A thousand years

The millennium-old history of Volodymyr has been described by many Ukrainian, Polish, and Jewish authors. The oldest mention of the town can be found in the 12th-century *Primary Chronicle* (also known as the *Tale of Bygone Years*), which reports that in 988, Prince Volodymyr (Vladimir) Sviatoslavich of Kyiv presented this Volhynian city to his son Vsevolod to rule. There is a questionable Arabic source mentioning the Jews of Volodymyr in the 10th century, but this could not be substantiated. On the other hand, there are Old Rus sources testifying to the Jewish communal presence in town in the 13th century, supported by external evidence of rabbinic responsa. The description of the death and funeral of Prince Vladimir Vasilevich in 1288 in the *Hypatian Codex* reads that “a whole host of people of Volodymyr wept over his death: men, women, and children; Germans, Surozhians, and Novgorodians; and the Jews wept, as they had wept when they were taken into Babylonian captivity after Jerusalem was conquered.”

With time, the town turned into an important trade centre. Merchants from Europe came through Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland to Galician and Volhynian towns and cities, and further on to Kyiv. Due to their broad commercial networks, the Jews of the medieval Slavic state known as ‘Kyivan Rus’ (also Duchy of Kiev) were mentioned in 11th- and 12th-century medieval rabbinic sources.

The Jews of Volodymyr

In the early modern times, the town’s Jewish population established a *kahal* – an autonomous self-governing communal umbrella organization. The authority of the *kahal* of Volodymyr extended over the smaller sub-*kahals* nearby: in Lokachi, Kovel, Kysylyn, and some other places. The Jewish quarter was located in the northeastern part of the town, but Jews also lived in many other parts of the town centre. The streets in the Jewish quarter bustled with trade; small craftsmen offered their services here, too. The Volodymyr Jews prospered at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, engaged in active trade with Lvów (now Lviv), Lutsk, and Kyiv. Commodities were freighted from Ustyluh down the Bug River to Gdańsk, and then further to Western Europe and back. Volodymyr
was a town where one could see Jewish merchants from Turkey, Italy, Kyiv, and Cracow. At the beginning of the 16th century and after Poland and Lithuania united their lands under one Commonwealth, Volhynia was incorporated into Poland, and the Jewish community prospered. Jews were active in crafts, trade, tavern-keeping, and tax collecting, as well as various lease-holding occupations (leasing fish-ponds, weights and measures, customs, etc.). As elsewhere, the Jews suffered from the bloody massacres during the 1648–1649 Cossack revolution led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky. Many Jews were killed during the mass violence of 1653, when the town was seized by the Commonwealth Lithuanian troops, and also during the Polish-Russian War (1654–1667), when the town was completely ravaged; there remained only two Jewish families in town. However, the community regenerated fairly quickly.

**Modern times** According to the 1897 census, Volodymyr had 9,883 inhabitants, including 5,869 Jews (60 percent). A Talmud Torah school was opened towards the end of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, a yeshiva and the Russian state school for Jews were established. On May 5, 1900, a great fire broke out and destroyed 250 houses; six prayer houses burnt down, and 68 Torah scrolls were destroyed. The main synagogue also suffered damage. This catastrophe prompted the Jewish community to set up a mutual assistance fund a year later. Various political parties emerged at this time, too. At the end of the 19th century, a branch of an organisation called Hibbat Zion (Heb.: The Love of Zion) was established in town, and from 1906, there emerged also a branch of the Bund – the socialist Marxist Jewish proletarian party. The newspaper Ha-Melits (Heb.: The Advocate) reported that in 1903, the town had a hospital and a pharmacy. Most Jews worked in the cattle (especially horse) and grain trade. According to the 1910–1911 census, 7,060 out of the 15,622 inhabitants of Volodymyr-Volynskyi were Jewish. At that time, in addition to the synagogue, there were nine prayer houses. In the first decade of the 20th century, a Jewish vocational school was established. Shortly before the outbreak of World War I, representatives of religious and political organisations set
up the “Kultura” ("Culture") committee, which helped the Jewish poor and also ran a hospital, a theatre, and the Sholem Aleichem Jewish literature library. After the outbreak of World War I, the Jews suffered each time the town changed hands, and the introduction of the new order nearly always started with acts of mass violence against the Jewish population. After the withdrawal of Austrian troops, for example, Polish forces entered Volodymyr and carried out pogroms. After almost two years of fighting and alternate occupation by the Polish Army and the Red Army, Volodymyr-Volynskyi (then Włodzimierz Wołyński) eventually remained under Polish rule from September 13, 1920.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the town had about 20 functioning synagogues. The Rabbi of Volodymyr-Volynskyi at that time was Yitzhok Grosman, who was succeeded in the 1930s by Yaakov Dovid Morgenstern, who died during the Nazi occupation. Technical and agricultural schools belonging to the Zionist-oriented Tarbut network opened in Volodymyr: the former was established in 1925 and the latter in 1935. There were also schools with Hebrew as the language of instruction, “Beth Yaakov” and “Javneh;” a private Jewish secondary school (gymnasium) with instruction in Polish; and a yeshiva for boys. The youth scouting organisations included “Ha-tsofim,” “Ha-shomer ha-leumi,” “Ha-noar ha-tsioni,” and “Beitar,” the socialist Zionist organisation “Ha-shomer ha-tzair;” and a branch of the Zionist-Marxist party “Poale Zion.” A community kitchen provided food for the needy. On the eve of World War II, several Jewish schools functioned in Volodymyr: a Talmud Torah school, a “Beth Yaakov” school for girls from the Orthodox families, and a primary school, cheder. The yeshiva was attended by 138 talmidim. The “ORT” craft school trained tailors. There were also a library, a hospital, a national bank, a Jewish orphanage, an old people’s home, and two cinemas.

