



# The Wars, Demons, and Ambitions of Babyn Yar

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## Abstract

For many years and decades, the need for a memorial center at the Babyn Yar ravine in Kyiv has been discussed. On September 29–30, 1941, Nazi German *Sonderkommando* forces and local collaborators had murdered 33,771 Jews in the ravine. In 2016, the Ukrainian government announced together with an International Supervisory Board its intention to create an official Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center (BYHMC) on the grounds of the massacre. Since then, the political and historiographical mandate, the building, the historical narrative and the artistic concept to be developed, as well as the future Center's scholarly and artistic staff have been hotly disputed. Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014 and even more so Russia's war against Ukraine in February 2022, which included repeated air strikes on Ukraine's capital, made the further development and operation of the BYHMC difficult and partly impossible, last but not least for all practical purposes. The Center was officially founded and began its operations at the eightieth anniversary of the Babyn Yar massacre in September 2021. However, the memorial complex itself still had to be built.

The present translation of an article by Shimon Briman analyzes a particular debate that surrounded the development plans for the memorial project in Kyiv at that time. The author sheds light on how the initially envisaged financial involvement of Russian businessmen in the project, whose relatives include Ukrainian-Jewish Holocaust victims, caused the ongoing debate to become much more complex and heated against the backdrop of Russia's intention and actions to destroy Ukraine as an independent state.

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*Almost eighty years had passed since the days of the inhuman tragedy of Babyn Yar, but the drama of this place continued. From Khrzhanovsky's spark to flame, Poroshenko's dance on the bones, Zelensky's impasse, the untranslated Netanyahu — the “memory war” continued.*

A new “war” surrounding Babyn Yar was ablaze in 2020. A “new war,” because in my memory, the “old” ceased to blaze in 2002–2003, when American sponsors of the JOINT organization wanted to build the “Heritage” community center right on the location of mass shootings. Then, I reported about the protests and the public’s victory on the pages of the Israeli *Vesti* newspaper.

From the past controversy, I remembered a phrase by a specialist of the Babyn Yar topography, the late architect Lev Drobyazko: “They [the Americans] view Babyn Yar like a kind of Manhattan, that is like a neighborhood in a city. Babyn Yar is an ulcer on the surface of the earth, however. It is a ditch, where a slaughter took place.” This ulcer on the body of the capital burst open again eighteen years later in a new scandal of an even larger dimension. It all began quietly and solidly on September 29, 2016, with the presentation of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center (BYHMC) project in the Taras Shevchenko Museum in Kyiv — precisely on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the beginning of the mass executions in Ukraine’s capital.

At different stages, the initiative group for the memorial project included the Kyiv rabbi and Vice President of the World Jewish Congress, Yakov Dov Bleich; the former President of Poland, Aleksandr Kwaśniewski; the outstanding sportsman Vladimir Klichko; the former US Senator Joe Lieberman; the former German Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor, Joschka Fischer; prominent businessmen and patrons Mikhail Friedman and German Khan as well as the Ukrainian businessmen and philanthropists Viktor Pinchuk and Pavel Fuks; the then head of the Jewish Agency for Israel, Nathan Sharansky; the leader of the rock band “Okean Elzy” (Elza’s Ocean), Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, the Nobel Prize laureate in literature, Svetlana Aleksievich; the President of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald Lauder, and the former UNESCO Director-General, Irina Bokova.

For three years (2017–2019), the Memorial Center’s project team, led by Director-General Yana Barinova, expanded its activities without haste. She transformed the registration of the rented plot of land into a future construction site, conducted educational projects and developed a scientific concept. Time flew by quickly, and it became obvious that at such a speed there would be no way of building a huge memorial complex to be ready for the eightieth anniversary of the tragedy.

The stagnant situation changed and blew up later following the decision of the main donors to introduce the position of artistic director, to whom all other subdivisions of the Center were subordinated. The appointment of the Russian citizen Ilya Khrzhanovsky in November 2019 to this position provoked the departure of Yana Barinova and many members of her team. Max Yakover, a successful investor and high-tech businessman in Kyiv, became the new director-general of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center. Since his appointment in February 2020, the Center suggested that the Metro station which is the closest to the location of the tragedy be renamed from “Dorogozhychi” to “Babyn Yar.”

This was the first spark, which by the month of May flared up into the largest flame. Possibly, Yakover truly thought that renaming the station would kindle a

debate in society that could be useful for the Center. Such a debate was indeed kindled. However, it flared up much more powerfully than when it was suggested by those who were throwing this topic into society as a “teaser.” The Ukrainian public began to ask questions: Who actually are you, wanting to change the place-names of Kyiv? What is this Center about, who finances it, and who is in charge of it?

