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Polish cities as a space of history in Boris Khersonsky's *Family archive*

Польские города как пространство истории в *Семейном архиве* Бориса Херсонского

Abstract. This article is focused on the so-called urban texts related to Poland with a special emphasis on the historical and geographical region of Galicia, which covers the territories of Red Ruthenia in Ukraine and Lesser Poland, and on their historical connotations as presented in Boris Khersonsky's book of poetry *Family archive* (2006). Khersonsky is a Russian-speaking Ukrainian poet from Odesa, who has been awarded prestigious prizes for his literary work both in Ukraine and abroad. *Family archive* can be described as a sort of novel in verse about the tragic history of the 20th century told through the family history of the author himself. The main goal of this article is to analyze the specific spatial structure of the book in the context of geopoetics and places of memory with a special accent on Polish cities and towns. This territory is the quintessential locus of historical events connected to Eastern European Jewish heritage and the tragedy of the Holocaust. This paper seeks to reconstruct the image of Poland with all the connotations and cultural myths associated with its multicultural experience.

Keywords: Boris Khersonsky, urban space, Galicia, Vilnius, Jewry

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Introduction

Boris Khersonsky (born in Chernivtsi in 1950) – together with his wife Ludmila Khersonskaya – is considered a key figure of modern Russian-language Ukrainian poetry and is highly regarded by critics and readers in his motherland and abroad. It is worth mentioning that he is a third-generation doctor; he studied medicine in Ivano-Frankivsk and Odesa and worked as a psychologist and psychiatrist at the Odesa regional psychiatric hospital. His education and experience, rather traditional for men of letters in different countries, seems to have had a long-term impact on his whole body of writing, his poetics, and his

sets of motifs. During the Soviet period, Khersonsky was not allowed to publish his poetry and distributed it through Samizdat and abroad; he also published in the émigré press as a journalist. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the author has published seventeen books in Russian and more recently in Ukrainian. Khersonsky enjoys the recognition of local and foreign literary communities: he was the poet laureate of the Kyiv Laurels Poetry Festival (2008) and the recipient of a Scholarship from the Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellowship Fund (2008) and the Jury Special Prize at the Literaris Festival for East European Literature (2010). Khersonsky is constantly compared by critics (see Rodnânskaâ 2007; Salomatin 2010; Abdullaev 2010; Sandler 2014) and translators (Livshin) not only to Joseph Brodsky, but also to Oleg Chukhontsev, Timur Kibirov, and Alexei Tsvetkov, among others.

After the beginning of Russian military aggression in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions and the notorious annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, and especially after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, his Facebook page has become a collection of anti-war and anti-imperialistic texts. Currently he and his wife live in Europe because of the war. The Khersonsky family are invited to poetry performances and discussions (especially those in the context of the currently controversial first language of their poetry). Khersonsky's texts have been extensively translated into English, French, German, Italian, etc.

Although he is an Orthodox Russian-speaking poet with Jewish origins from Ukraine, Khersonsky constantly experiences the influence of his complicated and tragic cultural heritage on his creative work. He himself seems to be a veritable "crossroad of cultures", since he intentionally situates his poems in the same problematic and semiotically rich spaces. Odesa is a prominent example of such an urban space, where cultural layers overlap each other, and history is said to be an integral part of these chronotopes. Recent events have enriched the poet's old texts with new connotations and, thanks to the poetics of postmodernism, triggered new interpretations of them in the context of postcolonial discourse. The notion of Jewish memory (Stier 2009; Hahn 2020) seems to play a leading role as a reference point for the unclear identity of Khersonsky's lyrical subjects and current unstable historical period.

The main goal of this article is to analyze the urban space of cities that are Polish or assumed to be historically Polish in Russian-language cultures in the poetic work *Family archive* (2006) in the context of the historical conflicts of the 20th century. I seek to reveal Khersonsky's poetical strategies when representing historical (common) and family (private) time in Vilnius, Galician cities and towns, and other places. It makes sense to use the tools of Imaginative Geography here, especially in the context of spatial perspectives on genocide and mass violence

which Jewry dealt with (see Tyner 2012) and a space of trauma. Furthermore, the impact of the images of Poland created by previous literary traditions, both Soviet official and underground Samizdat, will be considered.

