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“From Bialystok to Kishinev”: The Dubnow grave inscriptions and their significance for Russian Jewish historiography and cemetery studies

Summary: In October 1892, maskil Simon Dubnow published an open letter in *Voskhod*, the liberal Jewish monthly in Odessa where he worked as a journalist and literary editor. His letter, directed to both the maskilim (intellectuals) and mitnagdim (traditionalists) of his day, appealed to his cohorts to assist in writing the history of Russian Jews as a value distinct from the larger world history of Jewry. The letters Dubnow received in response bear witness to this process of historiography, and many are preserved in The Simon Dubnow Papers, 1632–1938, part of the Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections. Within Record Group 87, ten folders from Jewish towns spreading from Bialystok to Kishinev were recently re-discovered. These folders include: Bialystok, Gomel, Lipoviets, Lublin, Lutsk, Miedzybozh, Mohilev Podolsk, Ostroha and Stepan, and Kishinev. This paper examines the inscriptions contained in these letters and responds to the simple questions: Why did the zamiers select specific epitaphs that they transcribed for Dubnow?, and What value does each gravestone letter hold for Jewish historiography then and now?

Keywords: Simon Dubnow, epitaphs, tombstones, Jewish historiography, cemetery research

„Z BIAŁEGOSTOKU DO KISZYNOWA”: INSKRYPCJE NAGROBNE DUBNOWA I ICH ZNACZENIE DLA ROSYJSKIEJ HISTORIOGRAFII ŻYDOWSKIEJ I BADAŃ NAD CMENTARZAMI

Streszczenie: W październiku 1892 roku Simon Dubnow, przedstawiciel ruchu Haskali, opublikował na łamach „Woschodu”, liberalnego żydowskiego miesięcznika wydawanego w Odessie, gdzie pełnił funkcję dziennikarza i redaktora literackiego, list otwarty. Adresatami listu byli zarówno maskilim (intelektualiści), jak i mitnagdim (tradycjoniści) ówczesnej społeczności żydowskiej. Dubnow zaapelował do nich o podjęcie wspólnego wysiłku na rzecz opracowania historii Żydów rosyjskich, uznając ją za odrębną i wartościową dziedzinę badań, niezależną od ogólnej historii światowego żydostwa. Odpowiedzi na list Dubnowa, stanowiące świadectwo procesu kształtowania się nowej historiografii, zostały zgromadzone w archiwum „The Simon Dubnow Papers, 1632–1938”, będącym częścią cyfrowych zbiorów Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections. W ramach zespołu akt 87 odnaleziono niedawno dziesięć teczek zawierających korespondencję z żydowskich ośrodków miejskich, rozciągających się na obszarze od Białegostoku po Kiszyniów. Teczki te dokumentują reakcje społeczności z Białegostoku, Homla, Lipowca, Lublina, Łucka, Międzyboża, Mohylewa Podolskiego, Ostroga i Stepana oraz Kiszyniowa. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje inskrypcje zawarte w tych listach, koncentrując się na odpowiedzi na następujące pytania badawcze: Jakie kryteria kierowały osobami dokonującymi transkrypcji epitafiów dla Dubnowa przy wyborze konkretnych inskrypcji? Jaką wartość dla żydowskiej historiografii, zarówno ówczesnej, jak i współczesnej, posiadają te dokumenty nagrobne?

Słowa kluczowe: Simon Dubnow, epitafia, nagrobki, historiografia żydowska, badania nad cmentarzami

«ОТ БЕЛОСТОКА ДО КИШИНЁВА»: НАДГРОБНЫЕ НАДПИСИ ДУБНОВА И ИХ ЗНАЧЕНИЕ ДЛЯ РОССИЙСКОЙ ЕВРЕЙСКОЙ ИСТОРИОГРАФИИ И ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ КЛАДБИЩ

Резюме: В октябре 1892 года Симон Дубнов, представитель движения Хаскала, опубликовал открытое письмо в либеральном еврейском ежемесячном журнале «Восход», издававшемся в Одессе, где он работал журналистом и литературным редактором. Письмо было адресовано как маскилим (интеллектуалам), так и митнагдим (традиционалистам) еврейской общины того времени. Дубнов призвал их предпринять совместные усилия для разработки истории российских евреев, признавая её отдельной и ценной областью исследований, независимой от общей истории мирового еврейства. Ответы на письмо Дубнова, свидетельствующие о процессе формирования новой историографии, были собраны в архиве «The Simon Dubnow Papers, 1632–1938», который является частью онлайн-коллекций Эдварда Бланка YIVO Вильна. В рамках архивной группы 87 недавно были обнаружены десять папок с перепиской из еврейских городских центров, простирающихся от Белостока до Кишинёва. Эти папки документируют реакции общин из Белостока, Гомеля, Липовца, Люблина, Луцка, Меджибожа, Могилёва-Подольского, Острога и Степана, а также Кишинёва. В этой статье анализируются надписи, содержащиеся в этих письмах, с акцентом на ответы на следующие исследовательские вопросы: Какие критерии руководили теми, кто транскрибировал эпитафии для Дубнова, при выборе конкретных надписей? Какую ценность эти надгробные документы представляют для еврейской историографии, как тогда, так и сейчас?

Ключевые слова: Симон Дубнов, эпитафии, надгробия, еврейская историография, исследования кладбищ

Introduction

In October 1892, *maskil* Simon Dubnow published an open letter in *Voskhod*, the liberal Jewish monthly in Odessa where he worked as a journalist and literary editor. His letter, directed to both the *maskilim* (intellectuals) and *mithnagdim* (traditionalists) of his day, appealed to his cohorts to assist in writing the history of Russian Jews as a value distinct from the larger world history of Jewry.¹ The letters Dubnow received in response bear witness to this process of historiography and many are preserved in The Simon Dubnow Papers, 1632–1938, part of the Edward Blank YIVO Vilna Online Collections.² These papers include his correspondence with a variety of prominent Jewish scholars and community leaders as well as copies or excerpts from *pinkasim* (record books), legal records and transcriptions of tombstones. Within Record Group 87, ten folders from Jewish towns that form a sweeping arc from Bialystok to Kishinev were recently re-discovered.³ These folders include:

¹ This open letter followed his 1891 article, “On the Study of the History of Russian Jews and the Establishment of a Russian Jewish Historical Society,” and its 1892 Hebrew version, “Let Us Search and Study.” Guide to the Papers of Simon Dubnow (1860–1941), 1589–1938, 1961, (bulk 1700–1900), RG 87. [http://www.yivoarchives.org/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=40006&q=] ; and Robert M. Seltzer, “Simon Dubnow.” *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, Volume 1, Gershon David Hundert, ed., 2008, 433.

² Guide to the Papers of Simon Dubnow (1860–1941).

³ *Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund* (BCRF) researcher and volunteer, Frank Idzikowski discovered a folder (945) within the Communalia series with the annotation: list of inscriptions on gravestones

Bialystok, Gomel, Lipoviets, Lublin, Lutsk, Miedzybozh,⁴ Mohilev Podolsk, Ostroha and Stepan, and Kishinev. While the reverse expression from Kishinev (Kishineff) to Bialystok is infamous for the wave of pogroms that swept the Pale from especially 1903-1906, the obverse of these cities – from Bialystok to Kishinev, here refers to a special subcollection of Dubnow's letters that record grave inscriptions, including some with historical references, gathered nearly a decade before the onslaught of these pogroms.



