Khust

Pol. Chust, Ukr. Хуст, Hung. Huszt, Yid. חוסט

Here live Ruthenian [Ukrainian – ed.] *shepherds and woodcutters, Jewish craftsmen and merchants. Poor Jews and rich Jews. Poor Ruthenians and even poorer Ruthenians.*
Ivan Olbracht, *Nikola Šuhaj loupežník* (Czech: *Nikola Šuhaj, Robber*), 1933

Salt trail fortress ¶ Located on the picturesque Tisza River Valley at the foot of the Carpathians, Khust is the third largest city in Transcarpathia. Probably its name comes from the Hustets, the river flowing through the town centre. ¶ The historical origins of Khust date back to the 11th century, when a fortress was established in order to protect the salt trail leading from the Solotvyno salt mines. The fortress was completed around 1190 by Béla III, King of Hungary. In 1329, the Hungarian king Károly Róbert (Charles I) gave the castle as a gift to his faithful knight Drago, and Khust became a royal town. After the 1526 defeat of the Hungarian army in the Battle of Mohács, the Kingdom of Hungary fell apart and Khust Castle found itself in the Principality of Transylvania. In the second half of the 16th and first half of the 17th centuries, Khust Castle was one of the centres of struggle between the Princes of Transylvania and the Austrian Habsburgs. In 1577, the fortress was reinforced and a royal garrison was stationed there. Tatars besieged the castle many times, and in 1594 set the surrounding area on fire but they failed to conquer the town. Khust also withstood the Turkish siege in 1660–1661. But in 1687, the Austrian army managed to seize the castle. In the 18th century, the rebels and outcasts of peasant origin – among them the band led by Hryhor Pynts and Fedir Boyko – pillaged the area around Khust, and their attempts to batter the castle with a wooden cannon became a theme of popular folksongs and part of local musical folklore. In 1703, the troops of Prince Francis II Rákóczi captured the Khust Castle, and it was there that the independence of the Principality of Transylvania was declared. In 1709, Prince Rákóczi summoned the so-called Transylvanian Diet, and in 1711, Khust was incorporated into the Austrian Empire as part of its Hungarian lands. ¶ Over the 19th century, Khust developed as a town of crafts and trades. In 1885, andesite started to be mined here industrially, and an andesite quarry has remained in the town to this day. Because of the surrounding forests and hills rich in clay, the town dwellers developed furniture production, established a brickyard and other manufactories and depots of construction materials. ¶ In the fall of 1918, in the aftermath of World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire

collapsed, and on January 21, 1919, the Ukrainians from Transcarpathia called a Nationwide Transcarpathian Congress in Khust, where 420 delegates from all over the Transcarpathian region decided to join the united Ukraine. Despite the will of the local population and due to the political ambitions of the surrounding countries, this part of Transcarpathia found itself in the interwar Republic of Czechoslovakia as Subcarpathian Ruthenia.

The synagogue in Khust, 2014. Photo by Viktor Zagreba, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

The Jews of Khust Attracted by its favourable location, Jewish merchants started to settle in Khust in the early modern times. However, since Khust had been a royal town of Hungary and followed the *De non tolerandi Judeos* policy, Jews could trade locally but could not permanently settle in the town. An intense influx of Jews began in 1772, coinciding with the First Partition of Poland and the incorporation of these lands into the Habsburg Empire. In 1792, the Jewish community consisted of 14 families. In 1839, 132 Jews lived here, along with 1,953 Greek Catholics, 640 Roman Catholics, 370 Reformed Evangelicals, and 8 Lutherans. The first rabbi in Khust was Abram Yakov of Zhydachiv, appointed in 1812, which implies that the community was sufficiently well-to-do to afford a rabbinic leader. The most respected among the 19th-century rabbinic scholars was Rabbi Moshe Schick (1807–1879), who in 1861 established a yeshiva in Khust – the largest one in Eastern Europe at that time. This yeshiva attracted rabbinic scholars of the highest calibre who at different times served the local community, among them Moshe Grinwald (1853–1910), Israel Yakov Leifer, Shmuel Shmelke Leifer II of Khust, Meshulam Grinsberg of Khust, and Josef Tzvi Dushinsky. In 1921, Rabbi Josef Tzvi Dushinsky became the head of the Khust Jewish community. He moved to Jerusalem in 1930, and became the leader of the rising ultra-Orthodox Judaism that embraced the so-called *haredi* community – various groups of Hasidim, yeshivah-centered Lithuanian Jews, and the Orthodoxy-oriented Sefardic Jews.

