



UKRAINE
CHERNOBYL
BACK IN BLACK

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THE OLD JEWISH CEMETERY OF CHERNOBYL.
IT HAS BEEN ABANDONED SINCE THE 1986 NUCLEAR ACCIDENT, BUT
MANY JEWS LIVING IN THE WORLD WHO COME FROM CHERNOBYL WANT TO
BE BURIED HERE. IN FACT, THERE ARE MANY TOMBS DATED AFTER 1986.



CHERNOBYL BEFORE CHERNOBYL

BLACK SHADOWS WANDER THROUGH CHERNOBYL, THE UKRAINIAN CITY THAT SUFFERED THE GREATEST NUCLEAR DISASTER IN HISTORY. THEY APPEAR AGAINST THE LIGHT BEFORE BROKEN WINDOWS. THEY OBLIQUELY PASS OVER WALLS, CARESSING THE PEELING PLASTER IN SILENCE. THEY SIGH OVER SARCOPHAGI COVERED WITH UNLIT CANDLES. AND THEY SPEAK AN ANCIENT LANGUAGE WHICH FEW NOW REMEMBER AFTER THE TRAGIC ACCIDENT OF 26 APRIL 1986.

BUT THEY ARE NOT THE SPIRITS OF THOSE HUNDREDS OF MEN AND WOMEN WHO WERE FORCED TO FLEE THE RADIOACTIVE CLOUD PRODUCED BY THE FAILED NUCLEAR REACTORS. THEIR BODIES ARE REAL. THEY HAVE LONG BEARDS. THEY WEAR HATS WITH LONG BRAIDS HANGING FROM THEM. THEY ARE THE LAST DESCENDANTS OF ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CITIZENS OF CHERNOBYL WHO WAS BURIED HERE IN 1787: RABBI MENACHEM BOCHUM TWERSKY, THE FOUNDER OF HASIDIC JUDAISM, THE REFORMING CURRENT OF ORTHODOX JUDAISM.

THEY COME IN PILGRIMAGE EVERY YEAR TO HONOUR HIS MEMORY AND THAT OF THE CONFRERES WHO LIVED IN THE UKRAINIAN CITY UNTIL 1920, WHEN THE ANTI-SEMITIC UPRISINGS AIDED BY THE TSARS TURNED INTO THE ATHEIST AND DEVASTATING HAND OF THE SOVIET COMMUNISTS.

THERE IS ALMOST NO REMAINING TRACE OF THE FIVE SYNAGOGUES WHICH HAD MADE CHERNOBYL THE CAPITAL OF HASIDIC JUDAISM. ONLY TOMBSTONES HIDDEN IN BIRCH FORESTS. RUINED ROADS THAT LEAD TO NOTHING. BUT IN THAT PLACE WHERE THE TIME AND MADNESS OF MAN HAD NO PITY FOR THE MORTAL REMAINS OF CHERNOBYL, A FAITHFUL HASIDIC SONG CONTINUES TO RISE UP TO HEAVEN.

THEIR HANDS TRACE THE COMMEMORATIVE WORDS ON THE WALLS OF THE ONCE-INHABITED HOMES. WHERE THE CONFRERES COME FROM IS UNIMPORTANT: IF FROM THE HOMONYMOUS TOWN RECREATED 40 KILOMETRES FROM NEW YORK, OR FROM SOME REMOTE CORNER OF THE WORLD. THE PROMISED LAND IS HERE, AND TWERSKY'S CHILDREN WILL NEVER LEAVE THIS PLACE. WHATEVER TRAGEDY HISTORY WILL WANT TO WRITE.



YITZ TWERSKY AND RABBI LEIBEL SIRKES IN THE OFFICE OF THE INTERINFORM AGENCY IN CHERNOBYL, WHICH MANAGES THE CHERNOBYL EXCLUSION ZONE. YITZ TWERSKY AND RABBI LEIBEL SIRKES EXPRESSED THE JEWISH COMMUNITY'S DESIRE TO BUY ALL THE LAND INSIDE THE EVACUATED AREA SO IT CAN PRESERVE THE SACRED SITES OF THE HASIDIC JEWS. AMONG THESE IS THE OLD CEMETERY WITH THE TOMBS OF THE RELIGION'S FOUNDERS AND THE ANCIENT SYNAGOGUE.

HASIDIC JEWS PRAY AT THE TOMBS OF GRAND RABBI AHARON TWERSKY ADMUR OF CHERNOBYL AND GRAND RABBI MENACHEM NACHUM TWERSKY ADMUR OF CHERNOBYL. THE LATTER WAS BORN IN 1730 AND DIED IN CHERNOBYL IN 1787. HE WAS THE FOUNDER OF THE CHERNOBYL HASIDIC DYNASTY. HE WAS A DISCIPLE OF BAAL SHEM TOV AND OF THE MAGGID OF MEZRITCH AND PUBLISHED ONE OF THE EARLY WORKS OF HASIDIC THOUGHT. HIS BOOK ME'OR EINAYIM (LIGHT OF THE EYES) SPREAD AFTER HIS DEATH AND CONTAINS A COLLECTION OF HIS HOMILIES CONCERNING THE WEEKLY PORTIONS OF THE TORAH AND SELECTIONS OF THE TALMUD. THE BOOK HAS BEEN ACCEPTED AS ONE OF THE MAIN WORKS OF HASIDIC THOUGHT.





