

# The Roads of Baal Shem Tov: Reimagining the Carpathians as a Jewish Space in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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*This article examines the Jewish imagination of the Carpathians in 20th-century literature. Non-Jewish observers who discovered the Carpathians at this time typically saw the Jews as an alien symbol of urban civilization that disturbed the authenticity of mountain life. The article analyzes essays from various Jewish intellectuals, whose aim was to rediscover the Carpathians as a Jewish space through the figure of the Hasidic leader Baal Shem Tov, who lived in the area during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By connecting his life with the mountain landscape, they created a Jewish figure embedded in nature and not alienated from it.*

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## 1 Introduction

In 1933, the rabbi and writer Markus Ehrenpreis, who was born in Galicia and served as Chief Rabbi of Stockholm, visited the Carpathian Mountains in Poland. His companions and guides were the editor of the Jewish Polish newspaper *Chwila* [The Moment], Leon Weinstock, and the renowned Polish writer Stanislaw Vincenz. The trip was similar to the numerous trips that had been made before, as the Carpathians had become a famous tourist destination among the Polish intelligentsia as early as the 1870s, starting with the physician Tytus Chałubiński.<sup>1</sup> However, what made the Carpathians worth visiting that year was not only the beauty of nature or challenging mountain hikes, but also its connection to the personal history of Baal Shem Tov (c. 1698 - 1760), the founder of Hasidism, who spent part of his life in Tovste (Polish: Tłuste) and visited secluded places in the Carpathians for the purpose of meditation. The Jewish and non-Jewish folklore of the Carpathians contained many stories about the Baal Shem Tov, which may have attracted the visitors, such as the story of the secret passage to the Palestinian city of Safed, which the Baal Shem Tov used to communicate with the Kabbalists.

Rabbi Ehrenpreis and Vincenz's trip was one of many to the Carpathians in the 20th century, but its focus on the Hasidic leader Baal Shem Tov is unique. It helps to understand that besides the Polish and Ukrainian processes of rediscovery of the Carpathians, Jewish intellectuals also thought about a special connection of Jewish mysticism with the sublime power of nature. We can note a few such approaches represented by various Jewish intellectuals and leaders. In some cases, the Jewish

discovery of the mountains went along with Ukrainian and Polish romantic and national thought.<sup>2</sup> The practice of visiting the mountains to build physical strength for a boy scout is reminiscent of similar Polish and Ukrainian practices. However, Baal Shem Tov's motive is more deeply rooted in Jewish spiritual tradition. The modern intellectuals, who study Baal Shem Tov, were inspired by his closeness to nature and border personality. Following in the footsteps of Baal Shem Tov helped them overcome the challenges of finding a place for Jewish identity in interwar Poland.

In this article, I will explore how the motif of the Baal Shem Tov in the mountains reappears in texts written by various Jewish authors – an ethnographer, a Yiddish leftist reporter, a Polish novelist, and a Yiddish poet – after their visit to the Carpathians from the 1920s until the 1960s. The discovery of each author began with a journey, for ethnographic research, reportage, or inspiration. They came from different backgrounds and represented different modern ideologies, but they shared a fascination with the mountains as a metaphysical and tangible frontier. The experience of the Baal Shem Tov, who underwent his transformation in the Carpathians, inspired thoughts about the possibilities of Jewish transformation. The Baal Shem Tov's connection to nature and the non-Jewish world on the one hand placed him beyond traditional Jewish society, but on the other hand did not alienate him. I argue that the figure of the Baal Shem Tov embodied the hopes of Jewish intellectuals for the ability to come to terms with Polish and Ukrainian society. They believed that the mountains offered various possibilities for interaction between Jews and non-Jews. Using the motif of the Baal Shem Tov, who was deeply connected to nature, the authors reject the common nationalist claim that Jews represented a civilization that spoils the mountains.

As the literary scholar Jagoda Wierzejska shows in her article, the Carpathians became an important theme in Polish interwar discourse as a „domestic landscape.“ By including the Carpathians in the historical narrative, on the one hand, and by presenting them as an exotic tourist destination, on the other, the Polish discourse represented in the guidebooks successfully made the mountains part of the national imagery, next to the Tatras.<sup>3</sup> The travel guidebooks praised the development of commercial mass tourism. However, as we will see below, the Ukrainian and Jewish intelligentsia criticized touristification, seeing it as a danger for the „right“ tourists. These representatives of the intelligentsia defined „real“ tourists in different ways but tried to distinguish their practices from those inscribed by the Polish national media.

If the process of imagining the Carpathians has already appeared in literature, Jewish themes are rarely found there. In her monograph, *The Carpathians: Discovering the Highlands of Poland and Ukraine* (2021), and numerous articles, historian Patrice Dabrowski provides some of the most important insights into the history of the discovery of the Carpathians.<sup>4</sup> Dabrowski does not single out the

Jewish imagination of the mountains, although the processes she describes in the context of the Tatry, the Chornohora, and the Bieszczady show the ways in which the mountains were appropriated by intellectuals. Since she talks a lot about the nationalization of the mountains, the Jews usually appear as the object of national narratives. One of Dabrowski's articles, for example, is devoted to the Jewish figure as it was represented in non-Jewish literature in the 19th century. She points out that in the early 20th century the Jew undergoes a transition from a mediating figure to an intruder, dissonant with nature.<sup>5</sup> I will use this „intruder“ motif as one of the starting points for my analysis of the Jewish narratives of the Carpathians, perceiving the texts of interwar Jewish intellectuals as a response to the assertion that Jews are aliens in the mountains.