## Khrzhanovsky as a trigger

And here Jupiter’s thunder hit upon the person and the activities of the freshly appointed art director, the Russian movie director Ilya Khrzhanovsky. Well-wishers were found immediately, who remembered how Khrzhanovsky had directed the multi-serial movie *Dau* in Kharkiv a decade ago. In March 2020, one serial was presented at the Berlinale film festival in Berlin.

In Ukraine, the reel immediately received accusations, most of which concern a scene of sexual violence towards a non-professional actress and the use of real neo-Nazis in the filming as well as a scene of experiments on infants who were taken from an orphanage. Concerning the last issue, a criminal investigation was launched against Khrzhanovsky. Following this, the chief historian of the Babyn Yar memorial project, the Dutch scholar Dr. Karel Berkhoff, left the project. He announced that for ethical reasons, he could no longer publically support this project and felt it necessary to “defend his professional reputation.”

The campaign against the movie *Dau* turned into a campaign against the whole Babyn Yar Center, while critics sometimes forgot that the film and the Center were not the same thing. Skillfully and very much in time, a whole jerrycan of oil was poured into the fire. A presentation of a draft version of Ilya Khrzhanovsky’s artistic concept was released onto the internet. The traces pointed to a “dirty trick” by someone from among the Center’s team that had left. Nathan Sharansky later declared that the file spoken of had been snatched from BYHMC computers.

The stolen and revealed working paper shocked many people. The mildest headline in various mass media was “Holocaust Disneyland.” Many museum specialists and Holocaust historians expressed their indignation towards the methods which Khrzhanovsky suggested to implement in the Center. They included experiments on the psyche of people and role games at the visitors’ choice: one could try oneself out as a victim, as an observer, or as an executioner. Unsuccessfully, Khrzhanovsky tried to extinguish the flames of criticism, emphasizing the originality, novelty and importance of emotional effects on people. “Ukraine can create its own ‘space ship,’ its own unique product which people from around the world will perceive not only as a museum, but as a place where they can feel something about themselves,” the art director elucidated.

But Ukrainian society was no longer ready to listen to him. Rather, they heard the “snobism” of the overseas guest, who seemingly thought that he came to lecture and enlighten the backward “aborigines,” doing experiments on them for the sake of his originality. Besides, Khrzhanovsky demonstrated his complete ignorance towards the subject matter of the Holocaust and the history of Babyn Yar: “I think that Babyn Yar is a cursed place. And this curse must be lifted. How this can be done, I do not know yet,” reported the director to the disappointed Ukrainians.

Khrzhanovsky became the trigger point for the entire scandal. Before this trigger was pulled, the broad masses of the Ukrainian public were equanimous towards what

this “Babyn Yar” Center was contriving. Only a few people had even heard of this project. But when the trigger was pulled, the avalanche got rolling, threatening not only to fall on Ilya Khrzhanovsky, but also the entire Center. First, in April 2020 an open letter was signed with an appeal to dismiss Ilya Khrzhanovsky. Then on May 13, almost three hundred figures from Ukrainian culture and art, academia and higher education, among which were also the most prominent stars of Ukrainian society, signed an appeal to the president, the prime minister and the mayor of Kyiv. The declaration called not only for the approval of a state museum project at the Babyn Yar site, but also for a prohibition of any possible “private ownership” in the construction works in the ravine. In fact, the signatories proposed an ultimatum and declared “war” on the entire BYHMC project.

## “Sulfur from Putin”

The case attained a political coloring reminiscent of a witch hunt. From March until May 2020, the style of criticism against the BYHMC became ever more radical, even reaching accusations of state treason and of undermining Ukrainian security. The writer Andrey Kokotyukha expressed this sense of a discourse going awry in the spirit of the late Soviet prosecutor Andrey Vyshinsky: “Mr. Khrzhanovsky’s vision of the memorial’s concept which he advances is essentially nothing but the same Russian aggression.” The long-time Jewish activist and anti-Soviet dissident Yosif Zisels, co-chairman of the Association of Jewish Communities and Organizations of Ukraine, repeatedly stressed that he categorically did not accept the participation of Russian oligarchs in the project — especially under wartime conditions. “I smell Putin’s sulfur in this project,” Zisels said in an interview.