The synagogue The largest of the known Volodymyr synagogues was located in what is now Roksolany Street. But with the emergence of Hasidism, small prayer houses called shtiebels also appeared. The main synagogue is believed to have been built in 1801. The members of its congregation were mainly wealthy people. The building survived World War II but was destroyed at the beginning of the 1950s. Its walls were so strong that tank carriers had to be used to pull them down.

Rabbis The first important rabbi in Volodymyr was Yitzhak ben Betsalel, known as the Gaon of Ludmir (Ludmir
being the town's Yiddish name). He enjoyed great authority and was the leader of the community in 1542–1576. Volodymyr was the birthplace of his grandson, David ben Shmuel Halevi Segal (1586–1667), also known as “TaZ”, an acronym of the title of his major work Turei Zahav (Heb.: Golden Rose). David stands out as one of the most highly recognised rabbis of his time. ¶ The leader of the Hasidic community in Volodymyr-Volynskyi Shlomo Gottlieb Halevi Karliner (1738–1792) was one of the most influential rabbinic scholars in the history of Hasidic Judaism. His mentor was Aaron Perlow of Karlin, who studied together with Shlomo under the guidance of the Great Maggid – Dov Ber of Mezherich. Aaron Perlow set up a centre of Hasidism in Karlin, giving rise to a movement that was later named Karlin-Stolin Hasidism. It is due to his influence that the mitnagdim, the opponents of the Hasidim – and later the Russian tsarist authorities – referred to the rapidly spreading Hasidic movement as the Karliner Jews. Shlomo Karliner was Aaron Perlow’s best student and led the movement after Perlow’s death. He enjoyed immense authority; his influence extended to the distant communities of Lithuania, Belorussia, and Volhynia. Reb Shlomo moved to Volodymyr in 1786 and established there a branch of Ludmir Hasidim. During his lifetime, he became famous for many good deeds. He helped people regardless of their creed or ethnicity. He wholeheartedly embraced the teachings of Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, that one should be ready for death when starting to pray, since prayer, by its very nature, requires the one who prays to abandon himself or herself entirely. Rabbi Shlomo was shot by a Russian soldier when he was praying in the synagogue on July 10, 1792; he was buried at the Jewish cemetery, where Gagarin Park is now located. Exploratory work revealed the foundation of the oHEL at the site of his burial, and in 1999, the oHEL was rebuilt. ¶ The Hasidic dynasty of Ludmir in Volodymyr-Volynskyi was continued by Moshe Gottlieb (d. 1821), his son Shlomo, and his grandson Nahum, who were the leaders of the town community. The last tsadik of Volodymyr was Nahum’s son, Gedalia.

THE MAIDEN OF LUDMIR ¶ Volodymyr-Volynskyi was the birthplace and home town of one of the most colourful figures in Hasidism, a charismatic female leader of the Hasidic community – Hannah Rachel Verbermacher (1806–1892), considered a tsadekes (a female righteous person, a tsaddik). She became famous for her healing skills and was known among the local people as the Maiden of Ludmir. Numerous scholars (such as Shmuel Horodecki or
Nathaniel Deutsch, the author of *Maiden of Ludmir: A Jewish Holy Woman and Her World*, Berkeley 2003) described the life of that remarkable woman – the first (and only) female tsaddik in the history of Hasidic Judaism. Hannah Rachel was born into a wealthy Hasidic family and received an excellent education. Her followers, called the “Hasidim of the Maiden of Ludmir,” gathered around her.