In her article on ethnography in the nationalizing state, Anna Engelking analyzes the case of the Jewish ethnographer Chaim Chajes (1902-194?) who was researching the Baal Shem Tov legends in the Carpathians. She emphasizes the difference between his multilingual and multicultural upbringing in Eastern Galicia and the nationalizing approach of the Polish state in the interwar period. Mentioning Chajes's research on the exchange of cultural beliefs between peasants and Jews in the Carpathians, Engelking notes that his scholarly lenses are class rather than national.<sup>6</sup> Not only did he fill in the gaps in Jewish ethnography, but he saw Jewish culture and culture in general in a methodologically different way, as one interrelated.

The figure of the writer Stanislaw Vincenz and his interest in the Jewish presence in the mountains attracted scholarly attention. Polish scholar Dorota Burda-Fischer analyzed Vincenz's writings before and after the war and explained that the writer used Jewish and especially Hasidic themes to emphasize the multicultural coexistence of different ethnicities in the mountains. He portrayed it through his own experience of witnessing Jewish life in the Carpathians during his childhood, as well as through later encounters with Jews.<sup>7</sup> Burda-Fischer shows how he selectively portrays relations between Jews and non-Jews as idyllic, avoiding mention of the conflicts and economic tensions that existed in the area. In his postwar writings, Vincenz did not write explicitly about the Holocaust, only alluding to the extermination of the local population.<sup>8</sup> In my article, I place his views on the multiculturalist in the context of the writings of contemporary Jewish writers and show how Vincenz was in constant dialogue with Jewish thought, but also inspired interest in the Baal Shem Tov among Jewish intellectuals. His use of the Baal Shem Tov figure as an example of the possibility of peaceful coexistence is in keeping with Jewish intellectual literature of the interwar period.

The literary scholar Efrat Gal-Ed researched how Baal Shem appeared in the poetry of the Jewish poet from Bukovina, Itzik Manger. Itzik Manger was a native of the Carpathian Mountains and therefore very sensitive to the rootedness of the Baal Shem legend in the local landscape. She compared the writings of Itzik Manger

about Jesus Christ with those about Baal Shem, treating them as counterparts.<sup>9</sup> Her insights into Manger are very important for understanding the poetry of Yankev Shternberg, since both poets were colleagues. The meeting of Baal Shem and Jesus in Shternberg's poetry acquires an additional meaning of competition because of the post-Holocaust perspective.

## 2 The Unapparent Jews

Throughout the 20th century, the Carpathians lay on shifting borders, and thus Jewish life in different parts of the Carpathians looked different, and each part was embedded in different cultural contexts. The most obvious and significant division in the interwar period was between former Galicia, which became part of the Polish Republic, and Transcarpathia, which became part of Czechoslovakia. After World War II, both territories were incorporated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Despite these multiple affiliations, the population has much in common with the strong Hasidic presence in history. Therefore, it is worthwhile to look at sources from both parts of the region - travelogues, ethnographic research, and fiction. The languages of the sources are Polish, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. The chronological frame focuses on the interwar period, which was crucial for the Jewish myth of the Carpathians. However, I also mention sources from the 19th century and provide an overview of the post-Holocaust image of the Jewish Carpathians.

Although Jews have lived in the Polish part of the Carpathians since the early modern period, their presence in narrative sources increases in the 19th century due to the development of ethnography and visits to the mountains. Polish data on the Eastern Carpathians indicate a stable Jewish presence in the *poviats* (districts) of Kolomyia, Kosiv, Nadvirna and Pechenizhyn in the Stanislawow Voivodeship, ranging from 5-7% of the population. In 1921 the Kosiv *poviat* had 7,275 Jews out of a population of 77,221 (9.4%). The town of Kosiv itself had 2,166 Jews (51.2%) and Verkhonii Yaseniv, mentioned by Vincenz, had 34 Jews (1.5%). The majority of the population was Greek Catholic, but in some places, such as Kuty, most of the non-Jews were Roman Catholics.<sup>10</sup> Among the various types of Jews living in the mountains, most lived in small villages south of Ivano-Frankivsk (Polish, Stanisławów), while some were among the urban middle class in small towns like Kolomyia. A few were wealthy, such as the Groedels family, the timber magnates who lived in Skole (now in Lviv Oblast). Jews in the villages worked the land, but also owned small shops. Some were winemakers or orchard owners. During the interwar period, non-Jewish observers most often encountered the Jews as hotel owners or hosts when they visited the mountains for leisure.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, a number of political movements began to engage Jewish youth. Trips to the Carpathians and contact with nature became a deliberate instrument of the attempt to educate young people and draw them away from

the old shtetl life. Zionist organizations set up colonies in the Carpathians, giving Jewish youth the opportunity to spend a few weeks in nature. Nature was supposed to prepare them for future work in kibbutzim in Palestine, where they would work hard. Historian Kamil Kijek argues that this kind of experience was a symbol of the spiritual transformation of youth after their politicization.<sup>12</sup>

The Holocaust destroyed the Jewish population of both parts of the Carpathians, leaving only a few survivors, most of whom did not return after the war.

