JEWS IN TWENTIETH CENTURY EASTERN EUROPE

A History Told in Six Female Jewish Voices

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Photo credit: Bezrezne in the 1930s. Biblioteka narodowa, CC0 1.0

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The twentieth century brought monumental changes and unprecedented challenges to the East-European Jewry. Its story is told here in the voices of six Jewish women, whose lives were marked by its turbulent course.

Although the cataclysm of the Holocaust overshadows the twentieth century as the major caesura, one which is often seen as the end of East-European Jewish history, the transformations in the Jewish world began much earlier than that; nor was the Holocaust the final chapter in the Jewish history of the region. The voices of six Jewish women of different generations will guide us through the century, providing a glimpse into the Jewish experience through their unique and intimate perspectives.

Assimilation

The turn of the twentieth century brought unprecedented chances for Jewish women. Better access to education, emancipation and ongoing assimilation enabled many Jewish women to reach leading positions in the artistic, literary and academic circles, among others. Some of them were active champions of this change, taking a public stance in the issues that concerned women. Irena Krzywicka, nee Goldberg, born in 1899 into an assimilated family of Jewish leftist intellectuals, was one of them. Having graduated in Polish philology from the University of Warsaw, she became one of the most important feminist writers and activists in Poland. Publishing material on female sexuality, reproductive rights, and safe access to abortion, among other things, she became one of the most controversial and scandalizing female voices of the century. In her autobiography, written at the age of 93, she painted the image of a happy, exciting, and fulfilled life of a woman at the height of her career, whose life became shattered by the outbreak of WWII.

I had a very long life … I lived through all possible misfortunes, not the Holocaust itself, but I lost almost all those I loved. They say about me that I was a star. A star of the salons. I was considered to be pretty; I led an interesting and colourful life. I had wonderful, devoted friends that I loved dearly. Antoni Słonimski was one of them, then, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz … Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński played a huge role in my life. He was my maitre a penser, my teacher and guide. What was amusing, and actually paradoxical, was that I used to know almost the entire Polish school of mathematics … I knew so many people in my life… I knew not only Polish writers, but also many French literati … I knew Pope John XXIII … After the war … I lost nearly all my relatives; I was walking on graves. I thought I was not going to survive it, that I would not be able to live on…But I'm still alive, damn it, and I keep on living and I keep on living.

Irena Krzywicka cited in Agata Tuszyńska: Krzywicka. Długie życie gorszycielki, Kraków 2011, 31–34. English translation by the author

Irena Krzywicka. Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, CC0 1.0

The Holocaust

The Holocaust ruined the lives of both the assimilated and the traditional Jews. One of the most poignant female voices that related the anguish as well as the sense of loss and betrayal experienced by East European Jews during the Holocaust was Zuzanna Ginczanka (Sara Polina Gincburg). Born in Kyiv in 1917, she moved to Warsaw at an early age to pursue a writing career as a poet. After the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, she escaped to Lviv, where she remained in hiding until 1942, when she was denounced by a Polish woman, Zofia Chomin. Managing to escape, she relocated to Kraków, where she was denounced again, arrested and executed in 1944. One of her most well-known poems, "Non omnis moriar," speaks about the plunder of her personal belongings that followed her first arrest. It is one of the most poignant documents of non-Jewish complicity in the genocidal dispossession and violence that enfolded across East-Central Europe during the Nazi occupation.

„Non omnis moriar“

Non omnis moriar — my proud estate,
Table linen fields, staunch wardrobe fortresses,
Acres of sheets, precious linens
And dresses, bright dresses will survive me.
As I leave no heir,
Let your hands rummage through Jewish things
Chomin, woman of Lwów, brave wife of a spy,
Swift informant, Volksdeutscher's mother.
May they be useful to you and yours, not some strangers.
"My dear ones" — it's no song, nor empty name.
I remember you as you, when the Schupo came,
Remembered me. Reminded them of me.
So let my friends sit with goblets raised
To celebrate my memory and their own wealth,
Rugs and tapestries, candlesticks, bowls –
Let them drink all night, and at dawn,
Let them begin to search for gemstones and gold
In sofas, mattresses, quilts and rugs.
Oh, how they'll make quick work of it,
lumps of horsehair and sea grass stuffing,
Clouds of torn pillows and eiderdown quilts
Will coat their hands and turn their arms to wings;
My blood will tie these fibres with fresh down,
And transform these winged ones to angels.