Pale of Settlement, 1855. Courtesy of YIVO. Bialystok (Belostok) in the northwest to Kishinev in the south-central.

This subcollection of Dubnow letters date from 1892 to 1898.⁵ While some letters are unsigned, five are from known *zamiers* (collectors), who responded to Dubnow's request for Jewish historical documents.⁶ Several letters hold a salutation to Dubnow. For example, the Lipoviets letter cordially begins: *"To the wise man, the Rav, R. Simon Dubnow. Shalom!* All letters have occasional color-

from the Bialystok cemetery for the years 5570-5620 (1810-1860), with remarks by Dr. Yosef Chazanovitch, Bialystok, Hebrew, 5 pp. Idzikowski brought this discovery to BCRF Vice-Chair, Translator and Historian, Heidi M. Szpek.

⁴ The Miedzybozh letter unfortunately is listed as missing in the YIVO Guide to the Papers of Simon Dubnow [<http://www.yivoarchives.org/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=40006&q=>]

⁵ The folders and letters for Bialystok, Mohilev Podolsk and Ostroha lack a date of transcription.

⁶ These letters and others from *zamiers* are also included in Dubnow Papers Series VII to include: Dr. Josef Chazanowicz (based on handwriting, Bialystok), Wolf Waynshteyn (Kishinev), Yehudah Leib Weisman (Lipoviets), Shlomo Nissenbaum (Lublin), M.N. Litinsky (Mohilev Podolsk), and Naftali Hertz Lerner (Ostroh). [<http://www.yivoarchives.org/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=40006&q=&rootcontentid=307267#id307267>]

ful pencil underscores, typically highlighting a name, location or year, and are generally attributed to Dubnow. These letters can be subdivided into those that (1) provide a general list of tombstone inscriptions with or without a heading (Bialystok, 1788-1869), Lublin (1541-1818), Kishinev (1712-1794), Mohilev Podolsk (1615-1810), Stepan (1743-1841), and Ostroha (1632-1742); and (2) those that include an epitaph within a larger narrative, focused on a specific historical concern or event, as with Gomel (1751), Lutsk (1762), and Lipoviets (n.d.). All letters record tombstone transcriptions from what was (generally) the oldest cemetery in that city or town. Excluding the old cemeteries in Lublin, Ostroha and Stepan, these cemeteries no longer exist but today are marked by a memorial stone or an informational sign (Bialystok, Lutsk, Lipoviets). Excluding several tombstones in Lublin and Ostroha, most tombstones associated with the inscriptions recorded are no longer extant. Historically, these cities and their Jewish communities record beginnings in the 15th – 17th centuries. They experienced similar historic events such as the devastation amidst the Khmelnytsky (1648-49) and later Haidamack Uprisings, only to witness both a spiritual rebirth and economic growth until their near annihilation during the Holocaust.

In his *History of the Jews of Russia and Poland*, Dubnow wrote that “Beginning with 1428, the old Karaite community of Chufut-Kale („the Rock of the Jews“), situated near the new Tatar capital, Bakhchi-Sarai, grows in numbers and influence. The memory of this community is perpetuated by a huge number of tombstones, ranging from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century.”⁷ The Dubnow collection of gravestone inscriptions similarly perpetuates the memory of these communities through these inscriptions. In some cases, the personal details in these epitaphs parallel known genealogical details. In other cases, they are the only extant record of an individual thus perpetuating memory. Moreover, it is not unexpected that many of the cemeteries referred to in these letters no longer exist, thus these letters become witnesses to these early institutions of Jewish heritage. These letters are also written in late 19th century cursive Hebrew and cursive Old Russian, serving thus as artifacts to further study of these written languages. Setting aside the value of these letters for genealogical research, as witnesses to non-extant Jewish cemeteries, and for cursive language development, this paper asks the simple questions for each letter: *Why did the zamiers select specific epitaphs that they transcribed for Dubnow?* It is critical to understand

⁷ Volume I. Jewish Publication Society of America, 1916, pp. 34-35.

that the zamiers were not motivated by the concern to record epitaphs from what would become a cemetery devastated by the Holocaust or the Post-War world under Communism. And: *What value does each gravestone letter hold for Jewish historiography then and now?* In particular, the growing discipline of Jewish cemetery studies precipitated by the Holocaust and the post-War climate of Communism may likewise benefit from the inscriptions and cemetery details preserved in these letters.

The Dubnow Gravestone Correspondence

Bialystok. The first-discovered Dubnow letter (R87/945) contains nine handwritten pages in cursive Hebrew, recording 16 epitaphs from Bialystok. More specifically, fourteen belong to rabbis with dates of death from 1788 to 1869, and two belong to members of the entrepreneurial Zabłudowsky family, the last being the four-sided black obelisk with inscriptions for lumber magnate Izak Zabłudowsky (d. 1865) and his brother Yehiel Michael Zabłudowsky (d. 1869).⁸ There is no information as to who transcribed these records or the date of transcription.⁹

The dates of death indicate these epitaphs are from the former Rabbinic Cemetery in Bialystok, which functioned from c. 1770 until about 1900 with occasional burials, especially mass graves, during the Holocaust.¹⁰ By 1944, tombstones were removed, and some destruction occurred during the Nazi Occupation of Bialystok. In the early 1960s, the Rabbinic Cemetery was covered with debris from the construction of the nearby Communist Party Headquarters. Several of the Dubnow records are also recorded in Hershberg's *Pinkus Bialystok* (1949-1950).¹¹ In 2022 and again in 2023, the US-Nonprofit Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund extracted 143 megalithic boulder matzevoth and one megalithic granite stele from a mound on Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery in Bialystok

⁸ Heidi M. Szpek, "Reception History Meets History: The Case of the Zabłudowsky Epitaphs from Bialystok." Konferencji Naukowej „Żydzi Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej.” University of Białystok 12-13 June 2017. [<https://www.jewishepitaphs.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Full-Text-Zabłudowsky.pdf>]

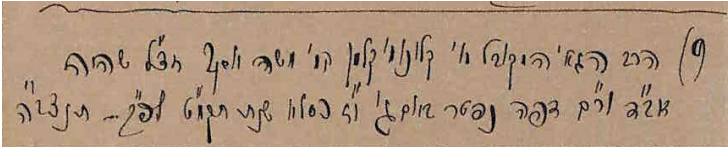
⁹ Bialystok historian, Avraham Shmuel Hershberg, author of the two volume *Pinkus Bialystok*, is a contender based on his arrival in Bialystok in the late 1800s although he does not have all the inscriptions of the letters recorded in his history. The date of transcription must be prior to 1898 as Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery in Bialystok was opened and by this date the renowned Zionist Rabbi Shmuel Mohilewer had passed (d. 1898), an unconscionable omission for the zamier.

¹⁰ Iwona Gorska, et al., „Cmentarz tzw. Rabinacki, ul. Konstantego Kalinowskiego.” In *Cmentarze w Białymstoku*, Urząd Miejski w Białymstoku, Departament Kultury, Pomocji i Sportu, 2022, pp. 372-374.

