

Eurolimes

Journal of the Institute for Euroregional Studies
"Jean Monnet" European Centre of Excellence

University of Oradea

University of Debrecen

Volume 5

Religious frontiers of Europe

Edited by
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IERS

Spring 2008
Oradea-Debrecen

„In the State of Walachia, Near the Border“
or: Was the Besht Indeed Born in Okopy?*

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Abstract: *It seems to be an accepted opinion that the founder of 18th century movement known as Hasidism, R. Israel ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov (c. 1698-1760), the master of the Good Name, often referred by the acronym ha-Besht, has been born in the Podolian village of Okopy or, at least, he was reported so. This assumption was unanimously expressed in both the more advanced academic studies on the topic, and in the various leading and most up-dated encyclopedias. Okopy was a fortress built in 1692, at the borderlines between the Kingdom of Poland and the Ottoman Empire, during the short period of the Turkish occupation of part of Podolia, between the years 1672-1699. The present article suggests that the Besht was born in Bukovina and arrived later on to Podolia and returned from time to time to Bukovina. In this context, we should mention a somewhat parallel, though geographically speaking, inverse phenomenon, related to the life of the major figure in Orthodox type of mystical movement known as neo-Hesychasm, Paisie Velicikovsky, (1722-1794). Though born in Ukrainian city of Poltava, he was active for some years in his youth and for important parts of his mature career in the three major Bukovinean monastery of Dragomirna, and the Moldavian monasteries of Secu and especially Neamtz, before he was forced, in his old years, to return to Ukraine. He was of Jewish origin, by the family of his mother, as he mentioned in his autobiography, and introduced in both Moldavia and Ukraine an intense interest in the Patristic literature, which he studied during his stay in Mount Athos, especially in some of its spiritual and hagiographical aspects.*

Keywords: Israel, Baal Shem Tov, Okopi, Walachia, Hasidism, Paisie Velicikovsky

It seems to be an accepted opinion that the founder of 18th century movement known as Hasidism, R. Israel ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov (c. 1698-1760), the master of the Good Name, often referred by the acronym ha-Besht, has been born in the Podolian village of Okopy or, at least, he was reported so. This assumption was unanimously expressed in both the more advanced academic studies on the topic, and in the various leading and most up-dated encyclopedias.¹ Okopy was a fortress built in 1692, at the borderlines between the Kingdom of

*This brief note is part of a more comprehensive monograph on the Besht in course of preparation, as part of my participation in a group of scholars on Hasidism at the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University during 2007/2008.

¹ I compile here an incomplete list of leading scholars in the field, who subscribed in one way or another, to the assumption that the Besht was born in Okopy: The first historian who dedicated a full-fledged study of the history of Hasidism, Simon Dubnow, expressed some hesitations, but nevertheless fell on the side of Okopy as the place the Besht was born. See the translation of his discussion "The Beginnings: The Baal Shem Tov (Besht), and the Center in Podolia," in ed. Gershon D. Hundert, *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present*, (New York University Press, New York, London, 1991), p. 27, 51 note 4, Abraham Kahana, *Sefer ha-Hasidut*, second edition, (Warsaw, 1922), p. 19 (Hebrew), Meir Balaban, *Toward the History of the Frankist Movement*, (Devir, Tel Aviv, 1934), vol. I, p. 23 (Hebrew), Isaac Alfasi, *Hasidism in Romania*, (Tel Aviv, 1973), p. 9 (Hebrew), as well as in the last three serious monographs dedicated to the Besht in the last two decades: Moshe Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996), p. 63-64, 174, as well as in his item in the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2008), p. 100, Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic and Leader* (Zalman Shazar Center, Jerusalem, 2000), p. 59 (Hebrew), and Netanel Lederberg, *Sod ha'Da'at, R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, His Spiritual Character and Social Leadership*, (Reuven Mass, Jerusalem, 2007), p. 21 (Hebrew). See also the item Ba'al Shem Tov,

Poland and the Ottoman Empire, during the short period of the Turkish occupation of part of Podolia, between the years 1672-1699. The single testimony for the view that this is the birthplace of the Besht is found in the most widespread collection of Hasidic hagiography focused on the Besht, entitled in Hebrew *Shivehei ha-Besht*, and translated in English as the *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*.² I shall try to question here this widely accepted opinion.