She ran a prayer house in Sokalska Street – a beth midrash in which her followers would gather, most of them poor members of the local community. She would remain hidden from the sight of her audience when delivering her teachings. The Maiden of Ludmir was known in all the nearby towns and attracted crowds of people, including learned scholars and rabbis. Men found this outrageous and she was forced to marry, but the marriage did not last long. She later emigrated to Palestine, where she gathered a Hasidic community around her. She died in Jerusalem on 17 July 1892 and was buried on the Mount of Olives – the burial place of some of the world’s most highly respected Jews.

**World War II and the Holocaust**

After the city was seized by the Soviet troops in 1939, the teaching of Judaism and of Hebrew was banned. Jewish schools were initially allowed to provide instruction in Yiddish, but they were soon closed altogether. The activity of all Zionist parties was halted and in 1940 their leaders were arrested and deported to Siberia. Soon after the occupation began, the Nazis opened their hunting season: they caught Jews in the streets or in their homes under the pretext of work. Once assembled, these people were immediately executed in the prison yard, where
they were also buried. Mass murders were committed in other places, too. In April 1942, the Germans established a ghetto, to which they also transferred the Jews from nearby towns and villages. Divided into two parts, the ghetto was inhabited by about 18,000 people. In September 1942, about 15,000 people were murdered in the village of Piatydni. Another mass execution, in which several thousand more Jews lost their lives, took place in town on November 13, 1942. The 1,500 Jews remaining in Volodymyr were murdered on December 13, 1942.

**Memorials** On September 17, 1989, a candle-shaped obelisk, 12 meters high, was erected in the village of Piatydni, on the road from Ustyluh to Volodymyr, near the site of mass executions of Jews. The mass graves are located 300 meters north of the obelisk. In 2010, a mass grave was discovered during excavations carried out in an old fortified settlement near the town. In that one grave the bones of 747 people were found and exhumed; 47 percent of these people were women and 27 percent were children. In 2014, a memorial to Holocaust victims was placed in Shevchenka Street, at the site of the ghetto.

**The Jewish cemetery** Drahomanova St., where Gagarin Park is now located, is the site of the Jewish cemetery – one of the oldest in Central and Eastern Europe. Many eminent people were buried here. During World War II, matzevot were used for paving streets. Even just a few years ago it was still possible to see a pavement of matzevot along Wasylivska Street, with inscriptions already worn away. The destruction of the Jewish cemetery was completed in Soviet times. Some of the matzevot are known to have been used to make other tombstones, predominantly for Christian grave sites. School No. 2 with a sports field, a sports school, and a residential building, was built directly on the cemetery grounds.

**Traces of Jewish presence** A few houses directly connected to the history of the Jewish community still survive in the town. For instance, at 81 Lutska Street there is a building that once served as a prayer house; on Pidzamche Street there is the building that housed the Jewish youth club “Akiva;” and on the wall of the house at 22 Danyla Halytskoho Street visitors can see the Ets Hayim symbol (Heb.: The Tree of Life). Another building surviving
to this day (at 2 Zelena Street) is the former elementary religious school for boys from poor families (Talmud Torah), which functioned until the beginning of World War II. One can see the Star of David in the form of a low relief in its brick wall. The buildings of the former Tarbut school at 24 Haidamatska Street and the former Beth Yaakov school for girls at 9 Drahomanova Street have also survived.

Municipal Local History Museum, 6 Ivana Franka St. tel. +380334221911; the exhibition includes Jewish objects of everyday use found in the town.

Worth seeing

Former Talmud Torah school (19th c.), 2 Zelena St.

Bulwarks of an old fortified settlement (10th–14th c.), Pidzamche St.

Orthodox Church of St. Basil (14th–15th c.), Vasylivska St.

Orthodox Cathedral of the Dormition of the Holy Mother of God (12th c.), Soborna St.

Dominican Monastery (1789), Danyla Halytskoho St.

Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas (1780), Mykolayivska St.

Walls of the Capuchin Monastery, Kovelska St., Drahomanova St.

Church of St. Joachim and St. Anne (1790), Kovelska St.

Greek Catholic Church (formerly a Lutheran kirche, 1890), Kovelska St.

Orthodox Cathedral of the Nativity of Our Lord (1762), Kovelska St.

Surrounding area