In a much more pronounced and harsh way, I would even say by way of a back-hand blow, one of the best-known Ukrainian publicists of Jewish extraction, Vitaly Portnikov, gave expression to his rejection of the project, viewing it as hostile to the Ukrainian state. On May 9, 2020, Vitaly Portnikov said on the Ukrainian channel Espresso TV: “In a time of war, we cannot build our projects on the account of Russian oligarchs, since it would insult the memory of both Ukrainians and Jews. If people want to participate in the financing of such a project in Babyn Yar, above all they must state that they condemn Vladimir Putin’s policy and consider it as being equivalent to the policies of Adolf Hitler, who had started the Second World War. They must cease their financial dealings and business in Russia. They must be ready to dedicate their lives to the goal of not allowing tragedies similar to Babyn Yar be repeated. For this, Friedman and Khan must fight the regime of Vladimir Putin!”

Portnikov further detailed the harsh conditions which the businessmen had to meet if they were to be granted access to financing the projects at Babyn Yar: the curtailment of their Russian businesses, the renunciation of their Russian passports and pro-Russian convictions as well as their “dubious connections to the people who attacked Ukraine.” On the same broadcast by Vitaly Portnikov, even Nathan Sharansky, the head of the Supervisory Board of BYHMC, was criticized: “Not even someone with the name of Sharansky will be able to call something moral that is immoral, even if he throws all the weight of his political reputation from the past in with the immoral weights. The memory of Sharansky, who fought for the departure

of the Jews from the USSR must be honored. It is very unfortunate that neither Friedman nor Khan have made use of the fruits of his heroism.”

Dmitry Zolotukhin, Ukraine’s deputy minister for information policy in 2017–2019, broached the issue of the lack of transparency of the BYHMC project. “Neither Khzhranovsky’s ideas nor his activity are our problem; it is the fact that Ukrainian society has no possibility of controlling how and for what Russian oligarchs spend their money in Ukraine.” Zolotukhin lifted the topic of Babyn Yar up to the heights of Ukraine’s national security. He linked it up with the Russian president’s presentation in Yad Vashem on January 23, 2020. “To Putin and his elite, history is a powerful weapon, and the philanthropy of Russian oligarchs of Jewish descent sometimes overlaps with the will of the ruler — an experience which the Israeli national Holocaust memorial center Yad Vashem had made. Putin used the money of the Russian oligarch Moshe Kantor to turn Israel’s Holocaust memorial center into his own theater in which he played the main role, having received unlimited possibilities to advance the historical narrative in ways in which it is viewed in the Kremlin.” Essentially, the discussion reached such a boiling point that those killed in Babyn Yar were no longer of interest to the participants in the polemical battle. This is why the drums of “war” began to thunder above the ravine.

## **If there were no war**

The victory of Zelensky’s theoretical “peace party” in 2019 expressed the demand of wide sections of the Ukrainian population to end the bloodshed in the Donbas. On the one hand, it asked for an agreement with Russia guaranteeing Ukrainian interests and security. On the other, it called for a removal of the conflict with Russia from everyday life of Ukrainian citizens. The opinion polls, which suggested such preferences of Ukrainian society, were vindicated by the seventy-three percent of the votes which Zelensky received.

Nonetheless, the theoretical “war party” did not go anywhere. In 2020, it continued to generate confrontational slogans which the majority of the population had been tired of throughout the five years of Petro Poroshenko’s presidency. The critics of “Friedman’s project” used the mass media to revive the radical rhetoric of military resistance. Those who attacked the BYHMC project were successful at presenting it in the Ukrainian media as a gloomy miniature Kremlin. It appeared in their imagination sometimes that the insidious Friedman and Khan were secretly scheming to erect a statue of Putin on a horse in front of the entry to the Babyn Yar Memorial Center.

The BYHMC’s English language website named the co-founders of the Russian Jewish Congress as its main sponsors. At the same time, the website’s Ukrainian-language version identified this organization as the Jewish Congress of Russia. It appears that this was only a microscopic detail at the level of translation. It could also have been viewed as reflecting the wish of the website’s authors to highlight the word “Jewish” and suppress the word “Russian” (*rossiyskiy*), however. This was likely done for the obvious reason of everything Russian being rejected or at least viewed suspiciously in today’s Kyiv in the seventh year of a military conflict. This conflict took the memorial plans of the BYHMC sponsors hostage.