***Family archive* as an example of “non-fiction poetry”**

The book *Family archive* was published in Russian in 2003 in Odesa and in 2006 in Moscow, and immediately drew the attention of critics. Interestingly, opinions varied from extremely positive to accusations that the book was an egregiously secondary collection lacking in originality (Salomatin 2010). Nevertheless, *Family archive*, which depicts the sunken Atlantis of Eastern European Jewry, became a milestone in Khersonsky's work and triggered heated debate around the problem of its genre. For instance, some researchers claim that it is a real novel in verse: “If a multifaceted narrative about people in history – or rather, under its wheel – is called a novel, then what we have is undoubtedly a novel. The action takes place throughout the 20th century” (Štypel' 2004). And even epic elements were found in this Jewish family narrative (Gubajlovskij 2007; Rodnânskaâ 2007; Kostûkov 2013), so that scholars describe this text as “a national epic woven from many, many distinctly individual stories” (Kostûkov 2006), as a “post-history” built on the principle of subjective montage, where years are intentionally shuffled like cards in a deck (Rodnânskaâ 2007). The poems in the book, both rhymed and in free verse, consist of biographies of the poet's close and distant relatives, recreated from photographs, letters, diaries, oral traditions, official documents, and some phrases and images that have remained in his childhood memory, brief prayers, and the “Auction of Judaica” cycle that interrupts narrative chapters. All the parts are rather unemotional, even when speaking about the most terrible disasters of the 20th century, so that it seems logical to compare Khersonsky's tone to “the Old Testament tradition and medical history” (Štypel' 2004) at the same time, poems-investigations, poems-reconstructions, non-fiction poems. In the context of Memory Studies, *Family archive* could be interpreted as a brilliant example of restorative nostalgia, which deals with attempts of transhistorical reconstructions of a lost home (Boym 41, 49, 50), or a lost family eliminated by Time and “traumatogenic social changes” (Szompka 158). Furthermore, scholars often question the role of such archives in representing the past, highlighting that there is no opportunity to remain objective when relying only on family customs, photographs, letters, postcards, diaries, objects, random notes without adding any fictive details (Lugarić 226) as it was done by Khersonsky's lyrical subject. Documents can be triggers for mechanisms of memory – individual or collective – and interpretation, but nothing more.

It is remarkable that most scholars analyzing *Family archive* focus on Jewish motifs only in the context of history without considering the very specific spatial structure of the book, despite the fact that even the titles of the chapters position the stories not only in time, but also in space: *Odesa, 1913. A game of cards; Kremenets, July 1914 – Vilna, August 1939; Odesa, 1915–1938. Utterances; Belt-sy, 1940 – Lviv, 1993; Odesa, 1984 – Kolyma, 1940; Sekuriani, 1930 – Jerusalem, 1990*, etc. Mapping episodes from his family chronicle, the author makes them, on the one hand, more plausible, documentary-style, and, on the other hand, he simultaneously uses a virtually rich literary tradition connected to different urban texts. The whole geography of the book consists of cities from Brooklyn to Jerusalem, includes the GULAG camps and territories which used to exist like Bessarabia and Galicia. Such a scheme connects the places where Jews end up as they are scattered across Ukraine, western Russia, Eastern Europe, and beyond – to Israel, America – thus repeating the paths of the Jewish diaspora of the 20th century (Sandler 2014). I will attempt to analyze the semiotics of the represented cities and towns with a special emphasis on Poland (Poland not only in real geographical borders) which used to be space of Eastern European Jewish culture before the 20th century's catastrophes.

