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A Photographer Named Death

An Underdeveloped Negative of Biography

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PLAN

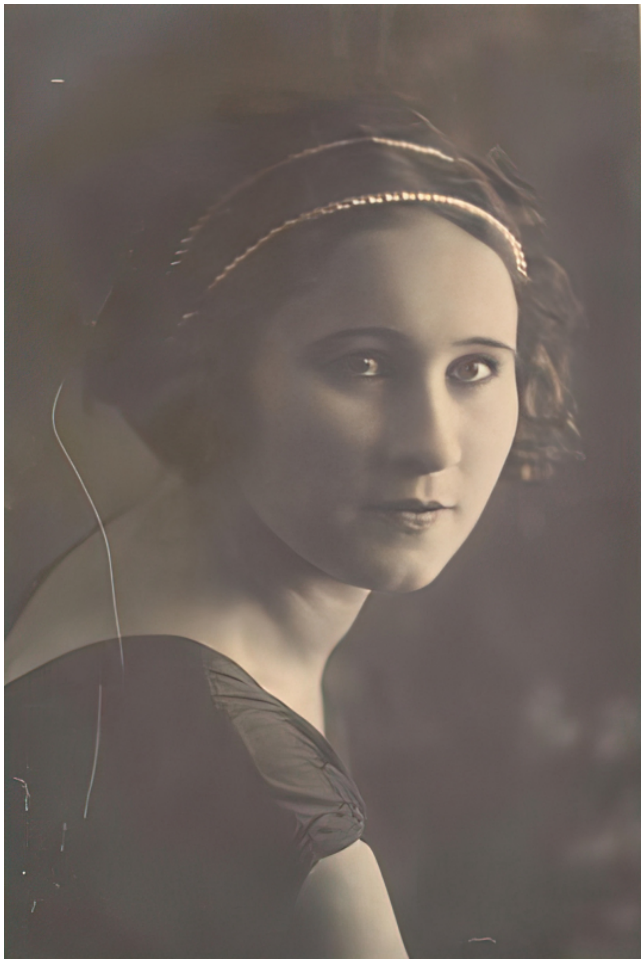
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Small histories

TEXTE

A tale of love and parting in three shots

1 Photographs of two young women from a bygone age, with naïve, solemn inscriptions, were gifted on the same day, to the same man—Zheka, Zhenichka, Zhenya, or more officially, Eugeniy (**figs. 1, 2a, and 2b**). We will never find out if any of the young women ever met the man again, and we can only guess what circumstances brought such simultaneous outbursts of emotions. The man must have cherished the memories of those times as he kept their photographs for the rest of his life in his private archive,[1] along with his own photographic portrait made at around the same time, in the same tiny historic north Ukrainian town of Korosten, in the oblast of Zhytomyr (**fig. 3**).