“If there were no war,” as an old song by Igor Shaferan goes. If there were no Ukrainian phantom pain for Crimea that was cut off in the spring of 2014, if

there were no constant news about fallen Ukrainian soldiers on the front lines in the Donbas. If all this were not there, then Ukrainian society would have much more readily accepted the plans of the international businessmen Mikhail Friedman and German Khan and believed in their good intentions.

## **Flashback no. 1**

On the 29th of September 2016, the presidential reception of Petro Poroshenko for foreign guests and the diplomatic corps took place in the “Mistetsky Arsenal” cultural complex in the center of Kyiv. I stood there in expectation of the presidential speech in honor of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Babyn Yar massacres. What was he going to say? With which words was he going to convey his understanding of that tragedy? What exactly would he announce to the world on this day of such a dark anniversary?

Poroshenko walked up to the microphone and said: “As seventy-five years ago a horrible threat came upon the Jewish people, so now Ukraine is experiencing aggression. During the Holocaust, the whole world remained silent — this is why today, the world must support Ukraine and join together in a united front against Russia.” He went on talking in this spirit for about five minutes about the problems of the international situation of Ukraine. With eyes wide open, I talked to Dr. Nicolas Dreyer, a German Slavist specializing in the area of the historical memory of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, whom I was standing close to. Nicolas asked me: “Did you hear this, too?! Did you take a video?” He could not believe it, but it was a fact: President Poroshenko had just used the occasion of the Babyn Yar massacre for utilitarian political goals, completely leaving the topic of the Holocaust out of the picture. As large as life, it was demonstrated to us how the topic of genocide against the Jews has been employed cynically.

## **Ukraine’s fifth President**

It is striking that the barrage of criticism directed at the BYHMC came from a narrow group of Ukrainian activists, humanitarians and “public intellectuals” who in their majority had been supporters of Poroshenko in the last elections of 2019, which he had lost massively. This group is still somehow convinced that their position reflects the genuine patriotic interests of Ukraine. For already one year, the intellectuals of this group had been busy with demonizing President Vladimir Zelensky, subjecting any of his actions to scathing criticism.

They called the BYHMC project a Muscovite “Trojan horse.” However, let us look at the facts: who brought this horse to Kyiv in the first place? This “horse-breeder” was no one else but the fifth president of Ukraine, Petro Alexeevich Poroshenko, himself. I was in Kyiv on September 29, 2016, in the thicket of memorial events dedicated to the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Babyn Yar tragedy. I remember well the backstage conversations about the fact that on that day, Poroshenko literally named himself the organizer of the BYHMC presentation. He did not simply come and sit in the first row next to Friedman. He delivered a speech giving his full support. Within an hour, the administration of the president of Ukraine quickly sent out a press release to all media, in which Petro Alexeevich iden-

tified himself as the “project’s initiator.” Why was it so important for the politician to “claim ownership” over this topic? Opinion polls in the 2000s showed that when people in Western countries heard the word “Ukraine,” they recalled three key words and symbols: Babyn Yar, Chernobyl, and Shevchenko (not the poet Taras, but the footballer Andrey). It was for no other reason than this that Petro Poroshenko did what public relations specialists call “docking on to an emerging brand” or “hooking one’s wagon onto a departing train.”

Poroshenko gave a speech during the presentation of the future BYHMC project against the backdrop of a “Babi Yar” lettering. Initially, the project’s name was written precisely in this way, as it sounds in Russian. Only with time did the Center’s employees understand that in Ukraine one has to work on the basis of Ukrainian pronunciation. This led to a re-naming into Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center. Poroshenko’s support for the project in 2016–2019 proved to be like a “kosher certificate” for all state structures as much as for ordinary citizens.

When I interviewed Petro Poroshenko in the David Citadel Hotel in Jerusalem in December 2015, he said: “I am ready to invest my own money into the creation of a memorial at Babyn Yar and I will turn to other Ukrainian businessmen with an appeal to donate for it, too.” Enraptured as I was in this minute by such a charitable initiative by Poroshenko, it did not cross my mind at the time to ask why he was talking about businesses instead of investment of the Ukrainian state in such an important project in the center of his own capital? Because Poroshenko is a billionaire himself, he understands the logic of business well: To every significant enterprise, you must draw the investment of serious people. In fact, if such people like Mikhail Friedman, German Khan, Viktor Pinchuk and Pavel Fuks had already come on their own, it would make no sense for Ukraine as a state to spend budgetary means on this project — there were already those who would “cough up” for it. This scheme led to a withdrawal of the Ukrainian state from among the main stakeholders of the project. Exactly for this reason, the BYHMC project was now being scolded by those Ukrainian patriots who were very reluctant to remember Petro Poroshenko’s role in the creation of this whole “deal” in the first place. The foundation laid down by Petro Poroshenko was now falling down as a huge problem on the head of Vladimir Zelensky.