### 3 Baal Shem Tov

Israel ben Eliezer, better known as the Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), was a key figure in the Hasidic religious movement that emerged at the end of the 18th century. He came from the Ukrainian region of Podolia, where he worked at various jobs, from kosher butcher to mohel. From a young age, Israel ben Eliezer was interested in learning Kabbalah. He came to the Carpathian region because of his wife Hana, who was a sister of Rabbi Gershon of Kutly, a small town near the mountains. It is said that Israel ben Eliezer began to meditate and isolate himself in the mountains. Later, he became famous as a healer and began to use the name Baal Shem Tov, a title that indicates his healing skills and abilities. His activities and charisma made him famous, and Baal Shem Tov was invited to live in Medzhybizh (Yiddish, Mezhbizh, Polish, Międzybóž).<sup>13</sup> The earliest source that tells us about Baal Shem Tov is a collection of the stories titled “Shivhei ha-Besht [In Praise of Baal Shem Tov],” written by Dov ben Samuel Baer in 1780-1810s, first published in 1814 in Hebrew and translated into Yiddish in 1815.<sup>14</sup> These stories are one of the first examples of the myth of the Baal Shem Tov, containing the main elements used in the later mythologization, including the mountain episode. According to the book, Besht [a portmanteau for Baal Shem Tov] lived in Tovste, but traveled to the mountains for isolation. He often fasted for long periods as a *hefsek* (interruption of the daily routine). When he was hungry, he would dig a small dugout and fill it with flour and water and bake it in the heat of the sun. This was his only meal after fasting. All these days he was alone.<sup>15</sup> The stories of Baal Shem Tov depict him as a person who is in the constant contact with the local highlanders. However, he does not fall a victim of the *opryshky* (bandits), thanks to the magical ability and the authority, which overcomes the rule of violence.

In other versions of the story, Baal Shem Tov moved to the Carpathians together with his wife. He stayed in a place called Gebirg, and she visited him on a cart, took clay he gathered and sold it in the city. Another story claims Baal Shem Tov had a distillery producing alcohol. Sometimes he went up to the hills, where he had a hut and spent his days fasting and then returned home for Shabbat.<sup>16</sup>

„In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov“ does not mention the name of the mountains, but from the proximity of Tovste it is evident that they were the Carpathians. The mountains and nature helped him to achieve his revelations. Seclusion in

the mountains was not a typical practice for Jewish scholars, nor was being away from the community. In the stories, Israel ben Eliezer seems to be the rebel who breaks the rules, for example, by refusing to kiss the mezuzah. His friends and the Jews of the Kutny community usually do not understand his behavior and only later discover his reasoning.

We do not know whether the authors discussed in the following articles have read "In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov." However, among the literature on Hasidism known to Stanislaw Vincenz were Martin Buber's writings on Hasidim, supposedly „The Legend of Baal Shem" (1908)<sup>17</sup> and the "History of Hasidism" (1931) by the Jewish historian from Russian Empire Shimon Dubnov.<sup>18</sup> These authors treated the mountain landscape in the story differently. In Martin Buber's fictionalized story, it does not play an important role. Stanislaw Vincenz criticized Martin Buber for his inability to give a sense of geography to the stories about the Baal Shem Tov, contrasting it with the sense of landscape in other biographical texts, such as „Little Flowers of St. Francis" (14<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>19</sup> A similar criticism appears in the later writings of the poet Itzik Manger, who also came from the Carpathian region and believed that the legend of Baal Shem Tov was inseparable from the mountainous landscape.<sup>20</sup> However, historian Simon Dubnov, in his book *The History of Hasidism*, vividly described the Carpathian Mountains and how the landscape influenced the personality of the Baal Shem Tov: „In this beautiful corner of the world, which was certainly more pristine and grandiose a hundred and fifty years ago than it is today; in this beautiful region, amidst high mountains, deep valleys, and dense, primeval forests, Israel Besht lived a quiet, contemplative life." The historian Ilia Lurie noted that although Dubnov never visited the Carpathians, he borrowed the idea of the connection between landscape and personality from Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus*.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the explanation of the connection between the mountain landscape and the personality of the Baal Shem Tov is reflected in Stanislaw Vincenz's approach.

#### **4 Jochaim (Chaim) Chajes and Jewish Ethnography**

It is noticeable that Jews, although living in the Carpathians, rarely appear in the pages of Polish and Ukrainian ethnographers who visited the mountains. When they do appear, the authors approach them in a negative way, describing the Jews as harmful to the local population, using either nationalist or Marxist terminology. For example, the Polish writer Oskar Kolberg, describing the Eastern Carpathians in the 1880s, mentioned the village of Porohy near Kolomyia, where only 40 Jewish families lived, but who owned the majority of the *polonyny* (upland pasture).<sup>22</sup> The Ukrainian ethnographer Volodymyr Shukhevych noted the growth of the Jewish population in the mountains in the 1880s and 1890s, after which the *polonyny* were bought from impoverished Hutsuls.<sup>23</sup> Despite his critical stance, his

work lends credence to the idea of Jewish-Gentile coexistence and shows how Jews served as intermediaries in the mountain villages.