1. Yakov Smertenko's studio, *Portrait of a Woman*, January 1931.



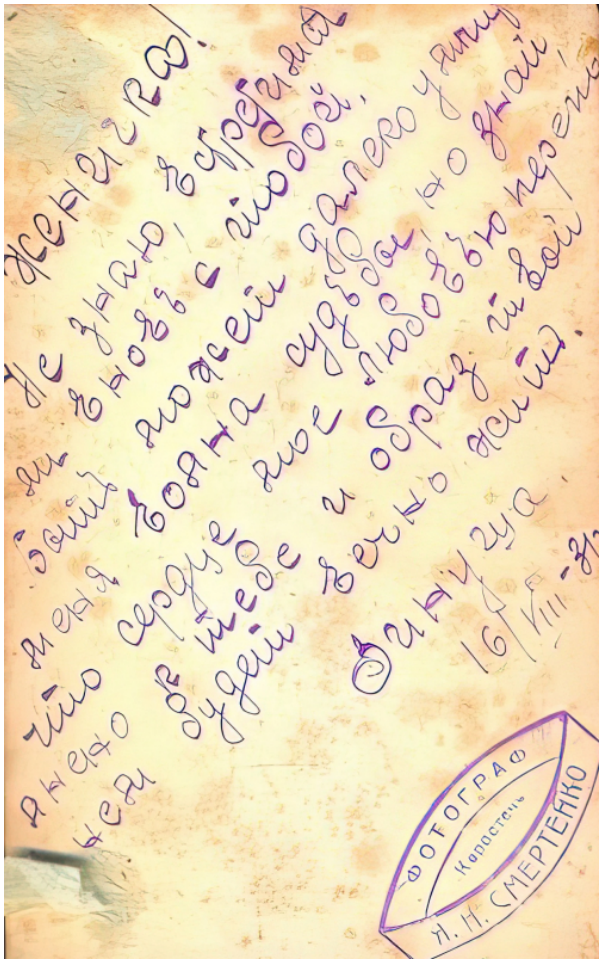
Silver print, dimensions unknown, private collection (given to Evgeniy by Natus'ka). On the back, in Ukrainian: "Dear Zheka, Although sweet was our first kiss, what an aftertaste of sorrow it had … thanks to your departure! Natus'ka, August 16, 1931."

2a. Yakov Smertenko's studio, *Portrait of a Woman*, August 1931.



Silver print, dimensions unknown, private collection (given to Evgeniy by Zinusha).

2b. Yakov Smertenko's studio, *Portrait of a Woman*, August 1931.



On the back, in Ukrainian: "Zhenichka, I don't know if we will ever meet again. Maybe far away, the wave of destiny will whirl you back to me, but you should know that my heart is overwhelmed with love for you and your image will live forever in it. Zinusha, August 16, 1931."

3. Yakov Smertenko's studio, *Eugeniy*, 1930s.



Silver print, dimensions unknown, private collection.

2 Sunday, August 16, 1931, was probably a typical hot summer day. Zhenya, judging from the classical Red Army soldier's tunic in which he poses for his portrait, was a military man or an NKVD (Soviet secret service) official. He was about to leave this small town—probably because he finished his mandatory service or got a promotion and was moving to a bigger city—Zhytomyr, Kharkiv (which at the time was Ukrainian Republic's capital) or, who knows, maybe even to Moscow. The departure of a young handsome Soviet official and an eligible bachelor apparently did not remain unnoticed on the local dating scene. A typical small drama, invisible to the outside world and painful for the young hearts of provincial beauties.

3 There is one thing that the three photographs—of the young women and their adored Zheka—have in common. All of them bear a stamp:

"Korosten, Photographer Y. N. Smertenko." Today, it seems a strange coincidence that three random pictures of different people were taken by the same photographer, but in a small Ukrainian town in 1931, there was probably only one or two photographic studios where a decent portrait could be made.[2] A more peculiar thing in this coincidence is obvious only to a Ukrainian- or Russian-speaking observer. There is a strange and, in a way, beautiful prophetic poetry in the fact that the photographer's family name is Smertenko, which literally means "the son of death."[3]

4 We don't know if a stamp with such a name on each portrait scared photographer Smertenko's customers back in the 1930s. Today, these dusty old pictures signed by the Son of Death invoke thoughts of the nature of photography as a medium that is dealing with "dead" patches of reality. Banal, unpretentious photographs suddenly look as if a weird tribute to classical Baroque "vanitas" paintings with their obsession with the transience of life, the futility of pleasure, and the certainty of death. A forgotten small-town photography enthusiast with his strange name resonates with the epoch marked by an unprecedented outburst of state-controlled violence: collectivization, artificially arranged famine—"Holodomor," the Great Terror and the shadow of the approaching Second World War, all of which would kill tens of millions in Ukraine and leave terrible scars on several upcoming generations.

5 Yet an eloquent name is just a name if there is no story behind it. Digging for the additional information about photographer Semenenko starts from mere awe and curiosity and leads to an exciting discovery of a unique and equally sad biography.