Let me start with the way in which the father of the Besht is described in this hagiography: "Rabbi Eliezer, our teacher, the father of the Besht, lived in the state of Walachia, near the border. He and his wife³ were old." (Ben-Amos & Mintz, 1984:7)

The term "border" translates the Hebrew *sefar*, which in the common usage of the word does not mean precisely the frontier, or the borderline, namely a precise line that separates between two different territories, for which there is another term in Hebrew namely *gevul*, but rather a small region found at the periphery of a much bigger geographical area. Given the fact that the larger region is described as Walachia, the more precise meaning of this term could be that Eliezer and his wife lived in a region that is not at the center of Walachia and, as the editor of the Hebrew version of the *In Praise of the Besht*, mentioned in a footnote, in fact we may speak about Moldavia (Rubinstein, 1991:36), or in more precise terms that refer to the later descriptions, Bukovina. However, the regular meaning of *sefar*, is qualified by the term *samukh*, which means "near", and the phrase *samukh la-sefar*, means therefore, as the translators indeed rendered it correctly, "near the border". The very expression *samukh la-sefar* is found in numerous earlier Hebrew sources and the usage displayed by this specific source is therefore neither new nor problematic.

The father, according to the legend, was taken to another far away country by bandits for several years to an unmentioned country where he became, like Joseph in the Bible, a vice-roy, and again like Joseph, he did not touch the woman he was given as a wife. Then - the legend reports - he returned, presumably, according to the text, to the original place, where his wife was still alive, and though both were very old, namely according to the hagiography, close to hundred years, the Besht was nevertheless born, again a story reminiscent now of the Biblical Abraham.⁴ This means that the parents of the Besht were inhabitants of a border region that has been described as part of Walachia, a place which they were not reported to have left and thus Walachia becomes a possible place for the birth of the Besht, a point that has not sufficiently been highlighted in the scholarship. This is all we know about the parts and the birth of the

The New Encyclopedia of Judaism, (New York University Press, New York, 2002), p. 99. The only substantial doubts having to do with the identification of Okopy with a village, or alternatively with a street in the Ukrainian city of Colomei, were expressed by Abraham Rubinstein, ed., *Shivehei ha-Besht*, (Reuven Mass, Jerusalem, 1991), p. 44 note 36 (Hebrew), but he too adopts the option of Okopy as the place of the birth. See also Hayyim Hillel Ben-Sason's item on the Besht in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, (1972), vol. 9 vol. 1049, where Okopy was mentioned, though elsewhere, in his discussion of the emergence of Hasidism, in ed. H.H. Ben-Sasson, *A History of Jewish People* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1976), p. 768, he claims that the Besht was born in Podolia. See also the view of an early scholar of Hasidism, Aharon Marcus, *Ha-Hasidut*, tr. Moshe Shenfeld, (Netzah, Benei Berak, 1980), p. 13 (Hebrew) who claims that the Besht was born in 1690 in Kytov (sic), but his translator "corrects" him writing that "the correct place is Okopy."

² *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov [Shivehei ha-Besht]*, trs. and eds. Dan Ben-Amos & Jerome R. Mintz, (Schocken Books, New York, 1984). For a recent survey of the perception of the material collected in this book see Rosman, *Founder of Hasidism*, p. 99-113, 119-126; Nahum Karlinsky, *Historia She-ke-neged* (Jerusalem, 1998); Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic and Leader* p. 217-263, and now an up-dated discussion in Rosman's *Stories That Changed History: The Unique Career of Shivhei Ha-Besht* (The B.G. Rudolph Lectures in Judaic Studies, new series, 5) (Syracuse University Press, 2007). For the earliest rendering of some parts of this text in any European language see the famous collection of Hasidic tales by Martin Buber, compiled a century ago.