In the interwar period, however, the new scholars of Jewish culture began to use other methods, such as collecting ethnographic evidence. One of the ethnographers born near the Carpathians, Chaim Chajes (Jochaim Chajes in the Polish version), studied Carpathian Jewish culture by exploring the myth of the Baal Shem Tov among Jews and non-Jews. Unlike most Jews who studied in the Polish gymnasium, he graduated from the Ukrainian gymnasium in Kolomyia. He studied at the Teachers' Seminary in Wilno (Vilnius) and at the University of Wilno, and in 1925 he became the secretary of the Ethnographic Commission of the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) there.<sup>24</sup> Chaim Chajes was the representative of the relatively new field of Jewish ethnography. Because of his linguistic and scholarly skills, he was able and willing to study Jewish culture in a non-Jewish context.

An example of his research is the 1934 study „Baal Shem Tov among Christians.“ The study has a broader introduction in which he explains the principles of cultural borrowing. He speaks mostly about the peasants, challenging the view that their attitude toward the Jews was suspicious and hostile. The first part of the article is full of examples of what Chajes calls „pietism,“ the feeling of pious respect that the peasants have for the Hasidic leaders, Jewish cemeteries, and synagogues.<sup>25</sup> His research question was to determine the transformation that Hasidic legends, selected by Christian followers of Tzadikim (wise men), underwent and brought into the Christian environment.

The central case of the research focused on the „motherland of Baal Shem Tov,“ namely the town of Verkhonii Yaseniv (Polish, Jesieniów). Chajes visited the area to collect the legends about Baal Shem Tov, which resulted in the publication in the *Jewish Monthly*. He used the gathering in the local *korchma* (tavern) to listen to the stories told by the Jewish tavern keeper and the peasants who visited the tavern after the Sunday liturgy. Chajes combined data he collected from Hutsuls in Verkhonii Yaseniv, Jews from nearby towns, and stories from Shivhei Ha-Besht. He was told in an inn that Besht blessed the Jews of Verkhonii Yaseniv so that they would always be safe from any attacks. Both Jewish and Christian residents could show the river Baal Shem used as a *mikvah* (ritual bathing place) and the cave in the mountains where he sat over his books. In the 1930s, however, the locals filled the cave with earth. Another popular motif concerns a cave that led between Kosiv (Polish, Kosów, Yiddish, Kosev) and Kutu (Yiddish, Kitev) to the Palestinian city of the Kabbalists, Safed. Besht used this road to visit Safed and to communicate with local scholars.<sup>26</sup> Others did not know this road, but once the Jews released a cow with a note, it returned and brought an answer. A similar legend about the secret road to Palestine existed about the village of Zabie (now Verkhovyna).

Chajes's approach was to show how Jewish and non-Jewish culture was exchanged in the local tavern. Unlike Polish and Ukrainian ethnographers, who

demonized the Jews selling alcohol, as those responsible for a moral degradation of the peasants, Chajes was fascinated by its possibilities for the cultural exchange.<sup>27</sup> He explored the story about a childless woman and explained how it was a mutual exchange between Jews and non-Jews. In Hutsul folklore, it was a story about a childless woman who visited Besht, and he said to her in Ukrainian: “Daj meni patynky, budesh maty dvi dytynky [Give me your slipper and you bear two children].” The same story existed in the Hasidic version, as a legend about Besht’s daughter Hodla, who was also childless. Once, when Hasidim danced in their house, one of them lost his slipper and yelled to Hodla in Ukrainian: “Hodlo, podawaj mnie patynku, to budesh maty dytynku [Hodla, give me your slipper and you will bear a child].” Besht gave her a slipper and later she bore a child. Chajes hypothesized that Hutsuls created the legend, including a Ukrainian phrase and only later it became part of Hasidic folklore.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike the authors discussed below, who focused on the figure of Baal Shem Tov himself, Chajes analyzed how the myth and memory of Baal Shem Tov showed the connections within rural Carpathian communities. For Chajes, Jewish and non-Jewish cultures benefit from this interaction, becoming richer and more complicated. In contributing to the field of Jewish ethnography, Chajes expanded it by showing Jewish culture as part of local society. The peasants and Jews in his research are not antagonistic sides, but members of one community.