Korosten: A shtetl where it all began

6 Google predictably knows very little about the photographer Smertenko and his life in Korosten. Luckily, further research brings a few precious details. We discover that Korosten's leading (or more probably, only) photographer Yakov Naumovich Smertenko was born on the territory of the Russian Empire's Kyiv governorate in 1903 and was a Jew—not a very surprising fact, taking into consideration that

Korosten was situated right in the heart of the Pale of Settlement and in the late 1920s, 57 percent of its population (6,089 people) were Jewish. [4]

7 The policy of the Russian Empire's leadership toward its large Jewish population was quite oppressive. The Pale of Settlement was the border, to the east of which Jews were forbidden to settle. Exceptions existed for only a very limited number of individuals. The largest part the Pale was situated on the territory of Ukraine. Most Jews in Ukraine in the early 20th century, lived in small towns (shtetls) in the areas on the right bank of the Dnipro river. In everyday life, they spoke Yiddish. [5] Korosten was a typical shtetl where a large Jewish population lived side by side with Ukrainians for hundreds of years in a love-hate atmosphere, under the rule of Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, and subsequently, Soviet authorities. [6]

8 Smertenko was born in the epoch that can be best described by the opening line of Charles Dickens's novel A *Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." [7] After 1917, all of society went through unprecedented turmoil. Ukraine was especially devastated. It had been one of the main battlegrounds during the war. For five years after the 1917 Revolution, it was torn between Bolsheviks, pro-czarist armies, the huge anarchist movement in the south, and pro-Ukrainian forces who managed to establish an independent Ukrainian state, although only for a very brief period. At a certain point, tiny Korosten was even granted the title of Ukrainian capital by the authorities of the Ukrainian People's Republic—for one day only, which was not so unusual in a period when authorities in a Ukrainian city or village would change almost every day.

9 Around the time when Smertenko reached maturity and was ready to start his career, things had become more or less settled. Soviet Ukraine, together with the Soviet Union in general in the second half of the 1920s, was going through the period known as the NEP—the New Economic Policy. This was a time of relative market freedom, when small entrepreneurs were given the possibility to establish their private businesses while the state continued to control banks, foreign trade, and large industries. For many people who were not very passionate about the ideals of collectivism, it looked almost as if Soviet Union was on the way to partly restoring the Old Regime—at

least in the economic field. By the end of the 1920s, Stalin had accumulated enough power and resources to end the NEP and all private enterprises. Of course, it took a while for this new wave of collectivization, industrialization, and planned economy to reach provincial Korosten. Therefore in 1931, Smertenko was still running his small photographic studio and putting his stamp on the portraits of young ladies, lavishly dressed according to typical NEP fashion, which renounced Communist ascetism and its brutal neglect of the private.

10 In the first decades of the 20th century, photography became a common career choice for Jews who otherwise had very few opportunities for social promotion in the highly anti-Semitic society. Smertenko's predecessor in Korosten in the 1910s was also Jewish, as were most of his colleagues throughout the country. In the early 20th century, photography was highly technical and Jews, who were traditionally linked to craftsmanship and areas that required sophisticated technological equipment and engineering skills as well as substantial investment had dominated the photographic business since the Russian Empire. [8] In the nascent Soviet Union, this "nationality" of the profession was still very obvious with the only difference being that all private photographic studios and salons were expropriated and their owners were either bankrupted or became office clerks in state-run photographic studios. [9] It was only during the NEP that private photographic studios were again allowed and then for only a short period of time.

Soviet and Ukrainian photography of the 1930s

11 The 1930s marked a period of immense technological advancement for the Soviet Union, and photography was no exception. During this era, photography began to flourish as citizens embraced a newfound appreciation for its artistry. From popular amateur photographers documenting everyday life to professional photographers, advances in photography technology changed Soviet art and culture. Prior to the 1930s, professional photographers had already made their mark in history with some even gaining recognition from the government who occasionally commissioned them for propaganda work. However, it wasn't until the mid-1930s that photography truly became visible,

thanks to advancements in camera technology. Documentary photographers were increasingly active as they sought various angles on current events and local culture.