Zuzanna Ginczanka: Non omnis moriar, in: Michał M. Borwicz (ed.), Pieśń ujdzie cało... Antologia wierszy o Żydach pod okupacją niemiecką (Centralna Żydowska Komisja, 1947). English translation from: http://www.70voices.org.uk/content/day50

Zuzanna Ginczanka. Muzeum Literatury,
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The post-holocaust void

Starting in 1944, as the Red Army was progressing westwards, the first East European shtetls were liberated and the first Jewish survivors, who had saved themselves by going into hiding, in partisan units, or in the Soviet hinterland, began returning home. The image of void and destruction that their reports carry give a sense of the overwhelming tragedy that touched countless Jewish communities in the region, but also of the survivors' efforts to commemorate and document the atrocities. For most East-European Jewish survivors, life on the ruins of their pre-war shtetls was impossible. Between 1945 and 1947, circa 150,000 Jews, or two-thirds of the post-war population of survivors, left Poland alone, heading to Palestine, USA and other locations.[1] Sara Bilianko and Yocheved Piven from the town of Berezne (in today's Ukraine) took the decision to emigrate, too. In the memorial book (yizkor bukh) of their shtetl, published in 1984 in Israel, they recall the moment of their first post-war return to their hometown.

When the partisan fighters were merged with the liberating Russian army in November 1944, we were discharged from the partisans and sent to Kiev. With the liberation of Berezne we passed through several towns in Volhynia. We arrived in our Berezne, and our eyes could not grasp what we saw – the town was forlorn and empty of Jews. The destruction was horrible and indescribable, the Jewish houses were deserted and destroyed and those which remained intact were occupied by strangers. It's impossible to recognize this town, that only five years earlier flourished. We didn't ask where the Jews were – our fathers, brothers, sisters. We, around forty Jews, who were wondering around the ruins of the widowed town, knew that their bones are buried in the pits, in big holes. Yet, we were afraid to go there alone, it was not before a governmental committee of Jews and Russians came to inspect the graves that we went to the graves of our fathers and children. We found a levelled piece of land, without any trace of a mound. We removed the surface of the ground and revealed a grave packed with male corpses. The bodies were placed one on top of the other in layers and between the bodies there was plaster, and around, next to the edges of the graves, there were bodies sitting. In the second grave women were buried, almost in the same position, and, in the third grave, we found children's skeletons. Our parents and dear relatives, whose life was brutally taken by the evil men, our heart exploded from this terrible and frightening sight. At the end of the inspection, we reconstructed the graves with our own hands, placed some soil around them and erected a tziun [monument], without knowing whether it would be preserved. We stood broken around the graves and shed tears. After saying the Kaddish, we left the place. The story of Berezne had ended.

In G. Bigil (ed.) Mayn shtetele Berezne, Tel Aviv: Berezner Society in Israel: 1984, p. 161. Translated from Hebrew by Yechiel Weizman.

Post-war Jewish Life

Only a few Jewish survivors decided to stay in East-Central Europe after the war. If they did, they often moved to metropolitan centres, where they hoped to find access to Jewish infrastructure and better chances for social mobility. Many of them, traumatized by the experience of the Holocaust and the continuing post-war antisemitism, cut themselves off from theirJewish identity and assimilated fully into post-war socialist society. Only a small minority of Jews continued their lives in the former shtetls. Given that Jewish religious life, especially in the Soviet Union, was severely limited, and places of Jewish communal life, such as synagogues and cemeteries, were repurposed across the whole region, Eastern European Jews looked for new ways and venues to experience a sense of community. Apart from the familial context, often the only communal practices that connected post-war Jews to a Jewish world outside their locales were the commemorations of mass shootings, which gathered survivors and their children from different parts of the Soviet Union, and sometimes from abroad. In Iŭje (in today's Belarus), the anniversary of the massacre on May 12, 1942 provided a high point of Jewish life in the town. Tamara Baradach, born 1949 in a mixed Jewish/non-Jewish family, remembers how it was celebrated:

Holocaust survivors at the shooting site in Iuje, Belarus, 1983. Privatarchiv von Abba Kawa, Free access - no reuse