³ The name of the Besht's mother was Sarah. See the passage discussed in M. Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1995), p. 86 and below note 6.

⁴ *In Praise*, p. 10. See above note 3 as to the name of the Besht's name, Sarah, like the biblical figure who gave birth to Isaac at the age of hundred.

founder of Hasidism, and problematic as this single source is, remained as the reference of the question of the birthplace of the Besht by historians in the field.

However, later in *In Praise*, the Besht has been described as an inhabitant of "the city of Okopy" (Ben-Amos & Mintz, 1984:15), - a name referred in the Yiddish and Hebrew sources as Akup⁵. This piece of information is reported in the name of a certain legendary Rabbi Adam⁶, who was told in a dream to deliver some mysterious Kabbalistic or magical writings – whose precise nature are unknown - to "Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer of the city of Okopy" (Ben-Amos & Mintz, 1984:15). In this context, the Besht is described as being of the age of fourteen. However, let me emphasize that never in this legendary text has the birth of the Besht in this village been mentioned, and the single reference in the entire book to Okopy has to do with an event, quite legendary to be sure, that was imagined to take place, in any case, many years after the birth of its protagonist. Why did the historians attribute to an event that took place – indeed it is hard to believe that it took ever place – the force to testify to what happened fourteen years earlier, is indeed a quandary.

Thus we may summarize that the founder of Hasidism was born to a poor family that inhabited an unknown place on the Romanian part of the border with the Kingdom of Poland, which means also a province that was, in some ways, under the sphere of influence of the Ottoman Empire, though the young Besht, was active on the Polish part of this geographical area. Since there is no material of the transition of the family from one place to another, there is a possibility that the Besht has been born on the Romanian part of the border, or somewhere in Moldova, but early in his life he and perhaps also his family passed the border and established themselves in the recently established Okopy, a place with never was part of Romania or of the Ottoman Empire. In other words, there is no extant evidence whatsoever that the Besht was born in Okopy, and the fact that he was described as "from the city of Okopy" does not mean, necessarily, that he was indeed born there. Moreover, according to a piece of information, which has been transmitted in the name of the founder of Lubavitch Hasidism, the late 18th century Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, by one of his descendants in sermon delivered in 1904, the term Akup is not a name of a city, but of a trench, or of some form of fortification, in Polish, found at the outskirts of the town of Tluste, where the poor parents of the Besht were living. Accordingly, Rabbi Shneur Zalman says, when the Besht signed "Israel of Akup", he means that he was from the trenches of Tluste.⁷ Let me emphasize that also in this case, we may better not identify the trenches as the place where the Besht has been born. In any case, it may well be that the stay in Tluste reflects the period when the parents, presumably, moved to Podolia, to rely on this type of evidence.

However, given the fact that the place where the Besht's old parents was at the border-region but within Walachia, it seems to me more plausible to assume, on the account of the extant material, that the Besht was not born in Okopy or even in Tluste. Let me be clear: I speak here about what may be more plausible from the perusal of the evidence transmitted in the hagiography, which is the single source that addressed the issue of the parents of the Besht and his birth and the testimony of Abraham Stern. This is still a tentative proposal. However, if new and more reliable material will surface, may be the picture I proposed here will be changed.

⁵ See ed. Rubinstein, *Shivehei ha-Besht*, p. 44: *me-'yir 'Akup*. The description of Okopy as a city seems to reflect a later situation, when the fortress established in 1692, grew. Let me make it clear that I do not deny the possibility that the Besht was connected with Okopy in one way or another, in his youth, but that relying on this possibility in order to claim that he was also born there, it is a long way, and the material we have points rather in another direction.

⁶ This part of the *In Praise*, is especially problematic, as it represents an adaptation of an earlier legend known since the 16th century. See the important study of the topic in Chone Shmeruk, *Yiddish Literature in Poland, Historical Studies and Perspectives* (The Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1981), p. 119-146 (Hebrew) and the bibliography adduced in *In Praise*, p. 310 note 1.