12 Throughout this period, the craftsmanship of new cameras created by manufacturers such as FED[10] enabled many citizen photographers to pursue an unprecedented level of creative expression. Photographers enlisted by Stalin's administration were tasked with using photography as a form of propaganda, one that would help spread his political message through deliberate visual compositions aimed at vilifying the West and emphasizing his own power. Publications such as *Sovetskoye Foto*, a monthly magazine founded in 1926, served as outlets for disseminating these works throughout the Soviet Union and contributed to a complex visual narrative of what life was in the Soviet Union. *Sovetskoye Foto* was source for inspiration, education, and discussion about the development of contemporary photography. The content ranged from artistic experiments with photographic techniques to debates about ideological issues related to Socialist Realism. Photographers such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, Max Alpert, Boris Ignatovich, and others used the magazine as an outlet for their own work, encouraging experimentation with camera angles and film processing techniques that ultimately helped shape the emerging language of Soviet photography.

13 Photography in Ukraine during the 1930s was largely shaped by the decade's sociopolitical and economic turmoil. The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic experienced an influx of Soviet-style propaganda as part of its socialist policies. This heavily influenced photography in Ukraine, as photographers were instructed to create images that presented an idealized view of socialist life and production. Furthermore, the Soviet Union's Five-Year Plans for industrialization meant that there was an emphasis on documentation and record-keeping in Ukrainian photography. This saw a large number of photographs taken of workers and factories as well as other aspects of daily life during this period. At the time, photographers were mostly limited to taking pictures that complied with Soviet policies, focusing on themes of productivity and progress. There was also a great deal of documentary portraiture, as the Soviet Union sought to document different aspects of its population for propaganda purposes. Additionally, there was a notable increase in landscape photography,

which sought to capture the changing landscape of Ukraine after the introduction of industrialization.

Soviet Zion in the Siberian taiga: Smertenko moves to Birobidzhan

14 The NEP was officially terminated on October 11, 1931, with the adoption of a decree banning private trade in the Soviet Union. For the photographer Smertenko it meant the end of his small business in Korosten. In this moment of despair, a new ray of hope shined. Smertenko became involved in a large-scale project of national Jewish renaissance under the Soviet government. The poverty endured by most of the Jewish population, the lack of access to social elevators, closed communities, and the constant threat of pogroms, all led to an increase in the popularity of radical Marxist ideas in Jewish communities. For the same reasons, at the end of the 19th century the Ukrainian territories became one of the main centers of the Zionist movement, as well as a source of powerful migration waves to the United States. During and after World War I, the situation only worsened, and anti-Semitism in the Russian Empire increased significantly.

15 Many Jewish leaders and cultural activists had high hopes for the 1917 Revolution as an opportunity to improve the situation of their people. Unfortunately, this enthusiasm coincided with a sharp surge of violence. During the period of instability in Ukraine in 1918–20, bloody pogroms continued, taking the lives of thousands. And yet, with the empire's collapse, Jews finally gained mobility and were able to relocate to larger cities and begin playing an increasingly important role in the cultural process. It brought a large-scale wave of cultural and political revival of Jewry in the era of the revolution and the early Soviet Union, when Jewish collective farms were formed and mass migration of Jews to the northern Crimea and the Sea of Azov was planned.

16 From 1928, the party's course regarding the Jewish question had become more hardline. Dreams of a New Palestine in the Crimea were forgotten and a remote region in the Far East of Russia was selected for the settlement of Jews. Here in the nearly unreachable

area known for its tough weather conditions, the Jewish Autonomous Region (JAR) was created in 1934. The capital of the region was a newly established city of Birobidzhan.[11] The project of Jewish national revival under the Soviet authorities should not be underestimated. A distinctive feature of this movement was an attempt to develop an alternative to the Zionist world view, with its elitist Hebrew cult and the idea that all Jews should unite, sooner or later, in faraway Israel. The rhetoric of building the "Promised Land" here and now was accompanied by the rejection of religious identity and the promotion of Yiddish as a national language as opposed to Hebrew.