A brief overview of Khersonsky's strategies in urban space

It is easy to note that Khersonsky does not depict urban space in detail. While speaking of people, he is not interested in city sights, famous spots or so called "signatures" associated with specific cities and towns, and semiotically being responsible for what Kevin Lynch called visibility or imaginability, "that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. It is that shape, color, or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the environment" (Lynch 9). In the case of *Family archive* readers do not have anything like that. Only sometimes the author mentions meaningful places like Bona Mountain with the ruins of a castle in Kremenets, where Nekhama and Rachel throw coins into a well in 1910, or a Jewish technical school in Odesa, where "Solomon and Nadya/teach separate subjects in Yiddish to teens" (Khersonsky 1996) in 1932. All these spots cannot help readers to build up the images of the cities they are situated in, but they are needed as specific "anchors" to pin characters on the map of Eastern Europe, the most unstable territory of the 20th century.

Furthermore, in some sense geographical localities in Khersonsky's texts become the anthropological space which is reconstructed semiotically around people's stories. As one scholar claims, "Khersonsky says the following: these peo-

ple *existed* because they *were* such-and-such, and something *happened* to them” (Štypel’ 2004). This strategy is used, for example, in his collection *Marble sheet* (2009) about Italy. As a poet of the 21st century, Khersonsky does not feel a necessity to describe Rome, Venice, Florence, the space of which has been extensively represented in Russian-language literature for more than 300 years. The poet is focused on Russian people and their unhappy lives, and sunny stunning eternal Italian cities in this context play a role of a contrast between the beauty and existential crises of characters.

In *Family archive* urban spaces neither define characters nor trigger their actions. All mentioned towns and cities are real places connected for the author with members of his family but – and this is rather important, in my opinion, – they make sense only in the form of the chronotope with a strong bond with time, or with the notion of “an experience of time” coined by Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 100). All events that had happened to Jewry in Khersonsky’s book, according to the poet’s conception, happened only because the longevity of their lives overlapped with depicted periods. In this sense Time prevails over Space in *Family archive*, History prevails over Geography, and specific cities become an integral part of the global space of Eastern Europe and – wider – the space of sunken Atlantis of Eastern European Jewry where things survived longer than people. The poet writes the chronicle of something ephemeral and vanishing, existing only in old photos and memories, so that he avoids portraying everything which is more long-lasting like cities. And, for sure, *Family archive* belongs to “tales about time” (Mendilow 16).

Polish (Jewish) text of Soviet culture: One tradition to follow

It goes without saying that Poland during the second half of the 20th century played for people from the USSR a specific role of quasi-West and a mediator between the Soviet Union and European culture with all its treasures, books, songs, films, and mass-market goods. It was a period of obsession with everything Polish: from cosmetics and fashion magazines to impregnable beauties and characters from Wajda’s films. Eventually, this craze (both in official and dissident underground culture) was reflected in literature after 1945 and almost totally disappeared after the collapse of the USSR.

But there was another semiotic layer which developed simultaneously with the Polish text of Soviet culture – a Polish Jewish text created by men of letters with Jewish (or – very rarely – without) origins like Boris Slutsky who had personal connections to the tragedy of the Holocaust and for whom Poland had become a mortal space where the Nazis organized the most terrible and notorious con-

centration death camps: Auschwitz¹, Treblinka, Majdanek. There are many pieces of poetry written during the Soviet period which are attributed not to Poland but mostly to the Jewish global context in mentioned toponyms. In these urban texts history (milestone events) was assigned by specific spaces and places, which is why they were separated from the geoculture of Poland semiotically. Geography in this case is absorbed by History.

This part of Polish martyrology, which is Jewish, in fact, had a very specific set of images, motives and mythologemes in Soviet culture that were different from the classical semantic field “Poland as a cemetery”. But while overlapping, they enriched each other. For instance, images of fire, ashes, smoke relevant to the topic of the Warsaw uprising and the Warsaw Ghetto (see Vorontsova 2020: 63–85) in poems about the Holocaust became symbols of innocent victims burnt in the ovens of concentration camps. Auschwitz crematorias’ ironically “sweet” smoke is a key image in poems by Boris Slutsky and Genrikh Sapgir, who wrote not only about individual tragedies but also about the whole Jewish lifestyle destroyed across Eastern Europe. Poland after the Holocaust in this context became a territory that retained traces of the Jewish past without a Jewish present, and Soviet poetry reflected this process rather objectively.