“For several decades, no one in Ukraine had cared about a Babyn Yar Memorial. Ukrainian intellectuals prefer to fight windmills in the person of Ilya Khrzhanovsky, forgetting that the real problem is not even the toxic Russian money, but Ukraine’s voluntary refusal to become an active agent in the realization of the most important commemorative project,” had recently written the publicist and honorary president of the Ukrainian PEN club, Mykola Ryabchuk. Well, we already figured out whom we could thank for Ukraine’s rejection of its own involvement: his name is Petro Alekseevich Poroshenko.

## Flashback no. 2

Early in October 2011, I was rushing a taxi driver from Boryspil airport. We hardly managed to get to Babyn Yar in time for the start of an important event. Then we walked through the grass and bushes to an open and flat square among the trees of the ravine.

There, before my eyes, the foundation stones of the future memorial center were being laid. The superstar of the ceremony, Igor Valeryevich Kolomoysky, co-owner of Ukraine's largest private bank and head of the United Jewish Community of Ukraine, said the right words about preserving the memory of the victims. He announced that "in this place we will soon build a worthy museum, the largest in Europe."

As I was leaving for downtown Kyiv, I overheard the quiet chat of two activists in the capital's Jewish life: "I think Yanukovych has his eye on 'Privatbank,' he's giving Kolomoysky a hard time. So he decided to get involved in Jewish projects. . . Well, in order to give himself an international cover in the West, if the authorities clamp down." Nothing was built in the ravine, therefore.

## Deduction and induction

Two different approaches separate the proponents from the opponents of BYHMC. The former apply deduction — descending from general aspects to particular ones. The latter apply induction — raising particular experiences to the general level. The "deductionists" say: There is an understanding of the Holocaust that is common to humanity, and therefore Babyn Yar is important as the location of the most comprehensive mass shooting during the Holocaust, having taken place at a singular moment. To quote Khrzhanovsky: "This is a story about choice. And at the center of it all are the notions of transparency, openness, dialogue, people's reactions, defining form through experience, and individuality. This story is not only about Ukraine. This story is about humanity. And it is a story about Babyn Yar. Because if you hear the other, accept the other, then genocide becomes impossible."

The "inductionists" ascend from below, from the ravines of Kyiv, from the history and topography of Babyn Yar. They are interested in what happened specifically in this area at different times — during the mass starvation of 1933, at the peak of Stalin's terror, during Hitler's occupation, and at the time of the Kurenivka mudslide tragedy of 1961, when thousands of tons of brick factory waste which had filled the Babyn Yar ravine broke the dam, collapsing on residential neighborhoods and taking 1,500 lives. This point of view is voiced, for example, by Vitaly Nakhmanovich, historian and executive secretary of the Babyn Yar Public Committee. It was Nakhmanovich who became the "motor" behind the signing of an open letter from the Ukrainian public to the Ukrainian authorities. The letter demanded an end to any construction activity by BYHMC. Meanwhile, the Center itself was trying to iron out the contradictions between deduction and induction. To this end, two research units were urgently created — the Institute for the History of the Holocaust in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, headed by Dr. Andrey Rukkas, and the Institute for the Study of the Territory and Memorial Landscape of Babyn Yar, headed by Dr. Vladislav Grinevich.

## The interpreter's omission

When deciding on the largest memorial project in Babyn Yar, should the opinion of tens of thousands of former residents of Kyiv from Israel or the United States be taken into account? And which role does the State of Israel play in this whole story?

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, making his first visit to Ukraine in ten years, visited Babyn Yar with President Vladimir Zelensky on August 19, 2019. I sat behind the powerful back of the mayor of Kyiv near the Menorah monument, listening to speeches in Hebrew and Ukrainian. And here was a story worthy of a handbook on missteps and mistakes.

Netanyahu made it clear that he supported the construction project of a memorial center in Babyn Yar, which was being developed under the leadership of Nathan Sharansky. Bibi said this and looked at Zelensky, waiting for his reaction. But the interpreter... trivially omitted this key phrase from her translation into Ukrainian! As a result, Zelensky was never provided with this piece of information which was so important to Netanyahu.