Moshe Schick (Maharam Schick, 1807–1879), born in Birkenhain (now, Brezová in Slovakia), was one of the most prominent 19th-century European rabbis and one of the leaders of the rising Orthodox Judaism. Moshe studied under the famous rabbinic scholar Hatam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Schreiber, 1762–1839) in Pressburg (Bratislava, Pozsony), perhaps the most authoritative rabbinic leader in East Central Europe of that time and the head of the biggest European Talmudic academies enrolling up to 400 students. Hatam Sofer called his outstanding student a "treasure chest full of holy books." Schick was appointed to serve as a rabbi in

Interior of the synagogue in Khust, 2014. Photo by Viktor Zagreba, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

the town of Svätý Jur (Slovakia) in 1838, where he opened a yeshiva, which he thought would create a stronghold of traditional Judaism against the encroaching Reform movement. In 1861, he became rabbi of Khust, and helped to establish a yeshiva there that over the years was attended by more than 800 students. ¶ In his rabbinic commentaries, Schick was commonly referred to as Maharam Schick, an acronym for "More(y)nu ha-Rav Rabbi Moshe" (Heb.: Our Teacher, Our Master, Rabbi Moshe). He is the author of a number of legal (*halakhic*) responsa, works as well as the treatises *Hidushey ha-Maharam Schick* containing legal novelties and *Derashot Maharam Schick* with his commentaries on the Torah weekly portion. He died in Khust on January 25, 1879.

In the mid-19th century, the Jewish community of Khust became one of the largest and most influential in Transcarpathia. In 1880, it numbered 1,062 Jews, and by 1910, it grew to 2,371 (15 percent of the town's population). In the interwar period, Khust became a district center in Czechoslovakia. By 1921, its Jewish population had increased to 3,391 people. Jews were involved in all aspects of civic, cultural, and economic activities. They established cinemas, managed taverns in wine cellars, ran factories and craft workshops, three banks, four mills, the "Korona" and "Centralny" Hotels, and other businesses. Many of them worked in liberal professions as doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, and clerks. In 1923, there were five Jews serving in the town council.

Josef Tzvi Dushinsky (1867–1948), of Hungarian-Jewish origin, was a disciple of one of the grandsons of Rabbi Hatam Sofer of Pressburg. Initially, Dushinsky served as a chief rabbi of Galanta in Slovakia, and in 1921 became the chief rabbi of Khust, where he spent most of his time teaching yeshiva students. In 1930, together with his family, he moved to Palestine and settled in Jerusalem. In 1932, shortly after the death of Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (1848–1932), the leader of the Haredi community (ultra-Orthodox Jews) in Jerusalem and the founder of the "Ha-Edah ha-Haredit" community (Heb.: The Community of The God-Fearing), Josef Tzvi Dushinsky was appointed as his successor – a sign of enormous prestige and respect toward this Transilvania rabbi. He also founded the Society of Hungarian Jews in Jerusalem. Rabbi Dushinsky was known for his strong opposition to secular Zionism; he protested to the UNO against the creation of the State of Israel, claiming – as some leaders of the *haredi* community would do in Israel – that the real messianic process is religious, not political in essence and that the

messianic pretentions of the Zionists are baseless. He died on the eve of the Sukkot holiday, on October 17, 1948, shortly after the State of Israel was established.

By 1930, the Jewish population of Khust grew to 4,821. Around the same time, however, a large majority of Jews in Transcarpathia, then part of Czechoslovakia (as many as 65 percent, according to the 1930 records), was not urbanized and continued to live in the mountainous rural areas: the highest percentage of Jews engaged in farming in Europe. This reflected on local realms – friendly relations between Jews and Christians in the Transcarpathia rural areas – and also the reformist intentions of the Austrian government that in 1867 allowed Jews to own land. ¶ Various Jewish political parties were active in Khust, including the "Agudat Israel" (also known as the Agudah) which represented newly formed political-religious Orthodoxy, as well as several Zionist organisations, Orthodox youth groups, and the Jewish National Party (*ation partei*, a Zionist group promoting full emancipation and national autonomy), which represented the Jewish community in the municipal council. ¶ Khust boasted its own Hasidic dynasty, an offshoot of the Nadvorna dynasty, established by a first-generation Hasidim Rabbi Meir of Premishlan (1703–1773), a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. The dynasty was founded in the 19th century, and its first *admor* (tsaddik) was Rabbi Yakov Israel Leifer (d. 1929). Today, descendants of the Khust dynasty reside mainly in the USA.