17 The first years of JAR were marked with unprecedented optimism. Jews were coming from all over the world to the taiga in the east to build the new, secular Jerusalem. Most of the newcomers were Jews from Ukrainian shtetls, those who in the previous decades had suffered from pogroms and harsh anti-Semitism and were craving a real home, even if it was in the middle of Siberia. The creation of JAR was an important project for the Stalinist government. By that time, Soviet authorities had realized photography's potential as a propaganda tool.[12] In 1925, a special organization had been created to readapt Soviet Jews through "agrarianization." The Society for Settling Toiling Jews on Land or OZET (Общество землеустройства еврейских трудящихся) was not only in charge of sending plumbers, beekeepers, shoemakers, and schoolteachers to Birobidzhan, they also sourced photographers who could document the successes of the newly established Jewish Autonomous Region. Smertenko was one of the photographers OZET sent to Birobidzhan.[13] Unlike many others who would come and go, he stayed and became one of the main documenters of JAR's early development.

18 Many of the settlers who moved to JAR in the first years were Jews from Ukraine. It is important to keep it in mind that in 1932–33, Ukraine saw one of the most tragic pages in its history. Millions of people were killed during Holodomor—the famine manufactured by the Soviet authorities in order to collectivize the region. According to the information provided by the Jewish Autonomous Region's State Archive, Smertenko arrived in Birobidzhan from Kyiv in June 1935.[14] In 1932–33, 80 percent of the population of his native Zhytomyr region died in the famine.[15] Eyewitnesses in Korosten, reported corpses on the street; they were collected, put on carts and taken to

the city hospital.[16] It is not difficult to assume that after seeing this tragedy, the photographer looked at the struggles of the new settlers in Birobidzhan with hope and optimism.