## **Does a billionaire have a heart?**

Ukrainian critics of the Center's main donors accuse them of directly following the orders of a malevolent Moscow. I disagreed with such a view, which portrayed these international businessmen as "robots of the Kremlin." Even a man owning billions of dollars still has a heart, emotions, and childhood memories. The Lviv native Mikhail Friedman and the Kyiv native German Khan can provide a list of their ancestors and relatives who were killed in the Holocaust.

All studies of post-Soviet Jewry demonstrate that the memory of the Holocaust is the second most important factor in affecting a person's Jewish identity. That is, "I am Jewish because I remember and know about the Holocaust that my ancestors experienced." Therefore, I am quite ready to concede that both major donors are acting sincerely and doing what their hearts and Jewish souls tell them to do. Mikhail Maratovich Friedman and German Borisovich Khan were then facing a difficult choice.

Option one: Having every right to be offended by the rejection of their initiative, the mudslinging in the media and the political accusations, they and their colleagues could have slammed the door loudly and shut down the entire BYHMC project. After all, even in business, not all investments become successful. Sign off the loss of the millions of dollars that had already been spent in Kyiv, give thanks to the team and let everyone go home.

Yes, there would have been collateral damage to their reputation, but so would have been the damage to Ukraine as a state. Leading newspapers in the West would have featured headlines such as "Ukraine did not allow the Babyn Yar memorial to be built." Yes, the Kremlin might have smirked, saying that we advised you not to get involved in Ukraine, but now you could see for yourselves what they are worth.

The second option: to compromise, to disown your own understanding of justice and consequently to give fifty per cent of the power over BYHMC to those who contribute money, even if it is not fifty per cent of what is needed to cover the expenses. Some public statements about the pro-Ukrainian nature of the future museum complex could have been made. People who personally knew the founders of the "Alpha" group told me that the second option was unlikely, since it contradicted the entire human nature of the "Alphas" and violated their ideas of good and evil. This left a third option open, one that remained mysterious and unexplored. For example, to ignore the avalanche of criticism and move forward assertively.

Meanwhile, BYHMC had no room for maneuver: On May 14, 2020, the Ukrainian Sports Minister Vadim Gutzeit and the State Property Fund stopped renting out a part of the property of the Kyiv sports complex “Avangard.” This vacant lot of land was close to Babyn Yar and the BYHMC management considered it as a backup option for building the memorial center there. The minister with a Jewish family name, however, proverbially “riding the wave” of criticism directed at the Center, remembered “suddenly” that “sports properties are among the priorities of the Ministry, in order to ensure the training process and the holding of competitions. Therefore, we stand at the side of our Ukrainian sportsmen and defend their interests.” Just to clarify, the minister was worrying about an abandoned football field with fallen trees and heaps of rubbish on the wild grass.

## A trap for Zelensky

I think the BYHMC Supervisory Board meeting that was scheduled for June 15, 2020, was meant to be less about the presentation of Ilya Khrzhanovsky’s artistic concept than about discussing and finding ways of saving the entire project from total collapse. A clear-minded analysis would have shown to the members of the Supervisory Board that Ilya Khrzhanovsky, who had barely begun his work as art director, provoked an avalanche of attacks on the entire Center. An eccentric director who was looking for new ways had become a great irritant. I feared that the Ukrainian public would not have reconciled itself with Khrzhanovsky in this position.

It appeared most likely that in the same June days, a personal meeting of the Supervisory Board members with President Volodymyr Zelensky would have been attempted in order to receive support from the head of state. Zelensky himself had so far kept silent, even though the ideological supporters of Petro Poroshenko, who had created the whole problem, were trying to trap him. If Zelensky had supported BYHMC at the time in its presented form, a hail of arrows would have been directed at him as a “traitor to Ukraine’s security interests.” If he had allowed the project to collapse, the West would have seen Ukraine’s weakness and inability to implement large Holocaust memorial projects, something that is a common denominator for the countries of the European Union and the United States.

If Zelensky had responded to the demands of the project’s critics to take the project under the wings of the state, contributing, let us say fifty million dollars from the state budget as a “matching” for fifty million dollars from private donors, other critics would have been found immediately. They would have accused the Jewish president of funding a Jewish project amidst a budget crisis which led to cuts in spending on Ukrainian education and health care, as well as to difficulties concerning IMF loans. In this case, characteristics of the Ukrainian mentality, such as thrift and a judicious economy would have been seen as being alive and well. Ordinary Ukrainians as much as government officials would have asked a simple question: “Why spend budgetary money that is already insufficient, if there are already private donors willing to invest one hundred million dollars of their own?!” Neither Zelensky nor the then-critics of the BYHMC project would have had any answers to this question. Thus, the vicious circle of Babyn Yar continued to bite its own tail. And for many years to come, nothing would be built on the site of the terrible tragedy.