⁷ See *Torah Menahem*, (Brooklyn, 1960), part II, p. 12. This piece of information has been kindly brought to my attention by Dr. Zvi Mark.

Where was the border according to the above sentences? Though the stories that constitute the *In Praise* have been collected, in their vast majority in 1794, but printed in 1814, I doubt if the above statement reflects such a late period, and I assume that they refer to the period that immediately preceded the birth of the Besht, which took place according to the scant sources in our possession, in late 1699 (Rosman, 1996:63-64). My proclivity toward attributing the meaning of the statement to the political situation in 1699 and not to that of 1794, or earlier (according to the thesis concerning the emergence of some of stories in the hagiographical collection, formulated by Elchanan Reiner⁸), or later, is based on the fact that around 1699, the whole region of Podolia was returned to Poland, and the fortress of Okopy lost its status as being on the border and thus its strategic importance in general, and became a place where Jews started to settle there. Therefore, the later development of the Besht and of the earlier phases of what will become later the Hasidic movement, took place in a region that remained part of the Polish Kingdom for more than seventy-five years, and then it became part of the Habsburgian empire, known as Bukovina, and would hardly be referred as Walachia.⁹

Let me add that I wonder to what extent would a Jew writing in the second half of the 18th century, describe a Polish, or Ukrainian region, occupied by the Turks for 27 years, as Walachia. I assume that this designation, when applied to old people, do not refer to the occupied Podolian territories by Turks, and thus the Besht's parents should be regarded as inhabitants of the Romanian territories, where the Turks governed, in one way or another, for several centuries. Let me point out that the term "Walachia" was used more than once by Hasidic writers, contemporaries of the editors of the *In Praise*, as referring to Moldavia. So, for example, when dealing with the journey to Miedzibusz of R. Hayyim ben Solomon, known as Hayyim Tirer of Chernovitz, who was for a while the Rabbi of the North Moldavian town of Botosani, he is described as "R. Hayyim Chernovitzer, from Walichia (sic), from the community of Botosiani (sic)."¹⁰ Here it is evident that Walachia refers to the well-known town in Moldavia.

Moreover, as Prof. Marcin Wodzinski has kindly drawn my attention, according to an unidentified source found in the Maskilic camp, namely among Jews who adhered to the European Enlightenment, the Besht was described as coming from Walachia to Podolia. Abraham Stern, a contemporary of the printers of *In Praise*, (1762-1842), whose book constitutes the written source of this tradition, wrote as follows: "No more than a few score years ago, an Israelite from Walachia called Israel, came to Podolia to the town of Miedzyboz. He adopted the name Ba'al Shem."¹¹ From the manner in which this statement is formulated it

⁸ See his "Shivhei ha-Besht: Mesirah, Arikhah, Hadpasah, Proceedings of the 11th World Congress of Jewish Studies, vol. C2, (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 145-152 (Hebrew), who claims that some of the stories found in *In Praise*, emerged much earlier in the sixties of the 18th century.

⁹ For the social processes related to the development of the initial Hasidic group into a much larger social movement see Ada Rapoport-Albert, "The Hasidic Movement after 1772, Structural Continuity and Change," *Zion* vol. 55 (1990), p. 183-245 (Hebrew) and in ed., Ada Rapoport-Albert, *Hasidism Reappraised*, (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London, 1996), p. 76-139, and Emanuel Etkes, "Hasidism as a Movement – The First Stage," in ed. Bezalel Safran, *Hasidism: Continuity or Innovation* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1988), p. 1-26. These studies show that it is erroneous to assume the existence of an organized social movement before the death of Rabbi Dov Baer, known as the Great Maggid of Miedziretch, in 1772. See also more recently Moshe Rosman, "Hasidism as a Modern Phenomenon," in *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnov-Instituts* vol. VI (2007), p. 219.

¹⁰ Printed in R. Barukh of Miedzibusz, *Botzina di-Nehora'*, (Jerusalem, 1961), p. 139 (Hebrew). See also the verso of the front-page of an edition of an anonymous Kabbalistic book, *Sefer Galia Razza'*, printed by the same R. Hayyim, (Mohilev, 1812), and in many cases elsewhere.