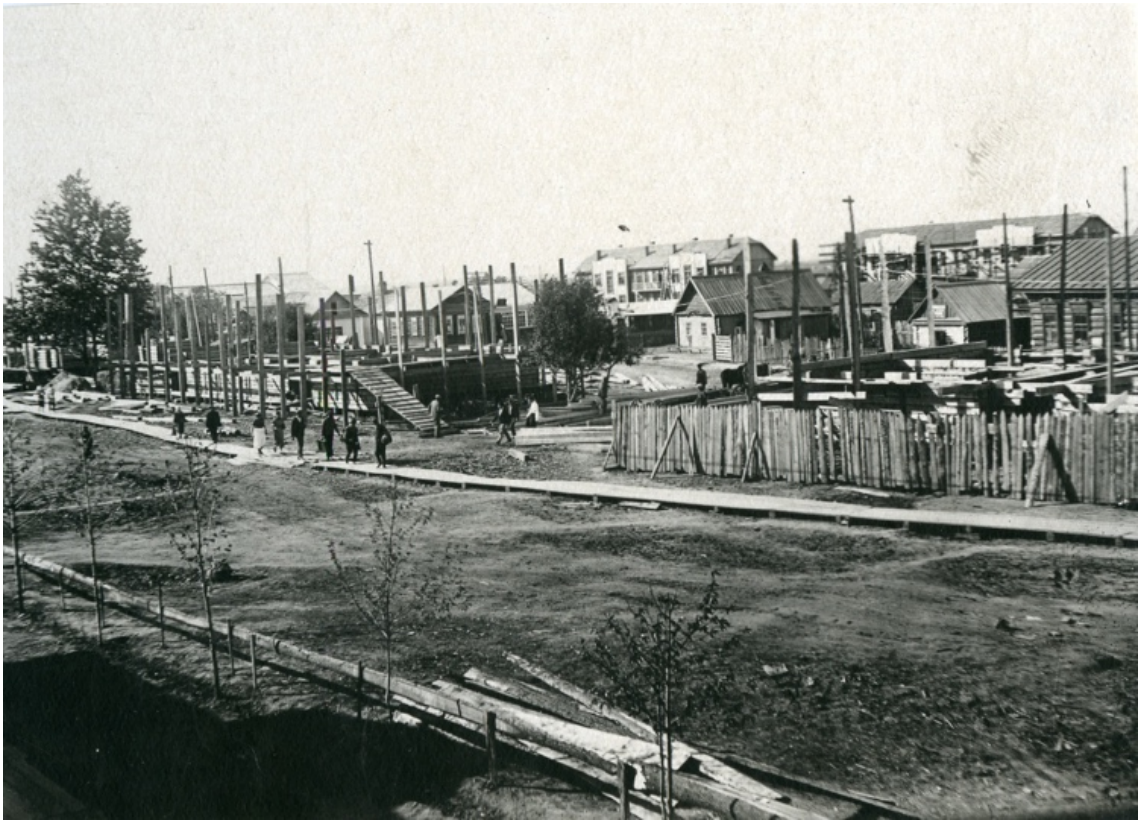
19 The photographer was sent to Birobidzan with the mission to document the activities of the local sport association Dynamo. In August of 1935, his wife, a preschool teacher, Smertenko H. L. (her full name is unknown), came to Birobidzhan from Zhytomyr.[17] The records show that at that time, the couple had no children. Smertenko's most productive year was 1936. It was the time when he made his most famous shots, which are now a part of Russian Museum of Ethnography's collection in Saint Petersburg. What do we see in these pictures? New buildings, a new train station which was the pride of Birobidzhan (**figs. 4 and 5**), as it connected the city with the outside world, a parade of OSOAVIAKhIM activists (**fig. 6**),[18] and of course the main cultural attraction of the city—the new Jewish theater (**fig. 7**), which, according to Soviet propaganda, remained the only place in the city where it was possible to see the image of miserable and struggling shtetl Jews.[19]

4. Yakov Smertenko, *May Day Demonstration on the Square near the New Railway Station. Birobidzhan*, 1936.



Silver print, dimensions unknown, private collection.

5. Yakov Smertenko, *Construction of a New Street in Birobidzhan*, 1936.



Silver print, dimensions unknown, Saint Petersburg, Russian Ethnographic Museum.

6. Yakov Smertenko, *OSOAVIAKhIM Parade*, 1935.



Silver print, dimensions unknown, Saint Petersburg, Russian Ethnographic Museum.

7. Yakov Smertenko, *State Jewish Theatre, on the Left—Restaurant Birobidzhan, on the Right*, 1936.



Silver print, dimensions unknown, Saint Petersburg, Russian Ethnographic Museum.

20 Smertenko embraced various subject, such as urban landscapes, rural scenes, portraits of workers (**fig. 8**), and nature. He sought to capture the spirit of his fellow citizens through creative manipulation of composition, light, and shadow. Unlike his more famous contemporaries, Smertenko avoided experimentation with montage techniques and expressionistic angles. One may even say that Smertenko's shots are plain. Very few of his photographs survived in the archives. Only three of them belong to his Ukrainian period and all these are portraits made in his studio in Korosten. Most of his oeuvre is lost and therefore it is rather difficult to judge the artistic quality of his works. Nevertheless, the documentation of the life of Jewish settlers in Birobidzhan still evokes emotion today. The photographs represent the attempts of the Jewish settlers to build an idealistic vision of community while negotiating poverty and other harsh realities. Smertenko not only documented one of the most important periods

in Soviet history, but also provided a glimpse into what life could be like if Jews were able to achieve their utopian aspirations. Today, his works serve as important documents and provide a way for Jewish people to remember and memorialize the struggles they faced in achieving self-determination.

8. Yakov Smertenko, *Workers of the Knitwear Workshop of the Own Labor (Свой Труд) Artel at the May Day Demonstration*, Birobidzhan, 1936.



