# Kosiv

**Pol. Kosów, Ukr. Косів, Yid. קאָסעװ**

**Among the Hutsuls** ❡ Kosiv is the centre of the Galician Hutsulshchyna region, named after the Hutsuls, an autochthonous people of the Carpathian mountains, cattle breeders and crafts-men, whose folklore has been nurturing and is still nurturing Hungarian music, Romanian folklore, Polish art, and Ukrainian literature. Kosiv is a moun-tain town, situated on the edge of the Ukrainian Carpathians in the valley of the Rybnytsia River, a tributary of the Prut. To the north, rising above it, is the Town Hill (432 m). ❡ The first mention of Kosiv dates back to 1318, when it was part of the Principality of Galicia-Volhynia. A century later, Lithuanian Duke Švitrigaila *Algirdaitis* (son of Algirdas) granted the ownership of the villages of Kosiv, Berezovo, and Żabie (Zhabie, now Verkhovyna) to his "faithful servant," a Moldavian boyar named Vlad Dragosynovych. This event is reflected in a document of August 31, 1424, composed in the Ruthenian (one of the official languages of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania), a form of High Medieval Ukrainian. ❡ In the 17th century, a wooden fortification was built at the top of Town Mountain. It was a fortalice, fortified noblemen's residence smaller and less imposing than the real fortress. The Kosiv fortalice dominated the town and served defensive purposes during the invasions of the Tatars and Turks as well as during the attacks of other noblemen who sought to conquer Kosiv and include its lands under their rule. ❡ When Kosiv and its surround-ing lands became part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the town acquired a status of the "crown lands" (*królewszczyzna*) possessions. In the 1579 tax register, the name "Koshov, oppidum" (Koshov, a town) was used for the first time, along with the name "Koshov, villa" (Koshov, a village). That document lists Kosiv as a private town owned by one Michał, whose last name and rank in the feudal hierarchy remain unknown. This private town near Stary (that is, Old) Kosiv together with four nearby villages formed a distinct Kosiv district. ❡ Kosiv prospered thanks to the salt trade, which made it a tempt-ing target for raiders. In 1740, it was attacked by a gang of Oleksa Dovbush, a rebellious outcast who lived from 1700–1745 and who entered Ukrainian folklore as a champion of poor people's

rights. In 1759, the nobleman Tadeusz Dzieduszycki, the then owner of the town, called up a private army to defend Kosiv against such raids.

> *Once, the Baal Shem Tov – the Besht – asked Dovbush a question:* ¶ *– How much longer do you plan to be a robber? Look, you have so much goodness and love for all creation in you; can't you settle down somewhere, work the land, build a house, take a wife, have children, raise them and just live, as God commanded? Why do you sin so?* […] ¶ *And Dovbush began to excuse himself:* ¶ *– What else can I do, holy man? I grew too big and too healthy, and I was the only pride and joy of my mother, a widow. In our mountains, no one knew how much evil there was out there. In our mountains, as you know, there are no masters, we do not know what an overseer's knout or whip is, our backs are proudly erect, and we are free like eagles. The forest is ours, we cheerfully hunt bears and deer; the meadows are ours, our sheep graze on them; you can hear the pipes, flutes, and bagpipes that the shepherds play to while away the time on long sunny days.* ¶ *Then recruiters and commissioners came to conscript us, cut off our long curly hair, put us in tight uniforms, and took us far from home, to Vienna, beyond the deep Danube, where even ravens would not find our bones. They brought us to Kolomyia, where we were guarded by soldiers. We talked long into the night, girded our loins, and then we attacked the guards, tied them up, and ran away back to our mountains with their weapons. From then on, we have been fighting them and their laws. Fighting to the death. The fight is hard, and our life is bitter.* ¶ Translated from: Dov Ber Horowitz, *Dobosz* (Dovbush) in: *Wunderleche mayses*, Warsaw 1923