## **5 Stanislaw Vincenz: The Transforming Landscape**

Such a fascination with the proximity of cultures can be found in the writings of the influential interwar Polish writer Stanislaw Vincenz (1888-1951), who was interested in Jewish culture in general and its relationship to the Carpathians. The writer, who grew up in Sloboda Rungurska and spent part of his childhood in the Carpathian Mountains, often used the figure of the Baal Shem Tov in his writings as an example of a person closely connected to nature. Well educated, Vincenz read the books about the Baal Shem Tov, but also collected the local Jewish and non-Jewish folklore. Although Vincenz was not a professional ethnographer like Chaim Chajes, some of his discoveries brought similar thoughts about the mutual influence of Jewish and Hutsul cultures. In one of his postwar essays, „Encounter with Hasidim“ (1961), he tried to analyze the influence of Hutsul mythology on the Baal Shem Tov he remembered from his childhood. Vincenz claimed that Hutsuls were not interested in Jewish culture, but valued local stories from people who remembered Besht. These memories came from the Fiedeczko family, whose ancestors lived in the village of Verkhni Yaseniv near the Chorny Cheremosh River and hosted Baal Shem. The Hutsuls also remembered the locations of places where Baal Shem meditated in isolation, namely forest caves and springs for ritual ablutions.<sup>29</sup>

Stanislaw Vincenz was the person who brought rabbi Markus Ehrenrpeis and



editor Leon Weinstock to the Carpathian trip in the search of Baal Shem Tov, serving as the guide and the medium in their discovery of the mountains.<sup>30</sup> The visit of Ehrenpreis, Weinstock, and Vincenz resembled a pilgrimage to a holy place. There was no gravestone, no synagogue or any other location which would have become a typical site of a Hasidic pilgrimage. The only thing they could see was nature: mountains, forests, and springs. In Weinstock's article about the trip for the newspaper *Chwila*, the beauty of the mountains and the life of Baal Shem blended. Moreover, in their belief, nature was why Baal Shem was able to achieve his revelation:

*It becomes clear that, in general, the system of views of Besht, narrated by the Master's students, reflects the environment in which he lived in the comfort of mountain nests. When he went down barefoot to the valleys and preached his science in Tovste and Medzybizh, he remained himself, radiating the resilient, dust-free and clean air of the mountain space. Does not its simplicity and humility contain the whole meaning of those mountains and their inhabitants? From the mountains, from nature, which never freezes, because it is always resurging – immortal thoughts emerged.<sup>31</sup>*

Jewish intellectuals went to the Carpathians in search of a sense of connection with their surroundings, which they might lack in the cities. In the interview with *Chwila*, Ehrenpreis mentioned that the goal of his trip was not Poland, but Kosiv itself. They should have read „In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov,“ which portrays the Besht as a kind of rebel who left the community to find peace in the mountains and become a transformed healer. Rabbi Markus Ehrenpreis and editor Leon Weinstock were not rebels, but they longed for the seeming simplicity of life in nature. For them, the places of Baal Shem Tov did not have a historical value, since there were no traces to be found, but rather embodied the feeling of liberation associated with Baal Shem Tov.

Lviv Yiddish writer Rachel Auerbach wrote an essay on Stanislaw Vincenz, emphasizing how both he and Rabbi Marcus Ehrenpreis focused on Baal Shem Tov's connection to the Carpathian landscape. Vincenz was very close to the Jewish intellectual circles of Lviv, and in a way he brought a secular interest in Baal Shem Tov to them. For Vincenz, the figure of the Baal Shem Tov meant not only connection with nature, but also coexistence with others. One of the points of the essay is the crucial role of the mountains in developing the thought of Baal Shem:

*Baal Shem Tov, the lonely wanderer and ascetic, owes many of his spiritual discoveries to the forest and mountains. He intuited such an encounter, longed for it and finally gained it not without effort. A Jewish inhabitant of a small town - who accordingly to his condition walked unarmed - would never have exposed himself to such danger, terrified at the very thought of so many wild animals and bands of robbers.<sup>32</sup>*

Rachel Auerbach treated Stanislaw Vincenz in a similar way he treated Baal

Shem Tov. She remarks the incredible interest of Pole Vincenz in the Jewish culture and explained it by the power of the mountain landscape:

*Living in his village in the sub-Carpathian region, in close spiritual contact with the intellectual spheres of foreign countries, while remote from the stinking fumes of hatred, stupefying various individuals, groups, parties, Mr. Vincenz can afford to completely ignore them.<sup>33</sup>*

The remoteness of the area and the proximity of nature seem to be the way to avoid the interethnic conflicts and Stanislaw Vincenz becomes a continuation of such an ability to overcome the hatred.

Vincenz was one the first to notice the entangled culture of Hasidic mysticism, which took inspiration in the music of their surroundings. One of the scenes Vincenz witnessed included the discussion of magic between peasants and Hutsuls, who shared the same idea of magic principles. Vincenz took inspiration for this idea from Buddhism. Unlike Polish and Ukrainian ethnographers of the past, Vincenz did not consider the Jewish presence in the Carpathian Mountains as harmful to the Hutsuls. Moreover, his vision of Jewish-Hutsul coexistence is rather idyllic.