## Flashback no. 3

As a young student in the Faculty of History at the University of Kharkiv, I attended the first legally held international conference on the Holocaust in Kyiv, giving a presentation on Drobitsky Yar. It was late September or early October 1991 on the calendar. Ukraine, having just had proclaimed its independence, set out urgently to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Babyn Yar tragedy, thereby showing off its new face to the West. The hall was filled with ambassadors and deputies from different countries. The delegation from Israel included the then-director of Yad Vashem, Dr. Yitzhak Arad, and the late government ministers Dr. Yosef Burg and Zevulun Hammer. One Ukrainian historian gave away a sensation: as a teenager during the Nazi occupation, the Ukrainian leader Leonid Kravchuk had hid a Jew in the attic! Applause was prompted by this “canard” that was not reported anytime or anywhere else.

In the evening we were invited to Babyn Yar. A temporary stage and rows of chairs were set up there. It was only possible to enter Babyn Yar through the cordons of the Ukrainian police. The wives of diplomats were sparkling with diamonds. From the podium, Kravchuk apologized on behalf of the Ukrainian people to the Jews for all the nightmares of the past and, demonstratively tucking the text into his pocket, improvised in a mixture of Hebrew and Yiddish: “Shalom, teire yidn!”

The evening ended with a concert near the ravine, a reception in a pavilion with champagne and plenty of snacks. I clinked glasses with the Finnish ambassador’s wife, heard jokes from Joseph Kobzon and listened to the faltering falsetto of Yevgeny Yevtushenko. The poet, while holding a glass of wine in his hands, tried to explain why, as a member of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR from the city of Kharkiv, he could not do anything for that city.

Everyone parted happily. The next morning, the diplomats sent their reports to their capitals about the new face of Ukrainian power. Leonid Kravchuk succeeded in making a determined move towards international recognition of Ukraine’s independence as well as a step towards his own election as its first president. Thereby, Babyn Yar became Ukraine’s “window to Europe” . . . Nearly thirty years had passed since, but the recognition and the memory of the Holocaust remained an unclaimed entry ticket for Ukraine into Western civilization.

In the war of the demons of politics and personal ambition concerning Babyn Yar, I heard many beautiful words in the spring of 2020. About the security interests of Ukraine, about Moscow’s insidious scheming in its hybrid aggression against Kyiv, about the artist’s right to original creative realization, about exciting methods of influencing visitors to the future museum by helping them clarify and purify their consciousness. The only people who were forgotten in this heated debate were the nearly thirty-four thousand Jewish women, children and old people who had been shot on September 29–30, 1941 and in the days that followed. The memory of them turned out to be of third-rate importance compared to the venturesome participants in this “memorial war.”

Because it is so much easier to have enthusiastic discussions about “confronting Putin’s hybrid warfare” or to talk abstrusely about “understanding the nature of human evil.” It is much more pleasant than just being silent even if only for a minute, imagining the endless columns of people wandering to Babyn Yar the day before Yom Kippur 1941.

# Statements from various stakeholders in the BYHMC

- **Dr. Anatoly Podolsky, head of the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust History Studies:**

“BYHMC simply has no future in Ukraine, I can feel it well. In recent years, many of my students and teachers, very decent and professional people, whom I raised as I would my own son, were on the Maidan and in the war. Some of them were killed. So I cannot deal with such businesses. The preservation of the memory of Holocaust victims will not suffer, given that it has already long been developing in our country, not least thanks to the Ukrainian Center for Research of the History of the Holocaust and other organizations and people.”

- **Yosif Zisels, head of the Association of Jewish Communities and Organizations of Ukraine:**

“They [the main donors of the project] would have been scolded in the Kremlin if they did not have Vladimir Putin’s blessing. But as it is, there is nothing to scold them for if they are doing what Putin wants — doing maximum harm to Ukraine on the information front of the hybrid war. We have offered them a fifty-fifty power-sharing agreement, but they do not want any other customers except their own. As the proverb goes, ‘He who pays the piper calls the tune.’”

