

Maps as Artifacts of Remembrance

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- 1 Over the course of a single day, my grandmother, a Holocaust survivor from Kostopol, Ukraine, told me about her life before, during, and after the Second World War.¹ I heard about her friends, her school, and her community; at the time I felt overwhelmed by detail but now I wish I had asked for even more. My interest then was largely in the destructive years of the Nazi occupation, whereas my grandmother spoke most poignantly and eagerly about her life before the war. Despite the hours we spent talking, I had no sense of the places she spoke about until, some years later, I acquired a book with the Hebrew title of *Sefer Kostopol* (which translates to “Book of Kostopol”), opened it, and encountered the map of Kostopol (Fig. 1), a complex document that helped me envision the spaces that she encountered in her youth.²
- 2 *Sefer Kostopol* is a *yizker bukh* (plural: *yizker bikher*), a collaboratively authored memorial book devoted to the life and death of Kostopol, one of the thousands of Jewish communities destroyed during the Holocaust.³ Over 1,000 of these place-based volumes exist, each written to memorialize a small village or large city decimated by the Nazis and their collaborators, and to pass collective community memory to descendants of both the victims and the survivors.⁴
- 3 *Yizker bikher* are both books and objects, with text and images that work in tandem,

and their authors conceived them as *matzeyvot*, gravestones, to the people murdered during the Holocaust.⁵ This concept of *yizker bikher* as memorials came from survivors who missed the physical and spiritual connection to the dead that usually came from a cemetery.⁶ Created to honor a destroyed Jewish community, each volume fulfilled the Jewish commandment of *zachor*, remembrance, itself a sacred obligation.⁷

- 4 Maps were one of the most common visual artifacts included in *yizker bikher*, and the majority, like the one from Kostopol, represented the memories of survivors from the town. They were not practical maps, but products of memory that captured a sense of space and community that once was, but is no longer; as a result, they may best be considered a form of testimony.⁸ Moreover, each map was personal: well-known religious, civic, and community sites were accompanied by places important to the mapmaker as an individual.
- 5 A survivor named Yaakov Cherlin made the map of Kostopol in 1964 to show the town as it was in 1939 (Fig. 2). It was initially included in the prospectus that introduced and explained the memorial book project to the surviving Kostopol Jews. The Book Committee of the Organization of Kostopol Expatriates in Israel, who wrote a brief overview to the prospectus, explained that they were “attaching to this brochure the map of Kostopol, which will surely evoke sad thoughts about a community that was and is no more.”⁹ Cherlin’s map, then, was created to help the *she’erit hapeletah* (the surviving remnant) reanimate what no longer existed; it was not a wayfinding tool in the literal sense but was designed to help survivors of the community navigate their memories of



Fig. 2 Map of Kostopol, Ukraine from the prospectus for *Sefer Kostopol*; this was the original map made by Yaakov Cherlin



Fig. 3 Map of Kostopol, Ukraine from the student memorial book project; it is very similar to Cherlin's original map, but rather than his hand-written annotations, this version has a typed legend

- 6 Subsequently, Cherlin's map appeared in three slightly revised forms, for three different audiences: by (and for) students at the A. D. Gordon School in Herzliya, Israel in 1965 (Fig. 3); in the published volume *Sefer Kostopol* in 1967 (Fig. 1); and in a single-authored yizker bukh about the rebellion in the labor camp in Kostopol published in 1993 (Fig. 4).¹⁰ As an artifact, it fulfills the obligation of *zachor*, and—at the very same time—it is a reminder that remembrance is an ongoing process. Despite their differences, in each case the map presented the lost community, constructing and reconstructing memory in different, varying ways.
- 7 The version that I encountered in *Sefer Kostopol* (and the version that is the focus of this essay) was not only for those who once lived in Kostopol, but for “future generations;” it offered descendants, and other readers, the opportunity to imagine the world as it once was.¹¹
- 8 On the whole, the map reflects the narrative content of *Sefer Kostopol*'s text: it highlights prewar life rather than the destruction of the Holocaust.¹² I see, for example, the two synagogues my grandmother told me about (Fig. 5; refer to Fig. 1 for location), and where she boarded the train that took her, along with her best friends, Manya and Riva, to school in the nearby city of Rovno (Fig. 6; refer to Fig. 1 for location). Beyond the places that my grandmother spoke about, the map offers a wide range of information about prewar Kostopol. The locations mapped included those that supported the community as a whole: the fire station (16) and town council building (17), the factories (12, 23), mills (13, 15, 22), and markets (7, 8). Five schools stood in different parts of the