## **6 Mastboym: The Threat of Civilization**

Tourists who visited the mountains in the 19th and 20th centuries often encountered Jews. There is a travelogue by the Ukrainian mathematician Volodymyr Levytskyi (1872-1956), who traveled along the Carpathians by bicycle in 1925, where he encountered Jews as guests or owners of various hotels and boarding houses. He criticized the abundance of these hotels, along with dance halls and other forms of popular entertainment, in the small towns of the Carpathians, such as Yaremche and Vorokhta. For Levytskyi, Jews symbolized „European“ culture, which he felt was detrimental to the authentic beauty of the Carpathians. He published an article in the Ukrainian newspaper *Dilo* (The Issue) about his first trip to Chornohora, the highest part of the range in Galicia. Levytskyi contrasts „real tourists“ who go to the mountains to appreciate their natural beauty with Jewish seasonal tourists who bring and promote an urban type of culture. For him, Chornohora was the last refuge of such authenticity, unlike Dora and Yaremche, which became the first victims of civilization.<sup>34</sup> For Levytskyi, Jews are the alien element in the mountains, the one that causes urban turmoil and reminds of interethnic relations that tourists want to forget.

Jewish tourists in the Carpathians faced a similar problem but verbalized it in a different way. The Jewish reporter from Warsaw, Yoel Mastboym (1882-1957), visited Galicia in 1928 to write several articles for the Warsaw newspaper *Literarische bleter* (Literary Pages), which were later collected in a book. He traveled throughout Galicia, from the large cities of Lviv, Krakow, and Stanisławów, to many small towns. He dedicated three of his articles to the Galician Carpathians

(generally speaking, the province of Stanisławów), describing different ways in which Jews encountered the mountains. His first essay, „The Place Where Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov Lived,“ was dedicated to Kutu, a small town already known to many Jews as the residence of the Hasidic founder. Mastboym expected to see the traces of Baal Shem Tov’s legacy, or at least to observe Hasidim in Kutu - he also visited Hasidic courts in Belz and Chortkiv and tried to communicate with Hasidim there. However, in the place that was crucial to Baal Shem Tov’s spiritual growth, there was no real Hasidic practice:

*If there are still traces of Baal Shem in Vyzhnytsia and Hasidic niggunim (religious songs) can be heard around between Vyzhnytsia and Kutu, in Kutu, there is no longer any spark of Hasidic exaltation. People are Viennese-type, polite and German-speaking, without any sentiments, neither for Hasidim nor for a simple Yiddish word. Half or fully assimilated. I wanted to meet real Hasidim here, but I met only Viennese girls with canes in their hands, good Viennese schnitzel and Romanian wine, moreover: I was looking for the cemetery where such famous people as Gershon Kitover, and Moshe Kitover are buried. It is terribly abandoned and even without a proper fence.<sup>35</sup>*

Unlike the author himself, they had neither passion for Baal Shem Tov nor even spoke Yiddish. Ironically, the only local person he meets who cares about the town’s Baal Shem Tov heritage is a Christian man named Yekl, who speaks Yiddish.<sup>36</sup>

Mastboym, being a Warsaw journalist, perceived Jewish Galicia with an orientalizing gaze, as a source of traditional Jewish wisdom. However, he was as disappointed as the real existing Carpathians since local Jews seemed too modernized, too civilized, and looked toward Vienna rather than Yiddishkeit. His disappointment in Kutu makes his article similar to non-Jewish narratives, which saw the interwar Carpathians as spoiled by civilization and, ironically, Jews.<sup>37</sup> Ukrainian observers perceived Jews mainly as owners of the hotels, and thus their presence was in contrast to the “true nature” of the local inhabitants and their environment. Mastboym shared this contempt for the spoiled material world. However, his admiration of nature was strongly connected with the admiration of Baal Shem. If he was not able to see the Hasidic culture, nature would substitute it for him. He visited the Kamenne gorge, where he described the beautiful sound of mountain springs: “He who has visited Kamenne solely for a minute, could believe that Baal Shem could have been here [too].”<sup>38</sup>

For Mastboym, the problem of forgetting the heritage of the Baal Shem Tov is related to the acculturation of Jews and their adherence to Austrian culture. For him, as for the activist of Yiddish culture, the Yiddish language was a way to preserve traditional Jewish thought. He visited the Carpathians in the hope that the birthplace of the Baal Shem Tov would bear the traces of Yiddishkeit. Similarly to Markus Ehrenpreis and Leon Weinstock, he was inspired by nature, which reminded him of the mysticism of Baal Shem Tov. It is no coincidence that his guide in the

mountains is a non-Jew, for the myth and influence of Baal Shem Tov transcends national boundaries. But Mastboym is also responding, perhaps unintentionally, to the common prejudice that Jews spoil the authenticity of the mountains. The Baal Shem Tov was a symbol of the Jew who was not alienated from nature, on the contrary, his teaching made him part of the springs and the mountains. Following in his footsteps allows Yoel Mastboym to go beyond the usual visitor experience in the mountains and not to be associated with either Jewish tourists from Vienna or commercially involved Jewish residents of Kosiv. Thus, his research trip also resembled a pilgrimage, as in the case of Markus Ehrenpreis, Stanislaw Vincenz, and Leon Weinstock. He did not seek the Baal Shem Tov as a Hasid, but rather as a secular person who wanted to escape the hostile world of civilization.