So, it is worth analyzing which parts of this semiotic structure of Polish geoculture were absorbed from the previous poetic tradition by Boris Khersonsky in his book *Family archive*, the whole composition of which is built up around different urban spaces. Some of them are Polish or supposed to be Polish in Russian-language cultures despite the geopolitical situation.

Poland with unstable borders

Traditionally in Russian-speaking literature there is an image of Poland which has all the features of liminal territories: between Eastern and Western civilizations, between the USSR and European culture, between the mythopoetical worlds of dead and alive, etc. (see Woroncowa 2015; Vorontsova 2019, 2020). It goes without saying that such a space must have had a set of stereotypical characteristics that could be transferred from one text to another without basic changes. In case of Poland, it is, undoubtedly, instability and semiotic uncertainty of its physical borders. It is understandable and formed under pressure of historical events, especially the partitions of Poland which resulted in the elimination of the country for 123 years.

¹ In Russian-speaking cultures the Polish toponym Oświęcim is more commonplace.

In *Family archive*, Boris Khersonsky follows the real paths of his relatives who lived in the former Polish territories or reclaimed ones after the Polish-Soviet War, but it seems obvious that old patterns have a long-term impact on his creative work. Moreover, most of the settings in the book are among those with the most complicated history in the 20th century, becoming during a very short period a part of Austro-Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, and the USSR. This instability and unclear status are highlighted by dates provided by the author.

For instance, the chapter *Sayings: Bessarabia, Galicia, 1913–1939* depicts a brilliant example of the theological disputes among rabbis about the image of the Family Tree growing underground, which could be interpreted as a metaphor of the flipped over World Tree and – simultaneously – as a symbol of Jews who are everywhere and nowhere without physical roots. Interestingly, except for the title there is only one toponym – Sinai – mentioned in the contexts of the fruitless search for Jewish origins and the lack of a physical land to which they might have belonged until they vanished. Taking the unclear status of Bessarabia and Galicia into account, dates play a specific role here. No peculiar city or town is mentioned, but the reader can make some conclusions based on the years in the title. It was a period when, for example, Galicia, a region populated by Poles and Jews in the cities and Ukrainians in rural areas, was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and, after its collapse, in 1918 joined the West Ukrainian People's Republic and in 1919 became a part of Poland with different legal statuses until 1939 when it was occupied by the Soviet Union. It is common knowledge that Jews made up nearly 12% of the Galician population before the Second World War (Hołub 2013).

In other words, Khersonsky uses space and time to depict the last years of Eastern European Jews in this territory when it was still possible to discuss philosophy and the Torah, and not as a part of escapism. But in the finale of *Sayings: Bessarabia, Galicia, 1913–1939* the four rabbis speak of pain and death, and the omniscient narrator speaks of oblivion, which are associated with the Holocaust. So this chapter could be treated as a foresight of wise men who know Jewish history well. And in this context unstable space becomes the most suitable setting for the unrooted culture.

Galicia is mentioned once more as a symbol of a vanished past of old Jewish clans in the chapter *Kremenets, 1942; Odesa, 1973*. The unnamed character, who migrated to the USA just before the Second World War, became a famous mathematician. In some sense he is a part of the unrooted Jewry, the eternal nomad, and the distance between him and his family lies in the fourth dimension, which is Time. Interestingly, Galicia here – together with Transnistria/Trans-Dnieper Governorate which existed from 1941 till 1944 – became not an image of space but of history and memory:

They became anonymous dust
 mixed into the soil
 of Galicia and Trans-Dnieper;
 he became a renowned scientist,
 a fellow of numerous institutes,
 the organizer of an annual seminar
 which bore his name²
 (Khersonsky 1996).

Galicia as a specific region in the history of Eastern European Jews will be mentioned several times in special chapters with the same title, *Judaica auction*, that will be analyzed further below.