¹¹ Raphael Yom Tov Lipman b. Israel Halperin (1879); Izak b. David Zabłudowsky (1865), Yehiel Michal b. Chaim Zabłudowsky (1869), and Avraham Ebli b. Meshulem Feivil (1848).

and another mound on Bialystok's Central Park, dating from 1806-1856.¹² Based on dates of death, epigraphic structure and style, tombstone style and local oral records, these mound matzevoth also belong to the Rabbinic Cemetery. The mound matzevoth, the Hershberg *Pinkus* records, and now the Dubnow records are the only known records for this now non-existent Jewish Cemetery.¹³ While these 16 Dubnow epitaphs preserve only a fraction of the several thousand burials on this two-hectare cemetery, they still offer incredible insights into this early history of Jewish Bialystok.

The choice of inscriptions in this Dubnow letter, as noted, is primarily focused on recording epitaphs for the early Bialystok rabbis. Their literary style, abbreviations, epithets, and vocabulary designating rabbinic lineage, rabbinic role as head of *beth din* not only in Bialystok but also in selected regional cities (Tiktin, Orla, Trestina), and reference to rabbinic books authored parallel these same details in other epitaphs from the Rabbinic Cemetery as well as the earliest epitaphs in Bagnowka. For example, the peculiar expression "head of the *beth din* of 'here'" in this epitaph and in #14 as well, is also recorded in the Bagnowka corpus,¹⁴ and in one epitaph in the Mohilev Podoski letter (#6),¹⁵ demonstrating a continuity in shared language through time and place.¹⁶



„The Rav, the prominent gaon, our teacher, Kalonimus Kalman [son of] our teacher Moshe Josef, a tsadik of blessed memory, who was the head of the Beth Din and head of the educational institute of here. He died on Tuesday, 12 Kislev 5549 [30 November 1788]. May his soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life.”

Three inscriptions are especially noteworthy for clarifying inscriptions preserved in a rare photograph by a Bialystok histo-

¹² “Poland: an artificial mound outside the Bagnowka Jewish cemetery in Bialystok could cover hundreds of matzevot dating back over 200 years.” August 17, 2022. [https://jewish-heritage-europe.eu/2022/08/17/poland-bialystok-bagnowka/]

¹³ Several additional tombstones found amidst other city construction projects are purportedly kept in the Bialystok City Storage.

¹⁴ For example, “Here lies a holy seed, a third generation, who ascended to the yeshivah on high, the prominent Rab, well-educated, R. Yehoshua Yisrael son of the gaon, the tsadik, our teacher, R. Chaim Hertz Halprin Halperin, a tsadik of blessed memory, head of the beth din of here. He died in a good name 15 Adar (Purim) 5691 [4 March 1931]. May his soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life.”

¹⁵ “Crown of Torah. The rabbi, the prominent gaon who was from Odiya(?). He did not move from the midst of the tent of Torah and always clung to it. Our rabbi from [---], son of (the gaon) our teacher, the rabbi, Tsvi Hirsh, head of the beth din of here [---]. He died on Monday, 2 Kislev (5)571 (17 November 1810 O.C.).”

¹⁶ Heidi M. Szpek, *Bagnowka: A Modern Jewish Cemetery on the Russian Pale*, IUniverse, 2017, Chapters 2 and 3.

rian, Jan Glinka, featuring a rabbinic *ohel* on the Rabbinic Cemetery. In the 1930s, Glinka photographed this *ohel* with external epitaphs for three prominent Bialystok rabbis: Raphael Yom Tov Lipele Halperin (1879), Eliakum Gecil Meir (1864) and Kalonymus Kalman Hacohen (1880). While Halperin's inscription is recorded in Hershberg's *Pinkus Bialystok*,¹⁷ the other two rabbis' inscriptions were not. Thanks to Dubnow's letter, the inscriptions for the rabbis whose tombstones flanked Halperin's tombstone can now be returned to the historic record. As noted, only two Bialystok epitaphs in Dubnow's letter are not for rabbis. One is for entrepreneur, Izak Zabłudowsky (1865), the most affluent Jewish man in Russia in the late 18th and 19th centuries, and another for his brother, Yehiel Michal (1869). The prominence of the Zabłudowsky family in the history and development of Bialystok, especially Izak, may have inspired their inclusion. But why Yehiel Michal Zabłudowsky? He may have been remembered by association with his brother but also for his own endorsement of Jewish life as recorded in *Pinkus Bialystok* when he paid a 54 rubles tax to wear Jewish clothing or he may also be the Michael Zabłudovsky (1869), an author of *Mish'an Mayim*, a "rational interpretation of the Haggadah."¹⁸



Ohel of Raphael Yom Tov Lipele Halperin (center), Eliakum Gecil Meir (right) and Kalonymus Kalman Hacohen (left). Jan Glinka, 1930s. Public Domain.

¹⁷ Volume I, Bialystok Jewish Historical Association, 1949, p. 169.

¹⁸ Volume I, p. 153; and Herman Rosenthal, Peter Wiernik, "BYELOSTOK (Polish, Bialystok)," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Isidore Singer, 1901-1906 [<https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3871-bye-lostok>]

Thus, the Bialystok zamier selected these 16 epitaphs because of their critical value for documenting the most prominent Bialystok rabbis of the 19th century as well as the most influential entrepreneurs. Moreover, Dubnow's letter's value resides not only in the individuals remembered but that it also preserves epitaphs composed in the foundational epigraphic tradition of Bialystok's Rabbinic Cemetery, paralleled in Hershberg's *Pinkus Bialystok* and in the mound matzevoth discoveries. This tradition will continue and further develop on Bialystok's Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery (c. 1890-1969)¹⁹ with epigraphic parallels also recognizable in the few inscriptions from the Bialystok's Cholera Cemetery (1831-c. 1870) as recorded in one single photographic record.²⁰

Lublin. The Lublin correspondence with Dubnow (RG87/948) is by far the most extensive extant letter in this collection of grave-stone inscriptions. Seven pages of neat cursive Hebrew writing contain 26 Hebrew tombstone inscriptions, each clearly numbered (e.g. No 24). Each inscription is separated by three small x's arranged triangularly. The Hebrew heading for these pages reads: "*Matzevoth from the cemetery of the holy community of Lublin.*" In the right upper corner, marked by a 'x' is written in Hebrew: "*Sent by R. Josef Levinstein, father of the beth din of Serock. Adar 5654 (January/February 1894).*"²¹ Rabbi Josef Levinstein, born in Lublin in 1842, was a religious scholar, who served as rabbi in a number of towns before taking up his position in Serock (1875), north of Warsaw, until his death in 1924.²² Levinstein was also engaged in correspondence with Dubnow that same year (1894) regarding the controversy between the Hasidim and the Mithnagdim.²³ All inscriptions, dating from 1541 to 1818, belong to rabbis buried

¹⁹ Hershberg, *Pinkus Bialystok*, Vol 1, p. 463 similarly noted a stylistic parallel in the Rabbinic Cemetery inscriptions and the earliest on Bagnowka.

²⁰ Szpek, *Bagnowka*, p. 56.