According to a late 18th-century census, Kosiv comprised nearly 250 Greek Catholic families, more than 110 Jewish families, and seven Roman Catholic families. ¶ With the First Partition of Poland (1772), Kosiv was incorporated

into the Habsburg Empire. Under Austrian rule, in addition to the salt industry, other crafts developed: carpet weaving, wood-crafts, and ceramics. From 1850, Kosiv became a weaving centre, with its own Weaving Society and a School of Weaving established in 1882. ¶ After the outbreak of World War I, Kosiv found itself under Russian occupation (1914–1915 and 1916–1917) and was subject to pogroms and pillaging. In November 1918, it fell under the rule of the West Ukrainian People's Republic, and after May 26, 1919, came under Romanian occupation. In August, 1919, along with the surrounding towns, Kosiv was incorporated into the Republic of Poland. ¶ In the interwar period, a number of Ukrainian associations and political groupings were established in Kosiv – both legal (e.g. the Society of Stone Cutters, the boy-scout "Plast," and the Ukrainian Women's Alliance) and illegal (the OUN, Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists; and the CPWU, the Communist Party of Western Ukraine). Other organisations were also active, including the Polish Society of Friends of Hutsulshchyna, the Jewish "Merkaz Ruchani" (Spiritual Center) and the Maccabee Sports Club. Kosiv had guest houses that could accommodate as many as 3,000 people a year, and eventually it became a mountain health resort. It was precisely this transformation that, in 1938, led to the failure of the salt refinery, which had earlier been the driving force behind the economic development of Kosiv.

**The Jews of Kosiv** ¶ Most likely, Jews settled in Kosiv as early as the 16th or early 17th century, but they did not form an independent community. Only in the 18th century, a Jewish cemetery was established, indicating the growing independence and prosperity of the local community able to negotiate its own privileges with the town owner – and pay for them. Hoping to increase their revenues, the Jazłowiecki and Dzieduszycki families, the town owners, issued trade and residential privileges encouraging Jewish merchants and craftsmen to settle in Kosiv. Gradually, the town centre became home to Jewish merchants and Jewish leaseholders of salt refineries, mills, landed estates, and inns. ¶ In the second half of the 18th century, the Hasidim, Jewish pietists and mystically-oriented religious enthusiasts, settled in Kosiv. They joined the old-generation pietists, called today the "small-case hassidim" – ascetic Kabbalists who had here their own *koyz*, an exclusive prayer and study house for members of the pietistic elite. Among the town's residents there were old and new religious enthusiasts, such as Rabbi Nachman (d. 1746), Rabbi Baruch ben Abraham (d. 1782), and Rabbi Menachem Mendel (d. 1825). Between 1790 and 1942, the town rabbis were mostly of Hasidic descent and relatives of Rabbi Yaakov Kopl Hosid (Yaakov Kopl ben Nechemia Feivel, known as "Hasid from Kolomyia," d. 1787), a disciple of the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, (known as the Besht), who had a beautiful voice and also served as a *hazzan* (synagogue cantor). ¶ As the legend has it, in the 1720s, the founder of Hasidism, Baal Shem Tov, lived in solitude in a cave by the lake near Kosiv. For seven years, he prayed and meditated there, but also carried out hard physical work – he cut

wood, prepared charcoal which his wife was selling in nearby villages to make a living. This episode is reflected in an old Hasidic Yiddish song:

*Fun Kosew biz Kitew*
*Iz a brikele faranen*
*Awu der Bal-Szem, awu der Bal-Szem*
*Szpacirn iz geganen…*

*Between Kosiv and Kuty*
*There is a bridge*
*Where Baal Shem*
*Used to stroll…*

*Fun Kosew biz Kitew*
*Iz a tajchele faranen*
*Awu der Bal-Szem, awu der Bal-Szem*
*Zich tojwlen iz geganen…*

*Between Kosiv and Kuty*
*There is a river*
*In which Baal Shem*
*Would perform ritual ablutions…*

*Fun Kosew biz Kitew*
*Iz a weldele faranen*
*Awu der Bal-Szem, awu der Bal-Szem*
*Af hisbojdedes iz geganen…*

*Between Kosiv and Kuty*
*There is a forest*
*Where Baal Shem*
*Went to be alone and pray*

*Fun Kosew biz Kitew*
*Zajnen fejgelech faranen*
*Awu der Bal-Szem, awu der Bal-Szem*
*Lernen szire iz geganen…*

*Between Kosiv and Kuty*
*There are birds*
*That Baal Shem*
*Visited to learn songs…*

One of the Hasidic legends in *Sefer Shivchei haBesht* (Hebr.: Book in Praise of Baal Shem Tov, 1814) tells of a meeting in the mountains near Kosiv between the Besht and the infamous bandit Oleksa Dovbush: one day, the great tzadik helped Dovbush escape from Hajduk soldiers by showing him a path through a mountain gorge. The grateful outlaw presented him with a pipe, which the Baal Shem Tov is said to have used until the end of his days, walking among people "always with a pipe in his mouth."