Silver print, dimensions unknown, Saint Petersburg, Russian Ethnographic Museum.

21 Smertenko was still too young or maybe not skillful enough to become the most authoritative photographer of the region. When in 1935 a special issue of the famous Soviet magazine, *USSR in Construction* (*СССР на стройке*), dedicated to the Russian Far East was being prepared, two famous photographers from Moscow—Max Alpert and Semen Friedland—were invited to create a photographic essay about life in Birobidzhan.[20] Smertenko was also in the shadow of a less important—in the Moscow context—but a very well-known—in Birobidzhan—photographer from Kharkiv and correspondent for OZET's newspaper *Трибуна* (Tribune), Leonid Gershkovich.[21] Smertenko is always almost invisible. He never comes to the fore, yet he

participated in the crucial events of his time and becomes interesting particularly due to this quality of his biography, which tells a lot and conceals even more.

Small histories

22 Smertenko was a typical "small man" of classical literature—a seemingly unimportant figure who personifies history. A thorough research of his biography is yet to come. For now, ironically, the fullest information about Smertenko is the record of his death.[22] The project of the "Promised Land of Milk and Honey" in Siberia ended in the same way as all the intelligentsia's infatuations with the revolution—it was drowned in blood and terror in 1937–38. Surprisingly, Smertenko was among the first people arrested in Birobidzhan in the wake of the Great Purge. He was jailed on February 27, 1937—long before the full-scale prosecutions and arrests started in the city and other parts of the JAR. It is yet another mystery that remains unsolved and promises an interesting story behind the curtain of the photographer's apparently normative life.

23 On April 15, 1938, Smertenko was sentenced to death under the most "popular" article during Stalin's rule, article 58-2—preparation for armed insurrection and counterrevolutionary activities. Smertenko, who was only 35 years old, was executed on May 11, 1938, in Khabarovsk.[23] He was rehabilitated in 1957. The final thing that we learn from the mysterious photographer's death record is that his real family name was not Smertenko, but Smerdenko. Smerd is an old Slavic word meaning a villain or serf. This word has very negative connotations in contemporary language and is also associated with unpleasant odors and something disgusting. Apparently for a young Jewish photographer in a small Ukrainian provincial town in the late 1920s, it was more acceptable to be associated with death than with serfdom. So far, no photographic portrait of Smertenko has been found. The famous saying about the shoemaker without shoes is true when we speak about the photographer who preferred to stay behind the camera.

NOTES

1 The author came upon all the photographs in this essay by accident, on a Ukrainian website selling antiques. Unfortunately, no additional information regarding the archive's owner has been found. Due to the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, the usual research for this essay became impossible, and the author had to rely on the existing information and what she had managed to find before the war.

2 There is no data regarding the number of photographers in Korosten in 1931, but, for example, in 1913, according to the official data, there was only one photographer in the town. See "Коростень" [Korosten], *Мой штетл: Еврейские местечки Украины* [My Shtetl: Jewish Towns of Ukraine], 2017: online (http://myshtetl.org/zhitomirskaja/korosten.html).

3 In Ukraine, surnames ending on "-enko" are quite common and have an etymology similar to English family names ending with "-son."

4 See "Коростень."

5 For more detailed information about the life of Jewish shtetls on the territory of Ukraine in the first half of the 20th century, see Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *The Golden Age Shtetl: A New History of Jewish Life in East Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

6 Paul Robert Magocsi and Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *Jews and Ukrainians: A Millennium of Co-Existence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

7 Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Mineola: Dover, 1998), p. 3.

8 "фотоискусство" [Photography] *World Ort: Электронная еврейская энциклопедия* [World Ort: Electronic Jewish encyclopedia], 1999: online.

9 About Jewish photographers in Ukraine, see Eva Krasnova and Anatoly Drozdovsky, "Еврейские фотоателье старой Одессы" [Jewish photo studios of old Odessa], *Мигдаль*, 2007: online (http://www.migdal.org.ua/times/90/16217).

