutes nor external actors have created a demand for a shared local narrative of Jewish Hlybokaye yet.

As we can see from other cases, either a local Jewish community or a bigger Jewish organisation, or tourism industry, or political and cultural institutions can act as agents of memory creating a demand for such a narrative. In Hlybokaye, the researchers participating in the Sefer project were the closest to this role. This seemingly unexpected turn of events is

because the research methodology that many of visiting researchers use is *per se* aimed at recreating historical and cultural realities lost to the past. Historians work on a documented map of Jewish town objects, both preserved and lost, on lists of former owners of Jewish houses and on a historical landscape of social life in Jewish Hlybokaye across the eras (see articles by M. Kozhenevskaya and I. Sorkina in: *Belova, Kopchenova* 2017). Folklorists recreate the segment of Jewish-related traditional culture and worldview of the inhabitants of pre-WWII Hlybokaye (see papers by O. Belova and A. Moroz ibid.) According to its authors, the collection of research papers and field materials published as a follow-up to the field trip is an "attempt at reconstructing the town's 'Jewish history'", appropriately titled: "Hlybokaye: Memory of a Jewish Shtetl". The researchers followed no institutional or social demand but their own academic interests and methodologies in the course of this reconstruction, and none of their work had any impact on Hlybokaye itself. But they were the only ones willing to construct the image of contemporary Hlybokaye as a former Jewish shtetl.

Many a recent scholarly work on memory about 20th century Jewish history (mostly, of course, on memory about the Holocaust) refers to *memory politics*. These works focus on intentions, rhetoric, actions of various actors on local and national levels who "work" with Jewish memory in politics, culture and education (see: *Levin, Lenz* 2013; *Hansen-Glucklich* 2014). This approach is common in studies of traumatic and/or disputed memory. Hlybokaye's Jewish past is an emotionally and ideologically neutral topic in the town itself. As much as local lore enthusiasts might disagree on how many Jews used to live in Hlybokaye pre-WWII or whether Ben-Yehuda's relative did actually reside in Hlybokaye, their disputes, very rarely making it into public discourse, may be clashes of personal ambitions, but they most certainly are no *wars of memories.* And if we can talk about memory politics in regard to local Jewish past in contemporary Hlybokaye at all, one could say that cultural and political elites of the town adhere to the strategy of having no particular strategy, and that they are happy to help in case a relevant demand exists and they are themselves interested.

Nevertheless, the Jewish aspect is neither random nor far-fetched within the context of local history and culture, and people from all walks of life can see it to various extent. While local experts consider the fact that Jews played a big part in Hlybokaye life until the mid-20th century to be "objective historical knowledge", the majority of Hlybokaye townspeople consider a stereotypical explanation of the town's blooming commercial life (a lot of shops and private enterprises despite contrasting poverty) via its Jewish past to be a perfectly sufficient knowledge of Hlybokaye's Jewish history: "...The Pale of Jewish Settlement used to be here, you know... so that kind of forms something... maybe that's why we're all so enterprising, because we're all partly..." (FM 2: Ekaterina); "Someone was at the board meeting, on the regional level, and they said it was noted that Hlybokaye District has one of the largest... registration rate... in registered self-employed entrepreneurs. That's the spirit, something must have survived here. Looks like Jews have left their trace" (FM 2: Peter). This self-mocking passage was one of the most noticeable common places in the conversations with townspeople about Hlybokaye (including those by other researchers: *Vodolazhskaya* 2009: 61–62), and it resurfaced not only in Jewish-themed conversations but in other contexts as well.

This combination of ideological neutrality and peripheral identity connected to historical Jewishness of the town lends to the secondariness of the Jewish theme in local knowledge and a benevolent indifference towards the former, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, ensures for the occasional demand for the memory of Jewish past, which all in all leaves it in a limbo, neither able to come into the limelight nor fading out completely.

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FM 2 – Field materials collected by the authors in Hlybokaye, Republic of Belarus, April 2019. Expert interviews: Margarita Kozhenevskaya, b. 1988, historian, research fellow in the Hlybokaye Historical and Ethnographical Museum (2017-2019); Tatsiana Saulich, b. 1953, Deputy Chair of the Hlybokaye District Executive Committee (1985-2000). Informants: Olga, b. 1980, maid; Ekaterina, b. 1990, hotel landlady; Petr, b. 1978, doctor. Tours: "Hlybokaye: The Cherry Capital" (a professional guided tour); "The Hlybokaye Connoisseur" quest tour (an amateur guided tour by a local kraeved), both tours during the annual all-Belarus festival "Tour Guide Fest"; a walking tour of Hlybokaye with a local kraeved and journalist.

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