Another example of Khersonsky's strategy to represent an unstable culture through unstable geography can be found in the chapter *Kremenets: July, 1914; Vilna: August, 1939*, about Moses the publisher. Here dates help readers to position family narration at the same time and space limits. Until 1917 Kremenets was part of the Russian Empire after the Third Partition of Poland, and then it passed from hand to hand 7 times, but in 1921 the town returned to Poland as a part of Volhynian Voivodship and was populated mostly by Ukrainians and Jews, so that the line about "police coming to the house of the rich Jew" (Khersonsky 1996) in verses about Moses is very plausible. Kremenets during the depicted period was so strongly associated with Poland, despite the real national composition of the population, that in September 1939 the Polish government was located there until the Soviet invasion.

The main character of this chapter is a printer who takes part in the underground activity of socialists, although he does not even pay attention to what is exactly said in the leaflets he creates. But they illustrate the multicultural population of Kremenets in the period of Russian Empire perfectly:

it was tedious-advocating close solidarity
 between Russian, Polish and Jewish workers
 for the sake of whatever³
 (Khersonsky 1996).

Moses is said to be a beholder of history, who is not interested in it, not an active participant. He will be somewhere far from the events until he too will be caught up in the wave of the Holocaust catastrophe. The consequences of police

² "Они стали анонимным прахом в земле Галиции и Транснистрии, а он – знаменитым ученым, членом многочисленных академий, организатором ежегодного семинара, носившего его имя" (Hersonskij).

³ "Текст потрясающе скучен. / Речь идет о тесном союзе русских, польских / и еврейских рабочих во имя чего-то" (Hersonskij).

coming is exile to another multicultural “Polish-Jewish” city, Vilnius, which is supposed to be one of the most literature-genetic cities of this part of Europe (see Brio 2008, Krupoves 2013): “Father, on his return, had to take drastic action / the son is exiled to Vilna, to his uncle the publisher” (Khersonsky 1996)⁴.

As Valentina Brio notices, the coexistence of several cultures in Vilnius (Vilno) over several centuries – Polish, Lithuanian, Jewish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Russian, Karaim, and Tatar – has made this city a unique and distinctive phenomenon (Brio 2008). But why is it possible to position the city in the artistic space of Poland? Traditionally, in different cultures it is associated with names of prominent Polish men of letters, from Adam Mickiewicz to Czesław Miłosz (Krupoves 2014). And in *Family archive* Khersonsky follows previous literary tradition when it comes to the process of portraying Vilnius as a multicultural and multilingual space with historical conflicts. Even the name of the city in the poetry book is given as Vilna, a form adopted in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and in the Second Polish Republic. Moreover, Vilna is still used in Hebrew. During the period described Vilnius also passed from hand to hand several times but in 1922 it was annexed by Poland and became the capital of the Wilno Voivodeship and was the fifth largest city in Poland until it was seized by the Soviets in 1939, after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. About these events Moses has his own opinion:

He thought the Soviet invasion was good luck.
For some reason he believed the Bolsheviks
were a Jewish regime which would
straighten the brains of Polish anti-Semites⁵
(Khersonsky 1996).

These lines reflect real tension between the nations that populated the city and made it a space full of conflicts and antisemitism. Polish authorities in Wilno subjected Lithuanians to denationalization and had strong antisemitic moods against the large Jewish community (see Melzer 2003). Khersonsky depicts history through Moses's point of view with all his hopes and mistakes. And it is an attempt of reconstruction of his thoughts.

It is remarkable that Vilnius, the most textogenic city from the whole map of the book, is described several times in different periods. The main character of the chapter observes it through the window, and is in love with Shula. His emotions and sexual tension enrich the landscape of gothic Old Town:

⁴ “Отец, вернувшись, / принимает крутые меры: сын ссылается в Вильну / к дяде-издателю” (Hersonskij).

⁵ “Вторжение Советов показалось ему удачей: / он почему-то считал большевизм еврейским режимом, / который вправит мозги антисемитам-полякам” (Hersonskij 2006).