HASIDIC JEWS IN FRONT OF THE TOMB
OF RABBI MENACHEM NOCHUM TWERSKY.



HASIDIC JEW INSIDE THE
ABANDONED SYNAGOGUE OF CHERNOBYL.

HASIDIC JEWS PRAY AT THE TOMB OF RABBI MENACHEM NOCHUM TWERSKY. THE TOMBS ARE LOCATED NEAR A FORMER SCHOOL WITHIN THE EVACUATED AREA OF CHERNOBYL. A SCHOOL WAS BUILT OVER THE JEWISH CEMETERY DURING THE SOVIET ERA. THE TOMBS HAD BEEN FORGOTTEN FOR DECADES AND THEN RECOVERED IN THE EARLY 90S THANKS TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY, WHICH RESTORED THEM TO PRESERVE THEM FROM OBLIVION.





THE STATUE OF LENIN IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE OF CULTURE, A FORMER RESIDENCE OF THE JEWISH RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY.



YITZ TWERSKY IN FRONT OF THE FORMER SYNAGOGUE, WHILE HE SHOWS SOME OF HIS OLD IMAGES TO RABBI LEIBEL SIRKES.

HASIDIC JEWS IN FRONT OF
THE CHERNOBYL SYNAGOGUE.



HASIDIC JEWS PRAY AT THE TOMB
OF RABBI MENACHEM NOCHUM TWERSKY.



HASIDIC JEWS PRAY AT THE TOMBS OF GRAND RABBI AHARON TWERSKY ADMUR OF CHERNOBYL AND GRAND RABBI MENACHEM NACHUM TWERSKY ADMUR OF CHERNOBYL. GRAND RABBI AHARON TWERSKY ADMUR OF CHERNOBYL WAS THE SON OF RABBI MENACHEM NOCHUM TWERSKY AND GRAND RABBI MENACHEM NACHUM TWERSKY ADMUR OF CHERNOBYL WAS HIS NEPHEW. THEY CONTINUED TO SPREAD THE HASIDIC CURRENT TO CHERNOBYL AND THROUGHOUT UKRAINE.





THE OLD JEWISH CEMETERY OF CHERNOBYL. IT HAS BEEN ABANDONED SINCE THE 1986 NUCLEAR ACCIDENT, BUT MANY JEWS LIVING IN THE WORLD WHO COME FROM CHERNOBYL WANT TO BE BURIED HERE. IN FACT, THERE ARE MANY TOMBS DATED AFTER 1986.



HASIDIC JEWS IN FRONT OF THE TOMBS OF GRAND RABBI
AHARON TWERSKY ADMUR OF CHERNOBYL AND GRAND RABBI
MENACHEM NACHUM TWERSKY ADMUR OF CHERNOBYL.



JEW VISITING THE ABANDONED
CHERNOBYL SYNAGOGUE.



YITZ TWERSKY IN FRONT OF THE MONUMENT THAT MARKS THE ENTRANCE TO CHERNOBYL.



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THE TOUR BUS "HASIDIC JEWISH HERITAGE"
LEAVES CHERNOBYL AFTER THE VISIT.



YITZ TWERSKY AND RABBI LEIBEL SIRKES
INSIDE THE FORMER SYNAGOGUE OF CHERNOBYL.



JEW VISITING THE ABANDONED
CHERNOBYL SYNAGOGUE.

YITZ TWERSKY PRAYING AND CRYING OVER THE TOMB OF HIS ANCESTOR AND FOUNDER OF THE HASIDIC MOVEMENT, GRAND RABBI MENACHEM NACHUM TWERSKY ADMUR OF CHERNOBYL.





THE MAIN SYNAGOGUE WAS IN THIS SPOT BEFORE THE POGROM,
BUT DURING THE SOVIET PERIOD IT WAS DEMOLISHED AND A
BAR AND PUBLIC BATH WERE BUILT ABOVE ITS REMAINS.
TODAY ONLY THE ORIGINAL FLOOR IS PRESERVED.



RABBI LEIBEL SIRKES LIVES IN NEW SQUARE, 40 MILES FROM NEW YORK. TODAY IT IS CONSIDERED THE NEW CHERNOBYL SINCE AFTER 1920 THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY OF THE ORIGINAL CITY FLED FROM UKRAINE AND MOVED TO THE UNITED STATES. THEY FOUNDED A NEW CENTRE HERE WHICH THE HASIDIC JEWISH COMMUNITY CONSIDERS THE NEW CHERNOBYL: NEW SQUARE. SIRKES WAS THE FIRST TO FIND THE TOMBS AFTER THE NUCLEAR DISASTER AND, THANKS TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY, RESTORED THEM TO PRESERVE THEM FROM OBLIVION.



HASIDIC JEWS IN THE ABANDONED CHERNOBYL SYNAGOGUE.



MONUMENT IN MEMORY OF A MASS TOMB OF JEWS.
IT IS ONE OF THE PLACES WHERE MOST OF THIS
AREA'S JEWS WERE KILLED DURING THE HOLOCAUST.



HASIDIC JEWS WRITE THEIR NAMES INSIDE THE FORMER CHERNOBYL SYNAGOGUE.



THE TOUR BUS "HASIDIC JEWISH HERITAGE" LEAVES CHERNOBYL AFTER THE VISIT.



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PARALLELOZERO, VIA DONATELLO 19/A MILAN - INFO@PARALLELOZERO.COM - WWW.PARALLELOZERO.COM - +39 02 89281630