**Synagogues and kloyzn ❡** The first Kabbalistic groups of pietists emerged in Kosiv and in the neighbouring town of Kuty in the early 18th century. These pre-Beshtian (before the baal Shem Tov) hassidim established their own prayer houses (*kloyzn*), where they used a kabbalistic prayer book of the safed Kabbalist Isaak Luria (known as Arizal). There were three such *kloyzn* in Kosiv. Later in the 18th century, the Beshtian Hasidim settled in Kosiv and established a dynasty of tsaddikim which also gave rise to an important Vyzhnytsia Hasidic dynasty (which emerged in the nearby Vyzhnytsia). After the Holocaust, the leaders of these two dynasties moved to Israel (Safed) and to the USA (New York), where they established sizeable ultra-Orthodox communites. ❡ In fact, all the prayer houses in Kosiv belonged to the Hasidic community. A wooden *kloyz* was built there at the end of the 18th century, around the same time that the Jewish

cemetery was established. Today, it is difficult to determine exactly where the first synagogue was located. It is certain, however, that a *kloyz* of the tsaddik the Hager family was built near the road to Kolomyia. The construction of this edifice, which could seat 200 people, was financed by Nathan Bender, a merchant and commercial agent from Zabolotiv.

¶ The central Hasidic *kloyz* in Kosiv was situated somewhere near the today's 126 Nezalezhnosti St. It was a one-floor building with thick brick walls. The prayer hall was decorated with floral wood-carved gilded ornamentation.

¶ On the evening of October 17, 1941, the *kloyz* was set on fire by the Nazis as part of the first large anti-Jewish *Aktion*; seven days earlier they had shot dead seven Jews seeking refuge in the building. The building burnt down but the walls remained. Another synagogue, which also served as a *cheder* (elementary school), has survived to this day and is now the seat of a municipal office. Near the synagogue, there is a building

that in the late 19th century served as a residence of the Hager Dynasty. Today, it is the building at 55 Nezalezhnosti St., and it houses the ethnographic Museum of Hutsul Folk Art.

**At the turn of the century** ¶ In 1880, the Jewish community in Kosiv numbered more than 2,000 people and made up 78 percent of the town's population. In 1898, a local branch of the Agudat Zion was established, and the same year also saw the opening of a vocational training school – it taught various crafts and was funded by the Jewish financier and philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch. In 1909, the Agudat Zion set up the "Safa Brura" school, with Hebrew as the main language of instruction. In 1938, a Jewish secondary school was opened. ¶ Zionists became active in Kosiv after World War I, setting up their own organisations and encouraging the local Jewish population to emigrate to Palestine. ¶ In 1921, the Jewish community of Kosiv numbered more than

2,166 people out of a total of 4,234. Dr. Jacob Gertner (1892–1941), of Jewish descent, served as the Mayor of Kosiv in 1929–1934, and Jews constituted half of the members of the municipal council. ¶ In the interwar period, Kosiv flourished economically. In 1928, some 40 weavers established a carpet-weaving cooperative. A year later, a Jewish Cooperative Bank was opened. Jews also owned the "Hutsul workshop" (belonging Gilman) and knitwear establishments (belonging to Schneiberg and Gund). ¶ The Zionists became increasingly influential in the 1920s and '30s, with various Zionist parties and branches of youth movements such as Hashomer Hatzair (Heb.: The Young Guard) and Hanoar Hatzioni (Heb.: The Zionist Youth) established in town. The Maccabee Sports Club was

actively promoting a healthy way of life and even had its own football team. Between 1934 and 1936, the *Kosover Shtyme* newspaper (Yid.: The Voice of Kosiv) was published.

## World War II and the Holocaust

¶ On September 22, 1939, the Red Army occupied Kosiv. The Soviet authorities opened the Industrial School of Hutsul Art, based on the former School of Weaving. But at the same time, harsh measures were taken against the local population. Jewish social institutions and political organisations were disbanded, but at the same time, the number of Jews in Kosiv increased due to an influx of refugees from Nazi-occupied Poland: in 1941, there were about 4,000 Jews in the town. At the beginning of the Soviet-German war in the summer of 1941, Hungarian forces allied with the Third Reich were the first to enter Kosiv; on July 1, 1941, they took over the town. The Hungarians had a relatively tolerant attitude towards the Jewish population, they submitted to the German racial laws but did not support mass executions of the Jews. However, in August 1941, Kosiv fell under the rule of the Germans, who instituted a regime of mass terror. On August 16–17, 1941, the first *Aktion* took place, in which half of the Jewish population of Kosiv was executed point-blank as part of what today is known as the Holocaust by bullets. In April 1942, 600 Jews were transported to Kolomyia, while others were murdered in the Sheparovski Forest. In the fall 1941, more than 10,000 Jews from Kosiv and neighbouring towns and villages were killed. In May 1942, a ghetto was established in Kosiv, and in September 1942,