He looks
 out the window at the gothic roofs, but sees
 simultaneously the marvelous sunset city and
 the chiaroscuro play in the folds and hollows
 of her voluptuous body⁶
 (Khersonsky 1996).

Another description of urban space of Vilnius reminds us of a street photo of Moses and his wife, whom he had abused mentally and sexually for many years:

A couple walks along a noisy Vilna street.
 He is much older, but still carries himself well.
 Both wear macintoshes in current fashion.
 He wears a beret, she, a round hat with a veil.
 * * * * *
 Everything has vanished, even more irretrievable than usual⁷
 (Khersonsky 1996).

A “noisy Vilna street” seems the only stable thing here: fashion changes, everything vanishes, people die. And the reader does not know anything about Moses and Shula after the Second World War begins, it looks like an open ending, but the historical background and knowledge about the Holocaust suggest only a tragic denouement. History equalizes the abuser and his victim. In this context it is worth noting that the described photo is said to be, on the one hand, an example of ekphrasis, and, on the other, an example of the domestication of public space, while family could be treated as a place itself (see Nye 74–95). A dysfunctional family lives in a city with a lot of ethnic conflicts, which fits the pattern very well.

In the chapter *Lviv, 1936. A nightdream*, Lviv, a former capital of Galicia, which was during the interwar period the third-most populous city in Poland, is depicted very roughly – only in the title – and has some Habsburg Empire heritage of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis. Lviv during its Polish period (it will appear again as part of the USSR and sovereign Ukraine but in more down-to-earth terms) is devoid of even fuzzy descriptions, so it is logical that this urban space seems to be placed in the oneiristic sphere, which as a dream of Josef is to be deciphered by “famous doctor Bloomberg”.

⁶ “Он делает вид, что не смотрит, вернее, что смотрит в окно, на островерхие крыши, но ухитряется видеть одновременно прекрасный город, закат и веселое тело с игрою складок, ложинок и светотени” (Hersonskij).

⁷ “Двое идут по шумной улице Вильны. / Он гораздо старше, но держится превосходно. / Оба в длинных плащах-макинтош по тогдашней моде, / на нем – берет, а на ней – круглая шляпка с вуалью / Все исчезло еще безвозвратнее, чем обычно” (Hersonskij).

The Polish past of all analyzed cities in *Family archive* becomes a metaphor for something that happened and never came back, like the whole culture of disappeared Jewry of Eastern Europe. All stories connected to these urban spaces are not documentary at all; they only pretend to be non-fiction. Khersonsky reconstructs the thoughts of his characters, their dreams, their inner intentions, and simultaneously demonstrates that accuracy in this question is not important. History will happen to all of them.

Galicia in the *Judaica auction* chapters

There are six chapters with the same title, *Judaica auction*, in *Family archive*. As Stefanie Sandler claims, the main idea of the whole book is that people disappear, while things remain. Thus, a terrifying equivalence of people and things in the history of the 20th century is opened. But Khersonsky does not delve into the horrifying details of disposing of people as if they were unnecessary things; rather, he tries to humanize these things that have survived people once again. In the *Judaica auction* poems, the poet focuses on the items exhibited there; mostly these are ritual objects (a Torah pointer, a Hanukkah menorah, a spice box (besamim), etc.), and the future owners still must restore their function as carriers of sacred meanings lost in the desacralizing 20th century (Sandler 2014). That is why the scholar emphasizes the significance of these poems in the structure of *Family archive*. According to Sandler, *Family archive* is organized around several repeating titles or poetic genres that create a sense of ritual. Repetition here functions as a structural and lexical trope (Sandler 2014).

But there are also negative opinions about the *Judaica auction* chapters, claiming that they do not fit the inner structure of the book. Comparing the stories about people and those about things, for instance, Abdullaev notes that the sacred objects appear more faded than human destinies. Moreover, the role of the meaningful refrains is in disharmony with the very picture of the world in *Family archive*, which is devoid of cyclicity, repetitiveness; each event in it is unique, irreversible, and irreparable (Abdullaev 2008). It is difficult to accept this point of view entirely because different repetitive motifs or even genres obviously help the author portray at least something stable in this unstable, blurry, vanishing world. As one critic says: "They serve as a metaphysical cement that binds together the fraying fabric of existence" (Galina 2007).