10 The first FED model was a 35 mm small-format rangefinder camera. It was produced by the Kharkiv Production Machine-Building Association "FED" from 1934 to 1955.

11 Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

12 David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

13 Valeriy Gurevich, Head of the Laboratory for the Study of the History of Jewish Culture and the Jewish Resettlement Movement of the Institute for Complex Analysis of Regional Problems, Far Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Birobidzhan, Russia, in an email to the author, April 15, 2020.

14 According to transcript No. T109/1 from the Jewish Autonomous Region's State Archive (Russian Federation).

15 As stated by Liudmyla Pol'huy, senior researcher at Korosten's Museum of Local Lore in an interview for Korosten TV, November 23, 2018, YouTube, 7'40": online (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOEiyPkBs9o).

16 *Ibid.*

17 According to transcript No. T109/1 from the Jewish Autonomous Region's State Archive (Russian Federation).

18 OSOAVIAKhIM was a Soviet Russian paramilitary society (ОСОАВИАХИМ, Союз обществ содействия обороне и авиационно-химическому строительству СССР, Union of Societies of Assistance to Defense and Aviation-Chemical Construction of the USSR).

19 Alexander Ivanov, *Визуализируя утопию: репрезентации Биробиджана в советской еврейской прессе 1920-х – 1930-х гг. Научные труды по иудаике* [Visualizing utopia: Representations of Birobidzhan in the Soviet Jewish press in the 1920s–1930s. Scientific works on Judaica], vol. 2 (Moscow: Sefer, 2013), pp. 346–85.

20 *СССР на стройке* [*USSR in Construction*], nos. 3–4 (1935).

21 Among other important photographers of this era in Borobidzhan were Valerii Girshovich, Haim Greenberg, and Leonid Gershkovich. The Russian Ethnographic Museum includes documentation on the life of Jewish settlers in Birobidzhan on its website: online.

22 The Open List website provides comprehensive information on the victims of political repression in the Soviet Union: "Яков Смертенко" [Yakov Smertenko], *Открытый список политических репрессий* [Open list of political repressions]: online.

23 According to the official statement provided by the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) in the Jewish Autonomous Region at the author's request on April 22, 2020. No additional information was found in the regional FSB archives.

RÉSUMÉS

Français
À partir de photographies trouvées, cet article retrace l'activité du photographe Yakov Smertenko, actif dans les années 1930 à Korosten, dans le Nord de l'Ukraine. Peu d'informations subsistent au sujet de Smertenko, dont l'atelier était spécialisé dans le portrait. Soupçonné d'activités contre-révolutionnaires, il fut condamné à mort sous le régime stalinien, en 1938. L'autrice dresse à travers lui le portrait d'une génération de photographes juifs actifs sur les territoires de l'Ukraine, dont il ne nous reste aujourd'hui que d'infimes traces.

English
Based on found photographs, this article traces the career of Yakov Smertenko, active in the 1930s in Korosten, Northern Ukraine. Little information remains about this photographer, whose studio specialized in portraits. Suspected of counterrevolutionary activities, in 1938, Smertenko was sentenced to death under the Stalinist regime. Through him, the author paints a portrait of a generation of Jewish photographers active in Ukraine's territories, of which only minuscule traces now remain.

INDEX

Mots-clés
photographie, art ukrainien, art soviétique

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Ukraine

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XXIe siècle, années 1930

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Alisa Lozhkina is an independent art critic and curator from Kyiv, Ukraine, currently based in the San Francisco Bay Area. She served as deputy director and chief curator at Mystetskyi Arsenal (2013–17), worked as *Art Ukraine*'s editor in chief (2010–16) and has curated numerous art projects in Ukraine and abroad. She has published several books, including *Permanent Revolution: Art in Ukraine, the 20th to the Early 21st Century* (ArtHuss, 2020; it has also been translated into French). She is a PhD candidate in History at the Central European University, Vienna.