- **Rabbi Moshe Reuven Azman, spiritual leader of the Brodsky Central Synagogue in Kyiv:**

“Already back in 2016 it was clear to me that the founders of the new Center would not be able to build anything at Babyn Yar. Time and initiative dissipated. As for the assertions about the alleged impossibility of building on that particular site: Seven years ago, Rabbi Yakov Dov Bleich and I supervised the excavation of dozens of pits on that site, and no human remains were uncovered. The Jewish cemetery was destroyed under the Communists more than half a century ago. The remains were moved to another location and the entire area was cleaned up. According to all the requirements of Jewish tradition, you can build there.”

- **Margarita Yakovleva, journalist and producer of the project “Word of the Righteous”:**

“The huge forest park territory of Babyn Yar was littered with garbage that had not been cleaned up for years. *Matzevot* (Jewish gravestones) were piled up in the ravines. No one had lifted them up either. The level of indifference was so high that a residential complex of apartment buildings was built right next to the Jewish cemetery. And there were no protests at the time from Jewish organizations because of this construction.

Only with the arrival of the BYHMC team at Babyn Yar, there were no empty words any longer, but real positive actions. Yana Barinova’s team lifted the *matzevot* from the ravines and restored a part of the Jewish cemetery, including its gates. When Ilya Khrzhanovsky joined BYHMC, the trash was removed from the entire forested area of Babyn Yar for the first time in history. Also under his leadership, we began the first all-Ukrainian research in many years

on the preservation of the memory of the Righteous Among the Nations, and the Righteous themselves began to receive real help.

Since 1991, not a single organization, independently from its founders, had started serious activity on the territory of Babyn Yar. Excuse me, but no one has ever been able to remove the garbage and restore the *matzevot* until the BYHMC team approached the place with the proper respect and trembling. I fear that at the core of the scandal is the expensive land in the center of Kyiv, an area in which many new buildings could be built.”

• **Statement by the Supervisory Board of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center Charitable Foundation dated May 7, 2020:**

“The Foundation’s objective was and remains the creation of a museum that tells the story of the Babyn Yar tragedy and of the place of mass murder of Jews, as well as of Roma, Ukrainians, and people of other nationalities and social groups; of the place which is a symbol of the attempts of the criminal Nazi regime of Germany to ‘finally solve the Jewish question.’ Babyn Yar became not only a symbol of this genocide, but also a symbol of subsequent attempts by the leadership of the Soviet Union to erase the memory of this tragedy. It is namely the readiness of independent Ukraine to return the memory of this tragedy to history that has made our initiative possible. The project has a unique chance to complement European history, the history of the Holocaust and the history of mankind.

We are convinced that the creation of the first and of a unique museum in Eastern Europe, which tells the story of the mass murder of Jews by shooting in the ravines of Europe (‘Holocaust by bullets’), and the creation of a scholarly and historical educational center along with it, are not only important for knowledge and understanding of history, but also for the restoration of historical justice. This project can strengthen Ukraine’s position in the family of the free countries of the world and as a country which puts the lessons of history into the service of cooperation and understanding among peoples today and in the future.

Along with the concept of the museum, a historical narrative was developed, written by authoritative international historians and widely discussed by representatives of the Ukrainian public. Neither the concept of the museum nor the historical narrative has changed and will not change as a result of any professional assignments. The artistic embodiment of the museum’s ideas is being developed by the professional staff and will be presented for discussion to the Supervisory Board and the general public by the end of this year. Only then will we be able to fairly evaluate the work of Ilya Khrzhanovsky and his team.

Each of us has a special bond with Ukraine, the Ukrainian people and its history. With our participation in the project we guarantee the observance of ethical and professional standards of scholarly methods in the creation of this memorial. We are interested in a broad participation of the Ukrainian public in this project. We want the Public Council not only to resume its work, but to expand it. Obviously, respected figures of art, culture and science, who have addressed us with criticism, are concerned about the fate of this

project. We repeat our proposal to the leadership of Ukraine to appoint a representative to our Supervisory Board. For almost eighty years, ideological and later bureaucratic disagreements had prevented the emergence of this project. We must overcome the obstacles and build this memorial in memory of the dead, as well as as a legacy for future generations.”

- **The press service of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center comments:**

“Today the BYHMC rents from the city a plot of land of 2.2 hectares (on the site of the old stadium) with the intended purpose of constructing, operating and maintaining a memorial complex. As of today, the Center has a total of forty-six employees. There are already fourteen people working on eleven projects at the institutes, led by Vladyslav Hrynevych and Andrey Rukkas, the Institute for the Study of the Babyn Yar Territory and Memorial Landscape and the Institute of Holocaust History in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. The next meeting of the Supervisory Board will take place in June 2020.”