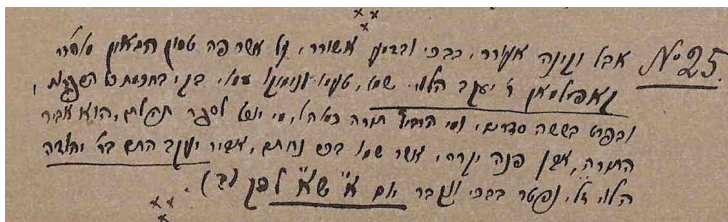
²¹ This folder also contains five additional letters, all in different handwriting than R. Levinstein's letter. The first is six-pages long, prefaced with the heading "from M---, Tuesday, 13 Tishri 5656 (19 September 1895). The second is a three-page letter, titled "Honored Lord!" with a Yiddish heading in *Kowno den 16 December 92*. Various words have been underscored in red pencil, including the book title "Josef Da'at" by R. Josef, b. Issachar, a man of Prague(?). Then follows a one-page letter entitled, "Sefer 'Josef Da'at' by R. Josef, b. Issachar, a man of Prague. A two-page letter, dated 21/3 March 1895 is signed by Shlomo Nissenbaum, author of *History of the Jews in Lublin* (1899), which includes Hebrew inscriptions from the Old Lublin Jewish Cemetery [<https://teatrnn.pl/lexicon/articles/old-jewish-cemetery-in-lublin/>] His letter is written to: "the wise and beloved rabbi, the gaon, of the Jews in exile in Russia and Poland, R. Shimon Dubnow." The last short letter, dated March 1895, is again from Nissenbaum to Dubnow.

²² Mordecai L. Wilensky, "The Polemic of Rabbi David of Makow against Hasidism." *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, Volume 25, 1956, pp. 137-156.

²³ Wilensky, *Proceedings*, Vol. 25, p. 143

in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Lublin. Each of Levinstein's transcriptions are preceded by a parenthetical note clearly indicating the name of the rabbi in the following epitaph. He also includes locational parenthetical notes, for example, that a rabbi was buried next to the one in a previous record (e.g., No 16 and 17).

The Old Lublin Cemetery, located on Grodzisko hill within the city, was established before 1550, functioning until c. 18th century. The earliest burial of a certain Jakob halewi Kopelman, 1541, indicates it was already in use before its official opening.²⁴ Entry No 25 in the Lublin letter preserves this very epitaph.



"I will wake up with grief and lamentation בְּכָל בְּכָל אֲנִי אֶשְׁכַּח אֶת הַגָּאֹן, our teacher, the rabbi, R. Kopelman, R Jakob halewi. His name is his taste and his reasoning with him is well versed in the wisdom of all books, and in particular in the six orders, and who preached the Torah like him and who can recite his praises. He is the noble one of the Torah, a precious stone, whose name was sealed(?), Jakob [---] son of Yehudah halewi of blessed memory. He died in [?] and was buried on Sunday [?] 1541."

The Old Lublin Cemetery was devastated in the 19th century and again during World War II. About 60 matzevoth remain today, including several that are also in Dubnow's letter. The inscriptions recorded in Dubnow's letter from Lublin also include Yehiel, the son, and Israel Isar, the grandson, of the renowned Talmudist *Maharshal* Shlomo Luria (1510-1573); Shalom Shechna, the father-in-law of R. Moses Isserles *REMU* (1510-1573) and "the famous progenitor of Polish Talmudism", "a senior rabbi of Little Poland (Krakow and Lublin)," ²⁵ who was also the teacher of both the *Maharshal* and the *Remu*; as well as other rabbis, who served as heads of the Beth Din of Lublin or in positions such as a *parnas* or a ritual slaughterer. About six years after this letter was sent to Dubnow, Shlomo Baruch Nissenbaum published his *History of the Jews in Lublin*,

²⁴ "Stary cmentarz żydowski w Lublinie (ul. Kalinowszczyzna)." Virtual Shtetl <<https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns/l/264-lublin/114-cemeteries/19862-stary-cmentarz-zydowski-w-lublinie-ul-kalinowszczyzna>>; "LUBLIN: Lubelskie [Głusku]." *International Jewish Cemetery Project*, International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies [<https://iajgscemetery.org/eastern-europe/poland/lublin/>]; Rebecca Weiner, "Virtual Jewish World: Lublin, Poland." *Jewish Virtual Library* [<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/lublin-virtual-jewish-history-tour>]

²⁵ Dubnow, *History of the Jews of Russia and Poland*, pp. 104, 109. Dubnow offers detailed information about this early generation of Lublin rabbis (pp. 112,125,128,129,199).

The specific language of Job and Isaiah incorporated into this epitaph find parallels throughout the Jewish epitaphic tradition.³⁰ The expression of “summoned to the yeshivah on high”, by contrast, is rare, and, at present, only attested on Bialystok’s epitaphic records and in Hershberg’s *Pinkus* records. The value of this expression in Lublin and Bialystok once again speaks to a shared epitaphic tradition separated by nearly 300 years and 246 kilometers.

Mohilev Podolsk. Dubnov’s correspondence from Mohilev Podolsk (RG 87/950a) consists of a four-page letter with the first two pages in cursive Russian recording excerpts from the *Book of Statistics of the Province of Podolia*, dated back to 1889. The text includes notes of events in the years 1564, 1672, and 1784. At the end of page two in a hurried cursive Hebrew script is added that “these words (records), part of the city documents, were found in an ash heap in the rubble of our city.” Then follow two pages of Hebrew text,³¹ with the heading, worded as *Concerning the history of Israel in the city of Mohilev Podolsk*, by Menahem Nahum Nitinski. An introduction in Hebrew follows, and then six Hebrew tombstone transcriptions numbered with Hebrew letters. The Hebrew introduction notes the Russian book from which these records were taken (pp. 477-479), followed by a subheading (Wording on the old matzevoth). The six transcriptions have explanatory footnotes. The last footnote, however, is missing. Within each epitaph, Nitinski also provides parenthetical notes with suggested readings or corrections in place of the original. Dates of death are 1615-1810.³²

The first mention of Jews in Mohilev Podolsk dates back to 1637, their community subsequently destroyed amidst the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648-49). By 1765, 910 tax-paying Jews lived in Mohilev Podolsk with two synagogues.³³ Today near Mohilev Podolsk a large Jewish Cemetery (17 hectares) still exists just south of the Dnister River in Moldava.³⁴ The oldest extant tombstone to-

³⁰ See, for example, Heidi M. Szpek, “May the dew fall upon them”: Jewish Epitaphic Poetry from the late 19th – early 20th Centuries in Bialystok and Bible Reception, *International Joint Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature and the European Association of Biblical Studies*, Helsinki, Finland, 31 July – 4 August, 2018 [<https://www.jewishepitaphs.org/papers-articles-and-essays/>]

³¹ In this folder, the Hebrew pages have been scanned out of order. The transcriptions of the Hebrew epitaphs with an introduction should be followed by a page that continues the footnotes to these epitaphs begun after the final epitaph entry. Also, a page is missing that held footnote #7 of epitaph entry #6.

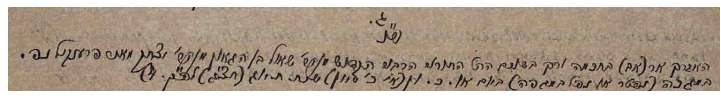
³² Possibly 1615 though even the transcriber questioned the date of death for this father and son.