¹¹ According to the English translation from Polish in Marcin Wodzinski, *Haskalah and Hasidism in the Kingdom of Poland, History of Conflict*, (The Littman Library, Oxford, 2005), p. 261. Prof. Wodzinski assured me that there is no plausible reason to assume that Stern was influenced by the *In Praise*, and that his testimony is independent of it. As to his sources in general see *ibidem*, p. 59-60. To my best knowledge, this tradition has not been used in order to question the accepted vision of the Besht's birthplace. See above note 1.

seems that the Besht was not just a child when arriving to Podolia, but this may be an over-reading of the source. For the time being this seems to be the most explicit statement about the possible Walachian origin of the Besht that does not depend on a hagiographical or even obviously Hasidic source.

The concentration on the place where the border was in a certain year should nevertheless be understood in the wider context. The borderline was, to be sure, in most of the cases no more than a theoretical line. Indeed the fortresses there, Okopy on the Polish side, and Kamianetz Podolski on the Turkish side, were at a distance of few miles from each other, and both constituted centers of concentrated military activity and building, though much less of cultural activity. However, from the Jewish point of view, culturally and otherwise, the shifting borders between empires were relatively meaningless. We may well assume that on the two sides of the theoretical borderline the Jews resorted to the same vernacular for communication between themselves, Yiddisch, and to Hebrew in order to read and write more advanced forms of Jewish learning, in addition to the other vernacular languages that were used in order to communicate with the gentiles. Also the basic Jewish culture hardly differed between those Jews that found themselves separated by a political or military borderline, like that established by the Katowice agreement in 1699, or any other similar political arrangement.

However, this point notwithstanding, from the more general cultural point of view it should nevertheless be pointed out that the situation of being born and raised in a frontier region may have a certain consequence for the Besht and the slowly nascent circles of Hasidic figures active in the area. I do not refer only to the psychological situation of emergency that may be generated by life in such a belligerent region, which are now quite imponderable, but also to the cultural possibilities that were probably available because of this geographical detail. This means especially the possibility that early Hasidic masters could be exposed to more than one cultural context, and therefore, instead of restricting the possible interactions or relationship to the Christian ambiance,¹² also some Muslim cultural elements should be taken in consideration, as well as the possible contacts with the rather mysterious Cángós, a population of Hungarian extraction, which displayed some Shamanic features, active in several villages in the Carpathian mountains and in the Subcarpathian settlements in North Moldavia (Idel, 2005:143-150). Given the relatively short period of Turkish occupation of part of Podolia, between 1672-1699, Turkish culture, or Islam in general, did not infiltrate in a massive manner in the culture of the North Moldavian and South Ukrainian regions, but the presence of some more modest elements of Turkish folklore, like the widespread stories related to Nassr a-Din Hodja, for example, should not be denied. This presence of popular stories is indeed interesting since one of the major contributions of Hasidism from its very inception is the massive resort to story-telling as a crucial medium for transmitting religious messages (Idel, 1995:185-188). Indeed, the Besht himself has been described by his grandson, R. Moshe Hayyim Efrayyim of Sudylkov, as resorting to stories that are described as alien, namely non-Jewish. The grandfather is reported as telling "stories and external things"¹³, and by their means he worshiped God, by his pure and subtle wisdom that he possessed" adds an awareness as to an important dimension that is hardly expressed in an explicit manner in the extant Hasidic material.¹⁴ From a comparative point of view: it is not only the very resort to stories as a vehicle of religious messages that is relatively new in Jewish mysticism, but also one specific case: the negation of the importance of the "I" – namely the ego - found in a similar storiola related to R. Aharon of Karim, a student of Rabbi

¹² See Yaffa Eliach, "The Russian Dissenting Sects and Their Influence on Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, Founder of Hassidism," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* vol. 36 (1963), p. 57-83. Subsequent studies on Hasidism did not endorse this proposal.

¹³ Namely by means of material that stems from non-Jewish sources. Therefore, what I call the individual panorama of the Besht's sources should include, at least in principle, also non-Jewish topics.