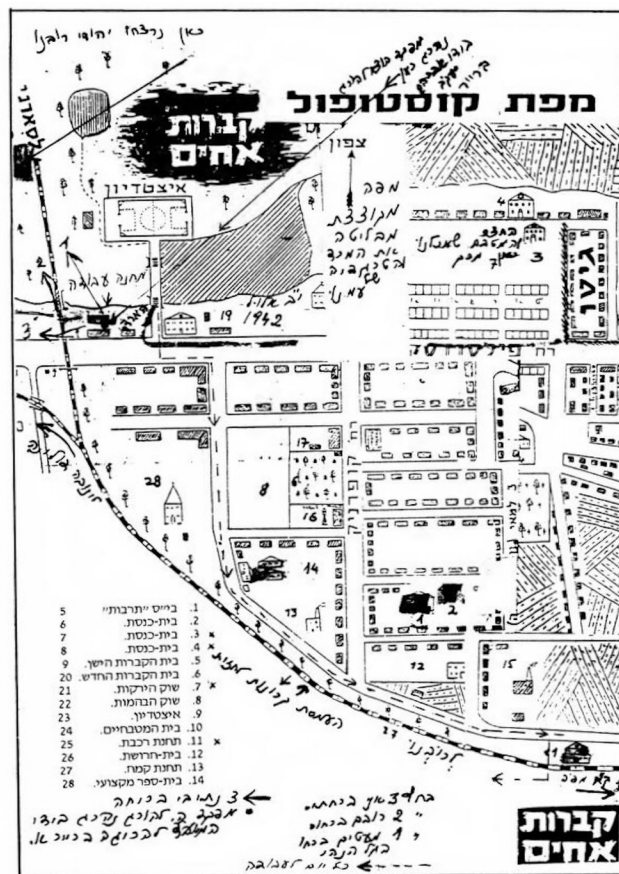


Fig. 4 Map of Kostopol, Ukraine from the memorial book written by Shalom Breyer; Breyer used half of the map contained in Sefer Kostopol and added hand-written annotations that help tell the story of the labor camp rebellion in Kostopol

town: the Tarbut (secular, Zionist) school (1), the vocational school (14), and three folk schools (19, 20, 24). Easily identifiable, though unnumbered, on the map are the soccer field (Fig. 7; refer to Fig. 1 for location) and the towns' churches.¹³ The map illustrates the fact that what the community remembered is not “just” Jewish—Kostopol was home to both Jews and non-Jews, who lived, worked, and prayed, if not together, then certainly as neighbors.

- 9 The map also showed me the parts of my grandmother's life that she was reluctant to speak about because she wanted to shield me from them. Although the map primarily represented Kostopol as it was in 1939, it also contained landmarks that did not exist until later, and that marked the fate of its Jewish residents. First, there is the ghetto—not formed until 1941—drawn as a relatively small rectangular space on the northeastern side of the map labeled with the word “ghetto” (refer to Fig. 1 for location). Located next to two of the three synagogues, the ghetto is surrounded on three sides by what appears to be fencing or barbed wire. And while the interiors of most of the blocks look as if they are covered in grass or other vegetation, the ghetto block appears lifeless, barren. My grandmother and her father were among the fourteen individuals who endured the