³³ “Mogilev-Podolsky: Vinnitsa Region.” *My Shtetl: Jewish Towns of Ukraine*, 2012 [https://myshtetl.org/vinnitskaja/mogilev_en.html]

³⁴ “Ataki New Jewish Cemetery (Velchinets).” *ESJF European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative* [<https://www.esjf-cemeteries.org/survey/ataki-new-jewish-cemetery-velchinets/>]

day dates back to the 1860s, much too recent for the Nitinski transcriptions, suggesting an earlier cemetery once existed.

All epitaphs are for men with rabbinic affiliations. The first, for example, remembers Josef Aske(?), son of the grandson Leyb Hasid, head of the *beth din* of Lviv. His epitaph opens with an excerpt from Genesis 47:12 “And Joseph cared for his father and his brothers and all his generation ...,” which Nitinski has for some reason transcribed twice. In the footnote to the first epitaph, he tries to clarify certain details as well as offer his computation for the chronogram used to indicate the date of death = 375, 5375 = 1615. If this record is accurate, the date of death for Rabbi Josef would precede the earliest record of Jews in Mogilev Podolski by more than 20 years! The second epitaph remembers a husband and author, Manasseh Isaiah, son of Avraham, and his wife Reykhel, daughter of Leyb Canpisz(?). The husband and wife both perished in a fire on the 13 or 23 Iyyar 5483 (7/17 May 1723), where they are called ‘kedoshim’ martyrs thus negating death due to a house or business fire or even amidst war. The third epitaph remembers a young religious scholar, Shaul b. Yitzhak Meir Freynkel, who died in a plague on 20 Sivan 5413 or 5493 (5 June 1653 or 23 May 1733).³⁵ In 1732, influenza struck Russia. Nitinski’s note comments on this same bout of influenza as the cause of this young religious scholar’s death. The surname Freynkel is attested to in later birth and death records from Mohilev Podolski from the early 1900s. While two of the last three epitaphs only record dates of death, the last, for a R. Tsvi Hirsh (c. 1810), records that “he never moved from the tent of Torah, always remained in it and that he was “the father of the beth din of *here*”, the same phrase, as noted, attested to in Bialystok, again demonstrating a shared epitaphic tradition. Thus, the Mogilev Podolsk letter offers evidence for the existence of the earliest cemetery in this town as well as for its connections to the early history of this town. Nitinski’s textual emendations and comments in 1894 parallels contemporary challenges in reading Jewish epitaphs.



“Here lies the young scholar, (father?) in wisdom but tender in years, he [–] the many holy ones, our teacher, the rabbi, R. Shaul, son of the gaon, our teacher, the rabbi, R. Yitzhak Meir Freynkel. He died in a plague (he died when the plague fell), Sunday, 20 Sivan 5413 (5493).”

³⁵ Nitinski places the year 1733 in parentheses after the inscription’s date of 1653. In his footnote (#4), he comments that a plague occurred in 1732, suggesting the inscription may have held an error.

Menahem Nahum Nitinski did not choose inscriptions for individuals with rabbinic affiliations. Rather his records challenge the known historical date of Mohilev Podolsk (1615 or 1637) and give us a glimpse into the challenges of everyday life in this town where 'fire' and 'plague' cut life short.

Kishinev. The Kishinev letter is one page long, divided into six horizontal registers by ruled lines. It is prefaced by a (later) heading in purple pencil "written in Kishinev." This letter is part of Dubnow's Folder RG87/947c, dated back back to 1894. Dates of death for these six epitaphs range from 1712 to 1794. Four are for women, who may be daughters of rabbis, and two for men, only one of whom is a rabbi.

Dates of death suggest that these transcriptions predate the famous Chisinau Jewish Cemetery on Milano Street that covers over a million square meters with 23,430 graves, the earliest of which is dated back to the 19th century.³⁶ Dubnow's Kishinev transcriptions may come from tombstones located in an early Jewish Cemetery then near Kishinev, in the village of Riscani,³⁷ today, a northern district of Kishinev. The Kishinev *Pinkus* notes that "the beginnings of the Jewish community of Kishinev are covered by the mist of time," but date back to the 18th century.³⁸ While a *hevra kaddisha* was founded in 1774 for a small Jewish population (540/7%), all but one of Dubnow's letter epitaphs predate this *hevra*, suggesting these epitaphs derive from the Riscani (or another no longer extant) cemetery. When Kishinev became the capital of Bessarabia under Russian rule in 1818, the Jewish community developed quickly and the Kishinev Jewish Cemetery that most are familiar with today was founded.³⁹

As noted, the Kishinev letter records six epitaphs, four for women and two for men. One is for a rabbi (Aharon, son of R. Shalom Halewi, d. 1712). He also bears the 'ha-kadosh' designation, typically used for a martyr though no information is offered or, at present, exists elsewhere explaining his death. The other man (Pesach, b. Yehuda, d. 1750) is described as 'important, respected', the same adjective more typically used for women, including three

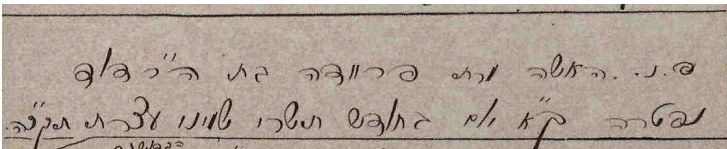
³⁶ "Kishinev Jewish Cemeteries." JewishGen KehilaLinks. [https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/chisinau/RES_Cemeteries.asp]

³⁷ "Chisinau." Encyclopedia of Jewish Communities in Romania, Volume 2 (Chişinău, Moldova) 47°00' 28°51', p. 400 [https://www.jewishgen.org/Yizkor/pinkas_romania/rom2_00400.html]

³⁸ *The Jews of Kishinev* (Chişinău, Moldova) 47°00' / 28°57'. Translation of Yehudei Kishinev by Sheli Fain. Tel Aviv, 1950, p. 20 [<https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/kishinev/kishinev.html#TOC>]

³⁹ "Kishinev Jewish Cemeteries." JewishGen KehilaLinks. [https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/chisinau/RES_Cemeteries.asp]

of the women remembered in these epitaphs.⁴⁰ All women seem to be daughters of rabbis by virtue of the phrase 'daughter of the rabbi, Reb' or 'daughter of our teacher, our rabbi'. Their precise paternal ancestry or connection to a distinguished rabbinic lineage is uncertain. For Freida, daughter of the rabbi, R. David, who died in 1764, her father's given name is the same as a record in the Kishinev *Pinkus* from a Romanian historian, who reports a legal ruling in favor of a Jew named David in 1742, whose goods had been stolen.⁴¹ While these Kishinev epitaphs offer evidence for those buried in Kishinev's earliest cemetery in Riscani, this particular record may be one of the earliest connections between a Kishinev epitaph and documented historic detail for this Jewish community, thus explaining this unknown Kishinev *zamier's* provocative choice and its value hinting at the world of 18th century Kishinev.



"Here lies the woman, Miss Freida, daughter of R. David. She died on 1 Tishri, Shimoni Atzeret 5525 [1764]."

Ostroha and Stepan.