¹⁴ *Degel Mahaneh 'Efrayyim*, (Jerusalem, 1995), p. 50. As to the Besht's relations with gentiles there are many stories in *In Praise of the Besht*. See, e.g., Rosman's discussion in *Founder of Hasidism*, p. 58-59. See also R. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Sefer Me'or 'Einayyim*, (Jerusalem, 1975), p. 169 (Hebrew).

Dov Baer, the Great Maggid of Miedziretch, seems to reflect the impact of a Sufi storiola, as it has been pointed out by Martin Buber (Buber, 1988:221-223).

The plausible picture that seems, in my opinion, to emerge from an examination of the extant material, which is indeed very scant and not always reliable, is that though born and perhaps spending some few years of his childhood somewhere in one of the provinces known as Moldavia or Bukovina, the Besht was, to be sure, active as a youth mostly in the Podolian part of the Kingdom of Poland, where his ideas nourished the nascent Hasidic movement, which expanded in new regions during the next two generations. Therefore, the vast majority of scholars' assumption that the Besht was reported to have been born in Okopy, or even that he was born there, is not sustained by any of the extant testimonies.¹⁵ Though not subscribing to the so many fantastic details found in the hagiography under scrutiny in order to extract historical material, a historian should however, never invent details that are not explicitly found there. Let me add that according to a detail in the *In Praise*, the Besht lived for some years in the mountains, described as being beyond the river of Prut (Ben-Amos & Mintz, 1984:34). He crossed the river weekly, to believe the report in this book. This means that the Besht spent some years of his early mature life in solitude in the mountains that were on the other side of the river, which means in the Romanian territories. Was this retreat to the Romanian mountains also a return to the place of his childhood? For the time being it is difficult to ascertain this assumption. In any case, the retreat in the Carpathians, and the origin of his parents in the Northern Romanian territories, may require the resort to another approach to the Besht: one that is concerned less with statal entities, like Poland and Romania, but more eminently with the specific cultural landscape of the mountains, and the ambiance of the villages, as being formative for a figure that will later on operate in more urban sites, and meet another type of Jewish culture. This combination between rural and urban, perhaps also between pre-axial and axial, may constitute one of the answers of the success of his teachings in different strata of Jewish population (Idel, 1995:225).

In this context, we should mention a somewhat parallel, though geographically speaking, inverse phenomenon, related to the life of the major figure in Orthodox type of mystical movement known as neo-Hesychasm, Paisie Velicikovskiy, (1722-1794). Though born in Ukrainian city of Poltava, he was active for some years in his youth and for important parts of his mature career in the three major Bukovinean monastery of Dragomirna, and the Moldavian monasteries of Secu and especially Neamtz, before he was forced, in his old years, to return to Ukraine. He was of Jewish origin, by the family of his mother, as he mentioned in his autobiography, and introduced in both Moldavia and Ukraine an intense interest in the Patristic literature, which he studied during his stay in Mount Athos, especially in some of its spiritual and hagiographical aspects.¹⁶ Was this transition from one geographical area to another by passing borders, instrumental in the contribution to the emergence of the two parallel mystical revivalist movements, that coincided geographically, namely the Northern parts of the Carpathians, and to a certain extent also temporarily? (Tourov, 2004:73-105; Idel, 2005:43-78).

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¹⁵ See above note 1. For the time being I did not find any serious hesitations related to the opinion shared by so many scholars that the Besht has been born in Okopy or in Podolia, which means that I did not see any conclusion drawn from such hesitations.

¹⁶ Cf. his autobiography translated into Romanian as *Cuviosul Paisie de la Neamtz, (Velicikovski), Autobiografia unui staretz*, ed. Ioan I. Ica, (Editura Deisis, Sibiu, 1996). See the introduction by P. Elia Citterio to the Italian translation of the autobiography, *Paisij Velickovskij, Autobiografia di uno staretz*, (Edizioni Scritti Monastici, Abbazia di Praglia, 1988), p. 13-53.

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