Former synagogue in Khust, currently library, 2014. Photo by Viktor Zagreba, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

CAPITAL ¶ In October 1938, following the Munich Agreement, the Ukrainian autonomous Subcarpathian Ruthenia was established as part of Czechoslovakia. A month later, it was renamed into Carpatho-Ukraine, with the capital in Khust and Avgustyn Voloshyn, a famous political leader and mathematician, as president. Carpatho-Ukraine proclaimed independence at the Diet in Khust on 15 March 1939, but as an independent polity it existed just one day: the following day Khust was seized by Hungarian troops, Voloshyn had to flee to Prague.

World War II and the Holocaust

¶ Following the outbreak of World War II, anti-Semitism in Hungary grew stronger, and became a palpable phenomenon in Transcarpathia, which previously had not registered anti-Semitic incidents. The Transcarpathian Jews, like all Hungarian Jews, were persecuted in 1939–1944, although Hungarian authorities with all their staunch anti-Semitism did not support the Final Solution. Starting from 1940, all healthy Jews were directed to forced labour sites. Several hundreds of Khust Jews were

transported in freight cars to Kőrösmező (the village of Yasinia) near the pre-war Polish border, and then across the border, where they were handed over to the Germans, who in turn sent them to concentration camps. Khust Jewish families without Hungarian citizenship were expelled to the Nazi-occupied territory of Ukraine. Many of them were executed in Kamianets-Podilskyi in 1941. ¶ In April 1944, immediately after a fascist coup in Hungary, three ghettos were set up in the area: one in Khust and two in the villages of Iza and Sokyrnytsia. More than 10,000 Jews had been confined there before they were deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. Several dozen Jews managed to escape from Khust and join the Ukrainian partisan units. ¶ Before deportation, the Jews were rounded up at what is now a brickyard, as well as in other assembly points in today's Dobryanskoho St., Duhnovycha St., and Khmyelnytskoho Square, which served as *Umschlagplatz*. Starting from May 14, 1944, trains to Auschwitz set off directly from eight railway stations in the region – Mukacheve, Berehove, Uzhhorod, Volove, Solotvyno, Sevlush (Vynohradiv), Khust, and Tiachiv. Each train transported between 2,000 and 4,000 Jews. Some Jews from Khust were forced to march west on foot – to the concentration camps of Buchenwald and Ravensbrück (Germany) and Mauthausen (Austria), 1,300 km and 800 km, respectively. Hundreds of prisoners were held in the Kryvka concentration camp, near Khust. From there, forty transports with the Jewish inmates were taken to the bank of the Tisza River close to the Welatynsky Bridge, where the prisoners were shot and their bodies thrown into the river. By late spring 1944, the Nazis declared Khust *Judenrein,* "free of Jews".

Ernő Szép (1884–1953) was born in Khust as one of the nine children of a local Jewish teacher. As a young boy, he moved to Budapest, where he made his name as a poet, playwright, and journalist. He débuted with a collection of poems and short stories *Első csokor* (Hung.: The First Bouquet, 1902). Alongside Sándor Bródy and Ferenc Molnár, he ranks as one of the most outstanding writers of Jewish origin who wrote in Hungarian. His plays such as *Pátika* (Hung.: Pharmacy, 1918), *Lila ákác* (Hung.: Lily Acacia, 1921), *A Vőlegény* (Hung.: The Bride, 1922), are still staged in Hungarian theatres. In 1944, together with other Jews from Budapest, Ernő Szép was made to do forced labour for many weeks, an ordeal that he described in his memoir *Emberszag* (Hung.: The Smell of Humans, 1945). His profound child-esque naiveté in the midst of the Holocaust horrors and his physical ability to dig trenches in extenuating and life-threatening conditions saved his life.