By the way, these poems constantly arouse the interest of scholars but, to the best of my knowledge, only Maria Galina has paid attention to the potential connection between urban space and the *Judaica auction* chapters, calling this collage of sacral objects "the references to the material culture of the Jewish shtetl"

(Galina 2007), *miasteczko* in Polish. It goes without saying that the author does not need to specify the name of the shtetl: speaking of his own family, he speaks about all the Jews from any shtetl in Eastern Europe. But most of the objects are from Galicia, and it is mentioned.

The chapter from this cycle *Judaica auction lot 1. Hanukkiyah. Bronze. 19th century. Poland* is very accurate when it comes to Time and Space, but it is worth mentioning that in the 19th century there was no such country due to the three Partitions. Poland in this passage is opposed to Galicia, which is remarkable:

Hanukkiyah. Bronze casting.
Nineteenth century. Poland.
Or Galicia. The being
of metal is more uniform, but lasts
longer than our lives. Apparently, materiality
gloomily grows into eternity⁸
(Hersonskij)⁹.

In other words, Poland in this context becomes intangible (in contrast to the objects) and transcendental, as a country which continues its existence only in patriotic hearts. The author also might have been hinting that he meant the Kingdom of Poland belonged to the Russian Empire. The reader can interpret toponyms semantically as widely as possible. And later it is repeated in the chapter *Judaica auction lot 3. yad (Torah pointer). Silver. Early 20th century. Poland*, which mentions no images of space at all except Poland. In my opinion, it could be treated as an indistinct outline and collective image of the whole of Eastern Europe. The geoculture of Poland collects all the features of any other countries in the region but has a set of stable connotations in Russian-language history.

However, images of Poland and images of Galicia are sometimes mixed up in *Judaica auction*. In the chapter *Judaica auction lot 5. Keter Torah (Torah crown). Silver. 20th century. Galicia*, despite the specific toponym and not very specific date (in the 20th century Galicia had different statuses and belonged to different states including the Second Polish Republic), artifacts of the Russian Empire are mentioned:

Money is dirt, but in its own way, it also pleases the eye –
a dozen or so golden, curly, royal beards
on the new minted rubles that Witte put into circulation¹⁰
(Hersonskij).

⁸ “Хануккия. Бронза, литье. / Десятнадцатый век. Польша. / Или Галиция. Бытие / металла однообразней, но дольше / наших жизней. Похоже, вещь / угрюмо перерастает в вечность” (Hersonskij).

⁹ All the translations from *Judaica auction* chapters in the paper are made by the author – K.V.

¹⁰ “Деньги – грязь, но по-своему тоже радуют глаз, / десяток-другой золотых кучерявых царских бород / на червонцах новой чеканки, что Витте ввел в обиход” (Hersonskij).

Sergei Witte's currency reform took place in Russia in 1895–1897 and because of this reference Galicia in *Family archive* looks like a place of collective Jewish memory from all the diaspora's settlements, where the experience of one Jewish family becomes the universal Jewish experience. Galicia from the 21st-century perspective of the author and the reader is a "territory-ghost", an "archeological layer" which exists only in old diaries and photos. Thereby it becomes a suitable receptacle for dead people from Khersonsky's book, and, moreover, it reveals its nature of heterotopia described as a Jewish cemetery:

The scroll (or roll?) is hidden in a precious cover,
sealed with two crowns as a sign that the letters are dead.
Aleph, bet – like small stones in the Galician soil,
between the roots of withered August grass¹¹
(Hersonskij).

Aleph and bet are the two first letters of the Hebrew alphabet that are "dead" according to the quote above, and at that very moment they are compared to "small stones" which refers to Jewish commemoration tradition when the visitor puts stones on the tomb of his friend, relative or some respected man. These stones in the Galician cemeteries could symbolize eternity and belonging to the history of the nation.