For Mastboym, the threat of civilization meant indifference to Jewish culture. We can compare his view with Rachel Auerbach's explanation of Vincenz's sensitivity to other cultures, which was possible because he lived in a small village. These two views show a similar attempt to see the mountains as a refuge from the dangers of acculturation or involvement in hostile ideologies. This refuge, however, does not presuppose national indifference, but rather mutual respect for other cultures.

## **7 Yankev Shternberg and the Carpathians after the Holocaust**

The tragedy of the Holocaust influenced texts about Jews in the Carpathians, presenting their stories either explicitly or implicitly as a tragedy. After the Holocaust, the Carpathians continued to appear in literature - memoirs, essays, fiction - as an imagined Jewish space. The text „Jewish Themes,“ written by Stanislaw Vincenz in 1961 and analyzed above, is a memoir of a lost world, but it does not have the flavor of tragedy.<sup>39</sup> The Holocaust and the destruction of the Jewish communities in the Carpathians challenge the trope of peaceful coexistence, undermining the image of the mountains as a space of peaceful coexistence.

I would like to follow the Baal Shem Tov trope and see its interpretation in post-Holocaust literature. In 1968, the Romanian author Yankev Shternberg (1890-1973), who wrote in Yiddish, dedicated his collection of poems *Songs and Ballads of the Carpathians* to the mountains. The book, published by the communist Yiddish publishing house „Oyfsnay“ in Paris, consisted of two parts, the first of which was written in the early 1920s about the Transylvanian part of the mountains, then in Romania. The second appeared in 1963, when Yankev Shternberg visited the Carpathians in Soviet-controlled Western Ukraine.<sup>40</sup> Yankev Shternberg was a Yiddish poet and theater director born in Bessarabia. Before the war, he lived in Bucharest in Kishinev. Shternberg survived the war in the evacuation of Tashkent and moved to Moscow, but was imprisoned in 1949 as part of a campaign against Jewish writers. After his release in 1954, Shternberg moved to Moscow.<sup>41</sup> Many of the poems in *Songs and Ballads of the Carpathians* are dedicated to nature, and Shternberg criticizes the negative attitude of modern poets to the description of

nature and tries to justify his sensibility. However, one of the most exciting poems is not inspired by landscapes, but by the tragedy of the Holocaust. In the Soviet Union, any mention of the Holocaust was strictly limited by the state. Since the tragedy did not fit into the official memory of the war as the Great Patriotic War, the term „peaceful Soviet citizens“ prevailed on monuments and in literature to describe the victims. However, 1961 saw the appearance of the famous poem „Babi Yar“ by the Russian poet Yevheny Yevtushenko.

For this reason, or perhaps because the book was published in Paris and not in the Soviet Union, Shternberg was able to refer openly to the Holocaust in the Carpathians. In the introduction, he explains this as an attempt to add social themes to his lyrics about landscapes. „In these poems is included my *kaddish* (a prayer of sanctification, usually said when mourning the dead) for that part of the Galician Jews who were killed in the terrible years of the war in those places that form the background of my *Songs and Ballads*.“<sup>42</sup> The use of the *kaddish* motif shows us that the poem was not intended for a secular Soviet audience. The Carpathian landscape is no longer a peaceful place for Shternberg. He cannot stop thinking about the destruction of the communities and of the poets, such as Moshe Leib and Moshe Nadir. And the other figure is Baal Shem Tov, „who is connected in our consciousness with those Carpathians.“<sup>43</sup> However, at the end of the section on the Holocaust (the term was never used), Shternberg justifies that his use of the Baal Shem Tov motif is not for the sake of mysticism or symbolism. The description of the national tragedy (*folks-tragediye*) is meant to embody the reaction against fascism and the counterrevolution.

The title of the poem „Between Kosev and Kitev: A Carpathian Fantasy“ refers to the Hasidic song „Between Kosev and Kitev,“ which describes the Carpathians as the place of the revelation of the Baal Shem Tov. The brick, the river, and the birds in the song become witnesses to Baal Shem’s meditation and thus serve as holy places. In the published version, the poem consists of more than one hundred stanzas (with the notation that this is a shorter version), in which he mixes the stories of Baal Shem with the events of the Holocaust. The poem repeats a verse several times:

*Oyf a barg shteyt a boym,*

*shteyt er ongeboyn,*

*zint gezen r`hot dem bal-shem*

*Mit farveynte oygn*

*There stands a tree,*

*Standing bent down,*

*Since it has seen Baal Shem*

*With eyes full of tears*

This verse, which imitates a Yiddish folk song, contains the main element of Shternberg's imagination of the Jewish Carpathians - the connection with folk tradition and nature, which reacts to Baal Shem's mood and mourns with him for the dead Jews. The setting of the poem is fantastic, depicting Baal Shem in the Carpathians at the time of the Holocaust as a figure that transcends time. He is embedded in nature, speaking to the forest and the birds. His eyes are full of tears because he is a witness of the Holocaust. One of the stanzas describes the synagogues, empty of Jews, and only their bones should go to make *slikhes* (prayers of forgiveness).<sup>44</sup> Baal Shem tries to protect the Jews, but he has no magical power to do so. This motif of Baal Shem trying to protect the Jews appeared in Elie Wiesel's introduction to his book *The Gates of the Forest* (1964). As Wiesel says, if Baal Shem had seen the danger to the Jews, he would have prayed in the forest to perform a miracle and avert the tragedy.<sup>45</sup>