On October 24, 1944, Soviet troops entered the town making it part of Soviet Ukraine (USSR). In February 1945, the first Jewish survivors returned to the city. By mid-1946, the Jewish population of Khust had grown to 400 people. Most of the returning Jewish families, however, could not come back to their old houses, which were taken by the Gentiles whose take-over was legitimized by the new Soviet authorities.

Jewish cemetery in Khust, 2014. Photo by Viktor Zagreba, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

In defence of the synagogue ¶ According to some sources, there were eight synagogues and prayer houses in Khust at the end of the 19th century. The 18th-century Old Synagogue survived the war, but it was converted under the Soviets into a movie theater. ¶ Only one synagogue, built at the end of the 19th century, has retained its original appearance and function to this day. The internal original wall paintings have survived, and the building has never been destroyed. It is the only synagogue in Transcarpathia which has operated continuously as a Jewish prayer house since its construction. ¶ During World War II, the Nazis stored Jewish confiscated property in the synagogue. After the war, the Soviet authorities repeatedly tried to confiscate or demolish the building, but the Khust Jewish women came to the synagogue and took shifts at its walls, preventing the realisation of these plans. Besides, the synagogue served a comparatively sizeable religious community of the Holocaust survivors: when they came to pray there was hardly enough room for everybody. This community secured the survival of the synagogue as an actively operating Jewish house of worship in the difficult times of the communist regime. To this day, about 165 Jews live in Khust – and they still pray in that synagogue.

The cemetery ¶ An old Jewish cemetery, established in the 18th century, is situated on a hill on Ostrovskoho St. It has more than 1,500 matzevot. Those buried there include Rabbi Moshe Schick and Rabbi Moshe Grinwald, prominent rabbinic scholars and communal leaders. The cemetery was closed for burials in 1960. A new Jewish cemetery was established on the slope of Castle Hill, near the Christian cemeteries, and it is still used by the Jewish community.

Worth seeing

Synagogue(1872 – 1875), 11 Nezalezhnosti Square, tel. +380667785786. ¶ **Jewish cemetery**, Ostrovskoho St. ¶ **Ruins of the castle** (11th c.), Zamkova St. ¶ **St. Elizabeth Calvinist Church** (13th–18th c.), a Gothic fortified church, 45 Konstitutsyi St. ¶ **St. Anne Roman Catholic Church** (late 17th–19th c.), 40 Karpatskoi Sichy St. ¶ **Orthodox Church of the Annunciation of the Mother of God** (1928–1929), Duhnovycha St. ¶ **Khust Regional History Museum**, 1 Pyrohova St., tel. +380686167370.

Surrounding area

Kireshi (5 km): **Carpathian Biosphere Reserve "The Valley of Narcissi"**: Narcissi flowers bloom in May, at an altitude of 200 m above sea level on an area of 170 hectares (420 acres); the entire reserve covers an area of 257 hectares (635 acres). ¶ **Vynohradiv** (24 km): a synagogue (19th c.); a Jewish cemetery; a Franciscan monastery (16th c.); the Orthodox Church of the Ascension (15th c.). ¶ **Irshava** (36 km): a former synagogue (19th c.); a Jewish cemetery. ¶ **Solotvyno** (50 km): salt mines; a former synagogue (19thc.; rebuilt); Jewish cemeteries (19th c.). ¶ **Kolochava** (60 km): "a village of a hundred museums," including an exceptionally rich ethnographic *skansen* (open-air museum) with Hutsul, Czech, Rusyn, Soviet, Hungarian buildings and a Jewish tavern exhibition; Ivan Olbracht Museum; a wooden Orthodox church (17th c.); a Jewish cemetery on the hill at the entrance to the village with the Holocaust memorial matzevot commemorating the Kolochava Jews; the Synevyr National Park and the legendary Synevir lake. ¶ **Berehove** (60 km): a functioning synagogue (1920); a Jewish cemetery (19th c.). ¶ **Mukacheve** (83 km): unique Palanok Castle (11th–17th c.); Gothic Chapel of St. Joseph (11th–15th c.); the Schönborn Palace (18th c.); St. Martin's Cathedral (20th c.); a new synagogue (21st c.); a restored Jewish cemetery (20th c.). ¶ **Uzhhorod** (100 km): a former synagogue now used as a concert hall (1903); a Jewish cemetery (19th c.).

KHUST