Fig. 5 Two synagogues in Kostopol



Fig. 6 Train station in Kostopol

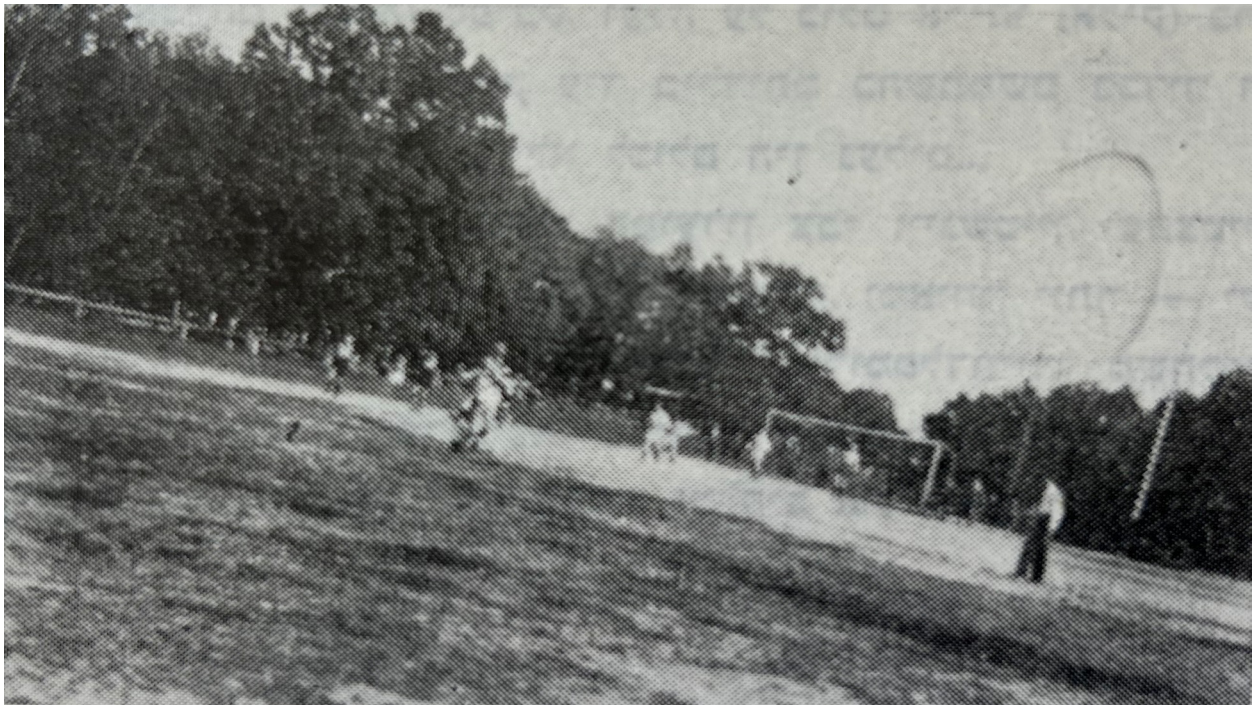


Fig. 7 Soccer field in Kostopol

ghetto and survived.¹⁴

- 10 And then there are areas of ruin on the southeast and northwest corners of the map; these represent mass graves (refer to Fig. 1 for location). They are a stark visual reminder that Germans, as well as Ukrainians, murdered my grandmother's mother, brother, sister, and baby nephew at the edge of one of these pits. The inclusion of these sites of death is another indication that the map was designed as a *matzeyve*, and they are the only marker I have for the members of my family who were killed long before I was born.
- 11 I have traced the borders of the ghetto and the graves with my finger countless times; each time, I whisper the Shema, the first prayer I remember my grandparents teaching me.¹⁵ This central Jewish prayer reaffirms my faith in God, and I recite it in the name of so many. I do this as a way to remember my grandmother and her father, and to honor all of those who did not survive. This small ritual makes me, somehow, feel closer to my family. It is my own enactment of the way that *Sefer Kostopol* operates as a kind of *matzeyve*, the way the concrete-ness of the map enables memorialization.¹⁶
- 12 *Yizker bikher* contain hundreds of maps, all similar yet each a stark visual and spatial reminder of the vibrant Jewish life that existed before the war, and destruction wrought by the Shoah. The map of Kostopol certainly enables me to envision the spaces and places my grandmother once occupied, but it also does something more important by reinforcing an idea that she tried to teach me: in addition to honoring those killed during the Holocaust, we ought to remember the rich lives they lived.