In the remainder of the poem, Baal Shem collaborates with the farmer Vasyl, who, like Baal Shem Tov himself, is believed to be the one who knew the Hebrew language and the language of plants. We may see this motif of a gentile who knows Hebrew and works with Baal Shem Tov recurring in the mythology of Baal Shem. The figure of Vasyl reminds us of a Yekl, the Christian man from Kosiv, fascinated by Baal Shem and described by Mastboym.<sup>46</sup> Such a person does not fit in the normatively prescribed relations between Jews and Christians and thus seems as someone, who transcend the natural order of the things, as well as Baal Shem by himself. However, there appears very different Jewish figure. When Baal Shem tries to rescue Jewish child in his cart, at one point bringing them to the monastery, the Jesus Christ himself steps from the altar. The Christ says that he is jealous for Baal Shem and attempt to kill him with a sword, in reply of which Baal Shem hits him with a shoe.<sup>47</sup> This scene and the involvement of Christ recalls the poetry of Itzik Manger, who was a colleague and great influence on Shternberg. Shternberg verbalizes the competition between Jesus and Baal Shem that was implicit in Manger's poetry. His depiction of Christ, however, is much darker than Manger's, full of anger and pain. Baal Shem says that the Christ has a "Nazi nose" linking him to the tragedy that is happening.

For Sternberg, the Jewish tradition and the metaphor of Baal Shem is the way to accept and speak openly about the tragedy of the Holocaust. In Shternberg's poem, Baal Shem, who spent most of his life not in the Carpathians but in Podolia, is connected to the land through his merging with nature. His approach to the

Carpathians remained deeply rooted in their Hasidic mythology and traditional character. However, Shternberg's poem presupposes the failure of the Carpathians as a safe and intercultural space.

## **8 Conclusions**

During the interwar period of the 20th century, Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals developed the Jewish mythology of the Carpathians, which differed from Polish and Ukrainian images of the mountains. In non-Jewish national discourses, Jews in the mountains were considered either irrelevant to the ethnography of the minority, or foreigners who disturbed nature by establishing commercial enterprises. Jewish mountain mythology, on the other hand, rediscovered the myth of the Hasidic leader Baal Shem Tov to address, perhaps unintentionally, the accusation of Jews as an unnatural part of the mountains. His imagery of the mountains challenges the idea of representing them as a national land and creates a view of the space of harmony and idyllic coexistence. The figure of the Baal Shem Tov, as someone who challenged traditional hierarchies and relationships, inspired this imaginative process.

The personality of the Baal Shem Tov was connected to the mountainous landscape, which, due to the mystical power of nature, stimulated the transformation of the Hasidic leader. The authors and researchers of his biography emphasized the influence of the landscape on the person, which appeared in the writings about other people. Thus, traveling to the mountains became a way to get closer to the mysticism of Hasidism and to understand and revive the story of the Baal Shem Tov. However, the intellectuals who made these trips were unique visitors to the Carpathians. They criticized the tourist approach to the mountains as a civilizational threat to the spirituality and authenticity of the mountains. Even the Jewish tourists treated the land of the Baal Shem Tov commercially, neglecting its Hasidic heritage. The intellectuals were not Hasidic pilgrims either. They never mentioned actual Hasidic pilgrimages in connection with the Carpathians. Even Rabbi Marcus Ehrenpreis, a Reform rabbi, sought inspiration for his book on the landscape. Nor were the visitors nationalists who wanted to claim the mountains as their own or to train in the mountains for future work in *kibbutzim*.

Yoel Mastboym, Stanislaw Vincenz, Chaim Chajes and Yankev Shternberg did not belong to a single group. What they shared, however, was an approach to the mountains as a symbolic refuge and frontier space. Far from the cities, the mountains bore no traces of the political ideologies that fought each other in harsh newspaper articles, political settings, and physical violence. However, this refuge did not presuppose a refusal to be associated with Jewish culture. The figure of the Baal Shem Tov, the subversive Hasidic philosopher who undermined traditional authority while developing Jewish thought, was the perfect metaphor for this rediscovery.

The rediscovery of the mountains was also actively practiced by the authors. All of them treated the mountainous landscape as an active force in the rebirth of the Baal Shem Tov, and wanted to understand it, or perhaps even relive it, by visiting the places of the Baal Shem Tov themselves, focusing mainly on Kosiv, Kutu, and Jaseniv. In some cases, the local Jews became a source of stories about the Baal Shem Tov, but the most important was a landscape that bore invisible traces of the Baal Shem presence. However, if for the pre-war writers this landscape was reminiscent of a supranational land that is not Polish, Ukrainian, or even Jewish, the land that helps to transcend all prejudices, for Yankev Shternberg the landscape, still the land of Baal Shem Tov, became a painful reminder of the destruction of the communities. In Yankev Shternberg's writings, Baal Shem remains an integral part of the landscape. However, he is now a figure of mourning, and the entire landscape is not a place of refuge, but a reminder of the unspeakable tragedy that took place there.

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