In RG87/953, letters to Dubnow from four cities in the Volhynia province of current N.W. Ukraine are gathered. The cities are Ostroh(a), Zaslav, Stepan and Olik; however, only the letters from Ostroha and Stepan record a Hebrew epitaph from their respective cemeteries, with the Stepan letter also mentioning a paternal connection to Lutsk, due west of Rivne, the center of the Rivne region where these cities are located. The Ostroha letter contains only transcriptions; the Stepan epitaphs are set within two larger letters.

The city of Stepan, south of Ostroha, is not far from Lutsk (120km); the letter from Lutsk will be taken up shortly. A Jewish community is noted in Stepan in the 17th century, a community that like so many in this area suffered during the Khmelnytsky Uprising.⁴² Stepan had a Jewish cemetery in the northeast quadrant of town

⁴⁰ See the examples of translations at [www.bagnowka.pl]

⁴¹ *The Jews of Kishinev* (Chişinău, Moldova) 47°00' / 28°57'. Translation of *Yehudei Kishinev*. Edited by Yitzhak Koren, Tel Aviv 1950, p. 16.

⁴² "Stepan." The Faina Petrzyakova Scientific Center for Judaica and Jewish Art, 2022 [http://www.jewish-heritage.org.ua/en/6352/stepan.html]

near the Horyn River but all that remains today is a dilapidated metal fence and less than two dozen matzevoth, dating from 1919-1936.⁴³ Research by the ESJF European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative suggests it dates back to the early 19th century, however, one Stepan letter, as will be seen, preserves the epitaph of R. Josef Joel b. Jakob Aharon Heilprin (d. 1769), whose tombstone is still extant today, suggesting that this cemetery dates back to the 18th century.⁴⁴

Set within an anonymous two-page letter, written to Dubnow on 13 Adar I 5657 (3 February 1897) from the city of Ostroha, is an epitaph of the prominent gaon, R. Josef Joel, head of the *beth din* of Stepan, son of a prominent gaon of a distinguished lineage, Jakob Aharon Heilprin, head of the *beth din* of Lutsk. R. Josef Joel Heilprin died on 10 Adar II [1769].⁴⁵ A second letter in the same cursive handwriting, with the heading 'Stepan', records two additional inscriptions. The first for R. Yehuda Halewi, a rabbi from the community of Stepan and the surroundings, and the son-in-law of a Yehiel Michal, who was a student of the renown Magid of Mezritsh.⁴⁶ He died in 5503 (1743). The second remembers another rabbi, Israel Dov Ber, son of the *maggid* David Halewi from Stepan and author of the book "Hanagit Adam." He died on the 12 Cheshvan 5602 (15 October 1841).

This folder concludes with a two-page letter, in flowery-cursive Hebrew, that preserves five epitaphs, prefaced by "These are the words which were engraved upon the matzevah of our rabbi, the great gaon, whose name is Maharsha, a tsadik of blessed memory, who is carefully buried in the sacred earth of *here*, our community of Ostroha." The letter closes with the comment: "All this was transcribed letter by letter" and then stamped Naftali Hertz Lerner, the righteous teacher of the holy community of Ostroha."⁴⁷ Lerner transcribed the two-sided epitaph of the "Maharsha of Ostroha, Shmuel Eliezer, son of Yehudah Halewi, who was summoned to the *yeshivah on high* on 5 Kislev 5392 (20 November 1632)." He also transcribed the epitaphs of Maharsha's three granddaughters, who were buried near him (Hinda 5501; Sarol 5501; Sarah 5502), and another rabbi and his daughter (Menahem Mendil b. Eliezer, no name, no dates of death), who was also the Maharsha's grand-

⁴³ "Stepan." *ESJF European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative* <https://www.esjf-cemeteries.org/survey/stepan-jewish-cemetery/>

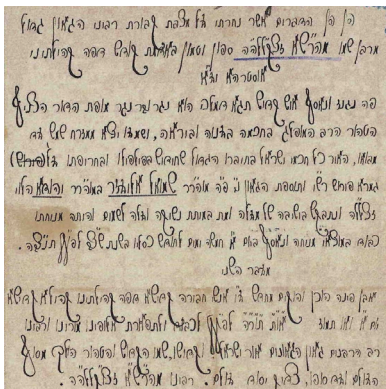
⁴⁴ Same.

⁴⁵ A family record at [https://www.jewishgen.org/webtrees/individual.php?pid=11797&ged=1_70125_u.ged] is the source of this date of death as 1769.

⁴⁶ David Biale, et al, *Hasidism: A New History*, Princeton University Press, 2019, pp. 77-99.

⁴⁷ It is unknown whether Lerner was the *zamier* for all these towns in the Volhynia province.

daughter. The expression of ‘yeshivah on high’ is found, as noted, though rare, in Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery in Bialystok (1900, 1927, 1931), in the Lublin letter epitaph (1623) and now here in Ostroha (1632), revealing over 300 years of continuity in the language of epitaphs among these distant cities.



Preface to the Maharsha's epitaph, Ostroha.

Ostroha's Jewish community began in the late 14th century and became a leading Jewish spiritual center and one of the four original communities of the Council of the Four Lands.⁴⁸ Destroyed amidst the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648), it regained its stature by the 18th Century. Shlomo Luria (Maharashal) was part of this community, as was Shmuel Eliezer (Maharasha), whose epitaph Lerner recorded for Dubnow. The *ohel* of the Maharsha still stands today and the cemetery has been partially restored.⁴⁹ Both the Stepan and Ostroha epitaphs offer evidence of the antiquity of these Jewish cemeteries. Clearly, once again, the zamier's choice of epitaphs is guided by their value in detailing the rabbinic dynasties of these towns. Most unique is the recording of the granddaughters of these two rabbis.

Gomel. The Gomel folder RG87/947a is dated back to 1898 based on the Russian date at the end of this letter. Dubnow's letter from Gomel within this folder records one partial Hebrew inscription that dates back to 1751, framed by cursive Russian text. The letter reads:

"(Russian) In Gomel, in Babushkin's school (Troitskaya Street), where, according to legend, Jews were slaughtered in 1648 and where there was a Jewish cemetery.

⁴⁸ "Ostrog," *Encyclopedia of Jewish Life*, p. 950 [https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ostrog]
⁴⁹ "Ostroh." Shtetl Routes [(https://shtetlroutes.eu/files/shtetlroutes/pdf/ShtetlRoutes_EN_www2_p339_349_Ostroh.pdf)]

I found (this stone) in the yard, overgrown by weeds.

(Hebrew) a stone matzevah is broken.

(Russian) Other things on it include:

(Hebrew) 1. upright and God-fearing

2. who turned from evil and set aside [times for Torah]

3. with commandments - - -

4. ---- Torah

5. Our teacher, the scholar, R. Hillel, son of R. Azariel

6. --- [May] his soul [be bound] in the bond of [everlasting] life.