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Citation Guide

1. Jennifer Rich, “Maps as Artifacts of Remembrance: The *Sefer Kostopol*,” Essay, *MAVCOR Journal* 9, no. 2 (2025), doi: 10.22332/mav.obj.2025.1.

Rich, Jennifer. “Maps as Artifacts of Remembrance: The *Sefer Kostopol*.” Essay. *MAVCOR Journal* 9, no. 2 (2025), doi: 10.22332/mav.ess.2025.3.

Notes

1. I interviewed my grandmother, Sonja Spielberg, on February 11, 2009. It was the only time she spoke at length to any of her children or grandchildren about her experiences during the Holocaust.

2. Arie Lerner, ed., *Sefer Kostopol* (Tel Aviv: Irgun Yotzei Kostopol B’Israel, 1967), 8-9. *Sefer Kostopol* is Hebrew which translates to “Book of Kostopol.” The word *sefer* in the title points to the idea that the volume is akin to a sacred, religious book. The map itself does not give any information about who drew it or when it was made, but it was included in the prospectus for the volume where a small note explains that it was made by Holocaust survivor Yaakov Cherlin in 1964 to show Kostopol as it was in 1939.

3. *Yizker bukh* is the Yiddish term for memorial book. These books are sometimes referred to in Hebrew as *sefer zikaron*—I chose to use the Yiddish to honor the language most commonly spoken by those murdered during the Holocaust.

4. For more reading about yizker bikher, see Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1983); Rosemary Horowitz, ed., *Memorial Books of Eastern European Jewry: Essays on the History and Meanings of Yizker Volumes* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2014). Eliyana Adler, “Translating Trauma: The Afterlife of Holocaust Memorial Books,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 23, no. 2 (2023): 200-220; Jennifer Rich, “Let this Book be a Monument: Yizker Bikher and Jewish Collective Memory,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 23, no. 2 (2023): 183-199. Hundreds of yizker bikher have been digitized and can be found on the [New York Public Library](#) and [Yiddish Book Center websites](#).

5. Contributors to yizker bikher used simple, direct language to mark their books as sacred: “matzeyve,” “eternal tombstones,” “memorials on unknown graves,” “memorial candles,” and “permanent tombstones.” For just a very few examples of this language, see volumes from: [Belkatov yizker-bukh](#) (Buenos Aires: Association of Polish Jews in Argentina, 1951); Aaron Alperin and Nahum Summer, eds., [Bzshezshin yizker-bukh](#) (New York: Brzeziner Book Committee, 1961); Israel M. Biderman, ed., [Pinkas Gostinin](#):

[yizker bukh](#) (New York: Gostynin Memorial Book Committee, 1960); M. A. Tenenblatt, ed., [Sefer Ozyeran yeha-sevivah](#) (Jerusalem: Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora, 1959); Shimon Kanc, ed. [Sefer zikaron li-kehilat Rozni'atov, Prahinsko, Broshnyov yeha-sevivah](#) (Tel Aviv: Rozniatow, Perekhinsko, Broszniow and Environs Societies in Israel and the USA, 1974); Mark Schutzman, ed., [Sefer Virzbnik-Štarakhovits](#) (Tel Aviv: Wierzbnik-Starachowitz Societies in Israel and the Diaspora, 1973); David Sztokfisz, ed., [Sefer Vishkov](#) (Tel Aviv: Association of Former Residents of Wishkow in Israel and Abroad, 1964).