The last time Galicia is mentioned is in the chapter *Judaica auction lot 6. Mezuzah. Silver, black. Early 20th century. Galicia*. Sandler makes an interesting remark about this poem that could be applied to other texts from the cycle: when tangible objects of Jewish heritage are sold, memories are recreated (Sandler 2014), which is why all the toponyms mentioned there used to exist as memories or exist as memories now. These objects trigger mechanisms of memory and construct space in the book. Galicia is said to be a place of the tragic past for Jewish culture. Even the lot itself suggests this interpretation: a mezuzah is a piece of parchment inscribed with religious texts and placed in a decorative case, typically affixed to the doorframe of a Jewish household. The fact that the mezuzah is sold during the auction means that the house, where it had been situated before, is destroyed. It correlates with the following lines:

This is an auction of Judaica, just an auction
of Judaica. Do you hear the groans
of souls that returned to the ruins of their homes,

¹¹ "Свиток (или рулон?) скрыт в драгоценном чехле, / скрепленном двумя венцами в знак того, что буквы мертвы. / Алеф, бет – как мелкие камешки в галицийской земле, / между корнями пожухлой августовской травы" (Hersonskij).

discovering the loss of everything,
including themselves¹²
(Hersonskij).

There is no description of the Jewish shtetl again because of any necessity: there are only traces of Jews after the 20th century and the epic image of Galicia is created by Khersonsky precisely because of the lack of specific addresses: every reader can picture the urban space of any typical Jewish town from the lines above. And like any Jewish Galician shtetl it has a cemetery:

Life, despite everything
and anything, because the gates of Jewish cemeteries
are adorned with the inscription “Bet Chaim” –
which means “The House of Life”. Who else
can come up with something like that?
It’s amusing, isn’t it?¹³
(Hersonskij)

The image of a cemetery has been associated in Russian-language cultures with Poland for many decades, and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the Holocaust have fixed this perception. In Khersonsky’s text it has nothing in common with Poland and even the manner of speaking on this heterotopia differs a lot. Jews celebrate “Chaim”, life, especially face to face with death. And in that very moment the poet stands out from other men of letters with Jewish origins who wrote about this aspect of Polish history in the USSR.

Conclusions

To summarize, Boris Khersonsky’s *Family archive* has a unique spatial structure that weaves a lyrical narrative through various urban spaces associated with the vanished and displaced Eastern European Jewry of the 20th century. The cities, towns, and territories connected to Poland are presented as a continuation of previous Soviet traditions of portraying Polish artistic space as liminal structures or heterotopias. These spaces represent a strange border between past and present, dead and alive, and history and current times. Galicia, in particular, serves as a place of memory that no longer exists in reality but only in archives, making it

¹² “Это – аукцион иудаики, просто аукцион / иудаики. Слышишь стон / душ, вернувшихся на пепелище-жилище, / обнаружив пропажу всего, / в том числе и самих себя...” (Hersonskij).

¹³ “Жизнь – несмотря ни на что, / ни на ничто, поскольку врата еврейских кладбищ / бывают украшены надписью “Бет-Хаим” – / то есть “Обиталище жизни”. Ну кто же еще / может придумать такое, – забавно, / не правда ли?” (Hersonskij).

the most suitable space for telling the long story of a disappeared culture, people, and lifestyle.

This analysis has focused on cities and regions historically linked to Poland, including Kremenets, Vilna, and Lviv, with Khersonsky's poems providing stability in an otherwise vague and uncertain world. Through the use of repetitive motifs and genres, the author creates a metaphysical cement that binds together the fraying fabric of existence. However, the topic of urban spaces referring to history and forming peculiar chronotopes is not exhaustive, as Odesa, Kyiv, and Bessarabia remain beyond the scope of this article.

The investigation of Khersonsky's *Family archive* could also be extended to the material of the so-called "Romanian text" of Russian-language cultures, which is less obvious and popular than the Polish one. Interestingly, both artistic spaces play the same role of a disappeared territory in the book, but analyzing different cultural myths connected to each region could yield new insights.

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