7. He died on the 19th day in the month of

8. Kislev (5)512 according to the shortened reckoning [26 November 1751].

(Russian) Personally written on 24 August 1898

Babushkin's son in Gomel"

1898 by Babuszkin's son in Gomel," thus confirming Dubnow was the recipient not the author. Though broken, what remains of this tombstone clearly indicates the deceased was a rabbi and religious scholar. The epithets that precede his name and patronymic derive from the book of Job (1:1,8) and are part of the standard epitaphic tradition.⁵⁰

Little information exists about the Gomel Jewish Cemetery save a reference that when the Cossacks attacked Gomel in the Khmelnytsky Uprising (1648-49) they left 2000 Jewish victims; those victims were buried in this cemetery.⁵¹ Yehudah Leib Kahanowicz recounts this attack and the legend that grew from it in his "Homel: History of the City."⁵² Amidst the Cossack attack in 1648, only one young Jewish woman survived, having hidden among the dead and the graves on the cemetery. She later married a man named Babuszkin, beginning the family name that continues to the present. Later, in 1898, a *zamier* found a broken tombstone in the [court]yard of a school or synagogue on Troitskaya Street and reported it to Dubnow. This discovery may mark the site of the former cemetery in the oldest part of Gomel, in the vicinity of the Great Synagogue and several girls' schools. This broken tombstone, however, is not the tombstone for a victim of the Khmelnytsky Uprising, but rather for a man, who died in 1751 as recorded in the epitaph. Kahanowicz dates back this tombstone to 1765 perhaps in connection with the first entry in the Gomel *Pinkus*, dating to 1766.⁵³ At that time, there were 685 Jewish families with Chabad Hasidism predominating.⁵⁴ The tombstone (1751) in Dubnow's letter predates this first *Pinkus* entry questioning whether reference is to the same cemetery.

Since 1922, the Gomel cemetery had been vandalized, finally demolished in 1961. Attempts to restore it saw the exhumation of human remains removed and reinterred in the nearby Pru-

⁵⁰ Heidi M. Szpek, "Here Lies a Perfect and Upright Man": Jewish Epitaphs from Drohiczyń, Poland. Western Jewish Studies Association Conference. Portland State University. 18-19 March 2007; Szpek, "On the Influence of Job on Jewish Epitaphs." Pacific Northwest Society of Biblical Literature. Gonzaga University Spokane, Washington. May 2011; Szpek, "May the dew fall upon them": Jewish Epitaphic Poetry from the late 19th – early 20th Centuries in Białystok and Bible Reception. *International Joint Conference of the Society of Biblical Literature and the European Association of Biblical Studies*. Helsinki, Finland. 31 July – 4 August 2018; Szpek, *Bagnowka: A Modern Jewish Cemetery on the Russian Pale*. UIniverse, 2017: 352.

⁵¹ "Our History." Gomel Jewish Religious Community: Beth Jakob. [https://www.jewishgomel.com/eng/courses/nasha-istoriya/]; and "Homel," YIVO Encyclopedia, pp. 750-751.

⁵² In *Cities and Towns in Israel: A Sacred Monument for the Communities that were Destroyed by Tyrants and our Poor People in the Land of Israel*. Edited by Y. L. Fishman, 2018: 190. [In Hebrew] On p. 190, Kahanowicz references this legend, and the tombstone discovered, noting, however, that Dubnow found it in 1896.

⁵³ Same, p. 190.

⁵⁴ "Gomel." Encyclopedia Judaica. Volume 7 (FR-HA). Keter Publishing Company, 1978, p. 388.

Jews had lived in Lutsk since the 10th century and in the 13th century a community of Karaites settled there as well. Both Jews (Rabbinite) and Karaites were granted the rights of the Jews of Lithuania and latter of Poland-Lithuania. From 1569 to 1795, Lutsk was a district center for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, after which it became part of the Russian Empire.⁵⁷ The city suffered under the Khmelnytsky Uprising but persevered. In the 18th century, Lutsk may have also been attacked during the Haidamack Uprising though the date of death for the 'martyr' Juda-Zev Wolf, 1762, does not directly coincide with the three primary Haidamack attacks in 1734, 1750 and 1768.⁵⁸

Contemporary sources connect Juda-Zev's death with a ritual murder and statement that his execution was in 1764;⁵⁹ however, this letter clearly reads 1762.⁶⁰ Noting the 1696 blood libel execution of four Jews, the YIVO entry for Lutsk continues: "In another case in 1764, Yehudah Ze'ev ben Toviyah chose execution rather than to convert to Christianity,"⁶¹ suggesting that his death involved blood libel. A recent translation of the Old Russian narrative into which this Hebrew epitaph was set reveals the shocking details of Juda-Zev's murder:

[...] a message that came to me from my late mother, who heard about all this from people living at the time, specifically from her late grandmother and grandfather. In the old cemetery in Lutsk, lie the ashes of a certain martyred Jew. The tombstone on the grave has survived to this day. (Hebrew epitaph:) *A Memorial, a holy cave, his fate was received. His name was holy, his name was great, and his name was awesome, the interpreter, R. Juda Zev-Wolf, son of R. Tuvia. He ascended to the heavens on the Shabbath day, and his judgment was bitter, 28 Tammuz year 5522 (8 July 1762).* The news goes as follows: Saint Wolf was a beautiful young man, very pious and learned. Catholic priests living in the city of Lutsk at that time, numbering three thousand people, seduced by his beauty and intellect, decided to include this young Jew in the Catholic Church at any cost. In the disputes Wolf, the saint, defeated them, and as his victories in these disputes increased, the desire to include him in the Church, which

⁵⁷ "Lutsk." YIVO Encyclopedia, p. 1103.

⁵⁸ "Haidamaka Uprisings." In *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine* <https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CH%5CA%5CHaidamakauprisings.htm>

⁵⁹ "Lutsk: History" Virtual Shtetl notes in 1764 they (the Jews of Lutsk) were accused of ritual murder (rabbi Jehuda Ze'ev ben Tovia died a martyr's death) <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns/l/983-lutsk/99-history/137634-history-of-community-1764-and-Jehuda-is-called-a-rabbi>. "Lutsk Volhynia, Ukraine: Historical Sketch." JewishGenKehilahLinks notes his martyrdom occurred seven decades after the 1696 blood libel execution of four Jews. <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/lutsk/history.asp>

⁶⁰ The 18th Century Ashkenazi cursive writing has several distinct letters as compared to the 19th and later centuries. The letters *beth* (= 2) and *dalet* (4) can easily be confused; however, in this letter the *beth* in such words as *Zev*, *ben*, *Tuvia*, etc. versus the *dalet* in *kadosh*, *gadol*, *'had*, etc. indicates that the date is (5)522 not (5)524. <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns/l/983-lutsk/99-history/137634-history-of-community-1764-and-Jehuda-is-called-a-rabbi>. <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/lutsk/history.asp> citing Encyclopedia

⁶¹ "Lutsk." YIVO Encyclopedia, p. 1103.

was losing, also increased. Seeing the futility of their efforts, the losers tossed a slaughtered pig to St. Wolf's house. According to the custom of the time, it was necessary to reward the farmer [for his loss] with millet in such quantity that it covered the pig placed on its hind legs perpendicularly. Of course, not only Saint Wolf but the entire community of the time could not give such a high ransom. After serving several months in prison, he was given the choice of Catholic baptism or death by quartering (of the body). He chose the last option.⁶²

The letter continues with the coincidental death of those involved in this ritual murder. In Lutsk, a New Karaite Cemetery was "demolished and overbuilt" with no extant tombstones.⁶³ The (Rabbinite) Cemetery was located along the Styr River, about three kilometers east of the Choral Synagogue and Jewish Quarter. A 1994 Survey located it on Lenin Street in the surrounding rural area near other cemeteries.⁶⁴ Today, only a monument stands on the Old Jewish Cemetery where Juda-Zev Wolf was buried.⁶⁵ In Binshtok's letter to Dubnow, we not only have the only extant details of the Lutsk Jewish Cemetery at the turn of the 20th Century and a possible detail to correct in the historic record (1762 not 1764), we also have a written version of the Lutsk oral legend of Juda-Zev Wolf's martyrdom, resulting from jealousy of this young man's wisdom and his refusal to convert to Christianity.