6. An allegory written by Josef Keller for Pinčas Gostinin called “A Meeting at the Old Cemetery” is helpful in understanding the ways in which those connections were forged, and what happened when they were severed. It tells the story of a meeting of the souls of Jews who died before the Second World War as they try to understand why the living no longer visit them. See Keller, “A Meeting at the Old Cemetery,” in *Pinčas Gostinin*, 320 – 325.

7. The word *zachor* (remember) appears around 200 times in the Torah, and the Shabbat before Purim is named Shabbat Zachor. For more about the commandment of remembrance, see Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1982). For more specific considerations of the relationship between Holocaust testimonies, artifacts, and the sacred, see Zoe Waxman, “Testimonies as Sacred Texts: The Sanctification of Holocaust Writing,” *Past and Present* 206, no. suppl. 5 (2010): 321-341; and, Laura Levitt, “After a Critique of Secularism: Excess and the Reliquary Logic of American Jewish Holocaust Commemoration,” *Implicit Religion* 23, no. 3 (2021): 237–250.

8. Barbara Mann explores this idea in her important chapter about *yizker bikher*, “Between Sefer and Bukh: Holocaust Memorial Books” (pp. 114-156,) and particularly the section called “Mapping as Memory and Resistance” (pp. 140-147). Mann, *The Object of Jewish Literature: A Material History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022). In his book about maps and mapping, Mike Duggan explores the concept that a map’s “record is not confined to the archival; it includes the remembered, the imagined, the contemplated.” Duggan, *All Mapped Out: How Maps Shape Us* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024), 23.

9. One relatively common way that book committees involved their *landsmen* (Yiddish that roughly translates to “fellow countrymen”) in the creation of *yizker bikher* was to circulate a prospectus for the volume. The prospectus contained a brief overview of the goals of the forthcoming memorial book, and, in some cases, images, including maps and photographs. The prospectus for *Sefer Kostopol* does not contain any publication information; I found this information tucked inside the *yizker bukh* when it was sent to me. Quote, p. 2 of the prospectus.

10. *Zikhron netsah li-kehilah kedoshah Kōstopol* (Herzliya: A.D. Gordon School, 1965); Shalom Brayer, [ha-Mered be-Kōstopol: lo hiskamnu la-lekhet ke-tson la-ṭevah](#) (Tel Aviv: Yaron Golan, 1996).

11. Marianne Hirsch explores the ways in which descendants of Holocaust survivors use

visual objects (primarily art and photographs) to animate their understanding—their “post-remembrances”—of the Shoah. Her engagement with the work of descendant-artists highlights the tensions of *making* art about the Holocaust from one generation removed, and can be extended to the tensions of *reading* art about the Holocaust from one generation removed. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

12. Only 57 of the 386 pages, approximately 15%, of *Sefer Kostopol* were about the Holocaust.

13. Tarbut is the Hebrew word for “culture.” There was a large network of Tarbut schools in the Pale of Settlement in the years between the two world wars. For more about Tarbut schools, visit the [YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe](#).

14. *Sefer Kostopol*, 190 says that 14 people who were in the ghetto survived the war. The [USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos](#) (vol. 2, pp. 1387-1388), however, says that 15 people survived.

15. For more about the Shema, see the Chabad website, [10 Facts Every Jew Should Know About the Shema](#).

16. Martin Brückner argues that we can understand the social lives of maps as being “bound up with the materiality . . . and material culture that surrounds them. . . . The message [of a map] is interwoven with the physical format that supports it.” In the case of the map of Kostopol, it is part and parcel of a sacred object and, therefore, holds the same sense of the sacred. Brückner, *The Social Life of Maps in America, 1750-1860* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 38-39.



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