all the prisoners, except skilled craftsmen and men able to do construction work, were either killed or transferred to the Bełżec death camp. In November 1942, Kosiv was proclaimed *Judenrein*, "free of Jews." Today, on Town Hill, there is a memorial to the victims of the Nazi regime. The mass graves of those killed in the Nazi *Aktions* of 1941–1942 can be found some 150–200 metres from the Jewish cemetery, on the site of the former castle. In 1992, a memorial plaque was established there, marking the place as a burial ground for Kosiv's Jews. ◗ During the war, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) was active in the mountains around Kosiv. Soviet forces returned to Kosiv on March 31, 1944. For several months, the town was on the front line and suffered heavy destruction.

**Post-war period** ◗ The end of World War II saw Ukraine incorporated into the USSR and marked the beginning of a new Soviet era in Kosiv's history, the so-called "second Soviets," which lasted until 1991 when Kosiv became part of the independent Ukraine. Under the Soviets, the town's spa facilities fell into decline; instead, much folk crafts experienced a revival. New Shevchenko and Franko *kylym* (Ukr.: for tapestry and carpet) workshops were established and the "Hutsulshchyna" sculpture studio was opened. In 2001, Kosiv was listed as one of the Historical Towns of Ukraine. Today, it has a population of more than 8,000, but there is no Jewish community.

**The cemetery** ◗ The first Jewish cemetery in Kosiv was set up in the 18th century on the side of Town Hill (behind the building at 42 Nezalezhnosti St.). Covering an area of approx. one hectare (2.5 acres), it contains several hundred matzevot and the tombs of the important Hasidic rabbis of the Hager dynasty. Among the oldest legible gravestones are those of Baruch, son of Abram (d. 1779); Sarah, daughter of Abram (d. 1783); and Menachem Mendel, son of Yaakov Kopl (d. 1825).

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

B Graves of Hasidic rabbis at the Jewish cemetery in Kosiv, 2014. Photo by Viktor Zagreba, digital collection of the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre" Centre (www.teatrnn.pl)

**Jewish cemetery** (18th c.), O. Kobylanskoi St. ❡ **Museum of Hutsul Folk Art and Life** (located in the former rabbi's house), 51 Nezalezhnosti St. ❡ **Town Mountain**, ruins of a reinforced fortalice from the 16th–17th c. ❡ **Burial mound** from the Roman period (3rd–4th c. AD) in the suburban village of Vezhbovets. ❡ **Orthodox Church of the Nativity St. John the Baptist** (1912), built of wood in the Hutsul style. ❡ **Chapel** (1866) located at the Polish cemetery; it had served as the main Catholic church before a new one was built.

**Horod**: a rock fortress from the times of the Principality of Galicia-Volhynia. ❡ **Huk**: a waterfall on the Rybnytsa River near Kosiv (2.5 metres high). ❡ **Kuty** (12 km): a Jewish cemetery (18th c.) with over 2,000 matzevot. ❡ **Vyzhnytsia** (12 km): 3 buildings of former synagogues (19th–20th c.); the 19th-c. house of the Vizhnitser tsaddik; a Jewish cemetery with over 1,000 matzevot; the legendary natural *mikve* of the Baal Shem Tov on the River Vizhenka. ❡ **Yabluniv** (17 km): a Jewish cemetery (17th c.). ❡ **Sniatyn** (43 km): a former synagogue (19th c.); a Jewish cemetery (18th c.); a church (1721); a town hall (1861). ❡ **Chernivtsi** (78 km): the capital of Bukovina; the Museum of the History and Culture of Bukovinian Jews; the Tempel (Progressive Synagogue, 19th c.); numerous monuments, Catholic and Orthodox churches, and museums; the palace of the tsaddik of Ruzhin in Sadhora (now district of Chernivtsi); the Jewish cemetery (19th–20th c.) with the gravesites of the tsaddik of Ruzhin (Israel Friedman) and key literary and political Jewish fgures of the first half of the 20th c., including the fable-writing poet Eliezer Shteynabrg (1880–1932).



KOSIV