Lipoviets RG87/1023 preserves a four-page letter from *zamier* Yehudah Leyb Weisman to Simon Dubnow, dated 21 February 1893, and stamped by Weisman nearly two months later, regarding a tombstone discovered in the Lipoviets Jewish Cemetery. The history of Lipoviets, Ukraine, due east of Vinnytsia, finds Jews first mentioned in this city in 1747, with population of about 1000 at this time.⁶⁶ They suffered under the Haidamaks at that time.⁶⁷ A cemetery was established in Lipoviets c. 1700 with its last burial in 1993. A Jewish cemetery still exists today, though neglected,⁶⁸

⁶² Translated by Joanna Czaban, Russian and Yiddish translator. Krynk, Poland, September 2024.

⁶³ "Lutsk New Karaite Jewish Cemetery: Historical Overview." *ESJF European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative* <https://www.esjf-cemeteries.org/survey/lutsk-new-karaite-jewish-cemetery/>

⁶⁴ Yoysef Retseptor (Joseph Receptor), "Once there was a town named Lutsk and it was destroyed." (*Geven a Shtet Lutsk, Geven un Umgekumen*) Paris, France https://bjbark.com/lutsk,_ukraine.htm#ONCE%20THERE%20WAS%20A%20TOWN%20NAMED%20LUTSKAND%20IT%20WAS%20DESTROYED

⁶⁵ "Cmentarz żydowski Stary w Łucku (wul. Zapowitna 1)." *Virtual Shtetl*. [<https://sztetl.org.pl/en/node/182236>]

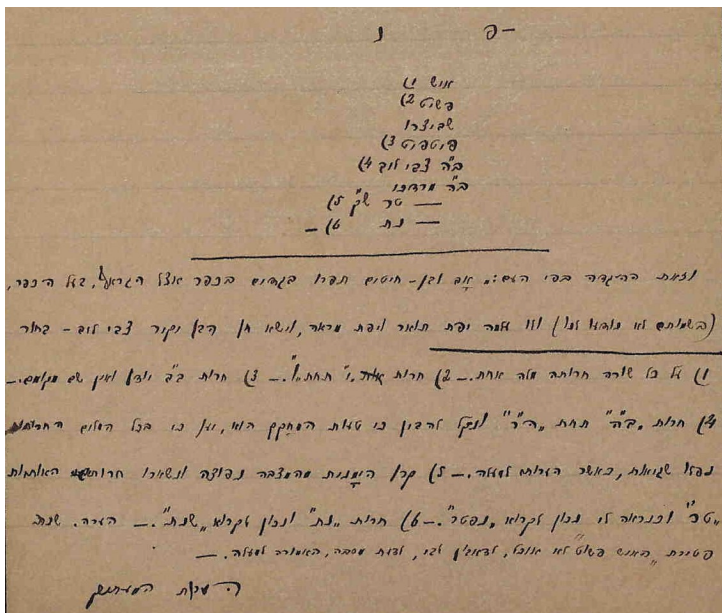
⁶⁶ "Lipoviets." *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust*. Edited by Shmuel Spector. New York University Press, 2001, Volume 2, p. 735.

⁶⁷ "Lipoviets: Vinnitsa Region." *My Shtetl: Jewish Towns in Ukraine*. [https://myshtetl.org/vinnitskaja/lipov-ec_en.html]

⁶⁸ "LIPOVETS [Lipovetz, Lypovets, Lipowiec, Lipovec, Lypovec]." International Jewish Cemetery Project, *International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies* [<https://iajgscemetery.org/eastern-europe/ukraine/lipovets-lipovetz-lypovets>]

as well a memorial that remembers those Jews murdered in the Holocaust.⁶⁹

In this Dubnow's letter, the same epitaph is discussed twice although no names or date of death are recorded, offering no hint as to which cemetery this epitaph belongs. Weisman provides running notes for each line of text, discussing even the most seemingly trivial details. The value thus of this letter and epitaph is Weisman's text-critical analysis, compelling as an early example of the study of the Jewish epitaph as a literary source. For example, after the opening abbreviation (פ נ), he notes the next line in every epitaph (lit. song) has one word: "man." One intriguing detail is the use of the adjective "simple, plain" (פשיט) to describe the man remembered here. In thousands of epitaphs from Bialystok, the Podlasie region and varied locations in Eastern Europe, this is the first time such an accolade is attested, with variations of the expression of "perfect and upright, God-fearing" (Job 1:4,7) most often used.⁷⁰



Lipoviets Gravestone Letter excerpt.

Weisman provides a note for nearly each (incomplete) line of the epitaphs

⁶⁹ "Lypovets." Memorial Museums. <https://www.memorialmuseums.org/memorialmuseum/memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-lypovets>

⁷⁰ Szpek, *Bagnowka*, pp.241-288.

Conclusion

This study of a small, overlooked collection of gravestone inscriptions within the Communalia Series of the YIVO Dubnow Papers demonstrates that zamiers responded to Dubnow's plea. We see Dubnow's plea in action – a call for documentation and a response via letters. These letters provide examples of what types of information were gathered and the nature of the sources used. While the sources are tombstone inscriptions, where they were discovered – existent and non-existent cemeteries, an ash heap, town records, adds to their intrigue. In his annotations and color highlights of certain details in these letters and epitaphs, we are also witness to the nature of the details Dubnow sought for writing his history. More pertinent, however, for cemetery studies today is that these zamiers – and Dubnow, of course, recognized the importance of tombstone inscriptions for writing that history. These inscriptions preserve names and biographic details, as well as historic events. Why he did not use many of these specific records in his history cannot precisely be known, although perhaps the details from smaller towns were just too overwhelming to include in Dubnow's already extensive *History of the Jews*. Yet names and events from these letters can properly be inserted into his history by interested readers.

To return to the initial questions posed at the beginning of this article, that is, *Why did the zamiers select the specific epitaphs, which they transcribed for Dubnow? And What value does each gravestone letter hold for Jewish historiography then and now?* Quite simply it would seem that the zamiers selected what was critical in relation to especially rabbinic dynasties as well as historic events that impacted their towns. As to the value of these letters today, especially in relation to Cemetery Studies, these letters are critical for returning the names and biographic details of individual Jewish men and women lost to the historic record because of the Holocaust and the Post-Communist world as well as information of now non-existent cemeteries. Equally significant for epigraphers and translators of the Jewish epitaph, these letters record the challenges in translating these epitaphs over a century ago as well as the shared epitaphic tradition that is only beginning to be researched and understood.⁷¹

⁷¹ This article is dedicated to the memory of Frank Idzikowski, *Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund* researcher and photographer, and spouse of Heidi M. Szpek, who passed away on December 31, 2024. For 20 years, Frank contributed to the restoration of Jewish heritage in Bialystok and Podlasie.

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