> *For us, children, the days of May 11th–12th were a holiday that we would always look forward to .... This was the day when all those who survived came to Iŭje. And they would talk, and I could hear this language, which I didn't understand, Yiddish ... All these survivors would come to our place ... For us it was a day of a family visit, because we had no families. Polish children would go to church, Tatar children into a mosque, and we wouldn't go anywhere, only to the cultural center at the former synagogue. And we celebrated no holidays. We only had this one day of sorrow and sadness, but also joy – because our family would come to visit .... My mom and dad would call all those survivors "boys", "our boys". And when we were growing up, we always thought that they were our uncles. And we addressed them as such. We thought these were our father's brothers, and these were actually the survivors of Iŭje. And when they addressed my mom, they would call her Aunt Nyura, even though she was the same age as they were. They just wanted to call her "auntie" because they had no families: no aunts, no uncles, no parents. They were all buried in one pit.*
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> *Tamara Baradach, born in 1949. The interview was collected during the research project "Mapping the Archipelagos of Lost Towns" by Ina Sorkina, 08.07.2020 and 21.12.2020. The research was funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. English translation by the author.*

Emigration

Precarious Jewish lives reconstructed in post-war Eastern Europe were repeatedly disrupted by outbreaks of antisemitic violence and the antisemitic campaigns rolled out by the socialist power holders. The most devastating among them took place in 1968 in Poland, when, in the wake of the Six-Day War, a wave of student protests triggered an anti-Jewish upheaval that forced at least 15,000 Polish Jews into exile. Janina Bauman, nee Lewinson, born in 1926 in Warsaw, was among the people who had to leave Poland at that time. In her memoir she describes in detail the atmosphere of fear that the anti-Jewish statements of the Communist

Party's officials triggered in the generation of Jews who still remembered the Holocaust.

Title page of the memoir by Janina Bauman. Free access - no reuse

> *The last day of January 1968 began a caesura in my life and that of my family, even though we did not realize it back then yet. That day, the censors decided to cancel the theatre performance of Adam Mickiewicz's Forefathers' Eve at the National Theatre. This provoked stormy protests of students and intellectuals … Students … were demanding the freedom of expression, and protested against censorship and state security organs, they also condemned the racism of the official propaganda that was blaming the protests principally on Jewish students. On March 19th, in the evening, there was a meeting of Władysław Gomułka with the Party activists. The TV was broadcasting it live … finally, they got to the point that the public seemed to have been waiting for since the*

beginning of the meeting. 'Last year, during the Israeli aggression against the Arab states, a number of Jews demonstrated the will to leave for Israel and join the war against the Arabs. There is no doubt that this category of Jews, Poland's citizens, is not emotionally and rationally bound with Poland, but with Israel. To those who consider Israel to be their homeland, we are ready to issue emigration passports.' A buzz went through the hall. ... Applause, feet stamping and exclamations: "Down with the Zionists" and ... "Your end is near, pack your suitcases" drowned the rest of the speech. The atmosphere at the Congress Hall started smelling of a pogrom. Fear overwhelmed us. In a minute, the meeting will come to an end, and the Party activists will go drinking, the mob will exit the streets of Warsaw to deal with the Zionists, with a full blessing of the Party. ... We fell into a panic. ... My daughters gathered all the heavy and sharp objects we possessed—a huge ashtray, the only sharp knife, a wooden head of an African warrior in a spiked helmet and a few sturdy cooking pots. The view of this arsenal amused us, although there was actually nothing to laugh about.

Janina Bauman, Nigdzie na ziemi: Powroty: Opowiadania, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Officyna, 2011, pp. 147-156. English translation by the author.

Jewish Revival

The wave of emigration that followed 1968 led to a further demise of Jewish communal life in Poland. Many Jewish institutions including schools, charities, publishing houses, and theatres, closed down. Many of the Jews who still remained lived fully assimilated lives, often concealing their Jewish identity even from their spouses and children to protect themselves from antisemitic persecution. Yet, with time, more and more Polish Jews, raised in secularized or fully assimilated families, began retracing their family history, educating themselves about Judaism, and exploring their Jewish identity. Author and film-maker, Katka Reszke, born in 1978, was one of them.

Katka Reszke. Katka Reszke, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

When I was about sixteen years old, I started "becoming Jewish." I read everything I could find in Polish and in English about Jews and Judaism, and I talked about Jews and about Judaism at home and in school. My high school friends started calling me a Jew. ... I discovered a number of odd rituals and customs my great-grandma used to practice. Nobody knew what they meant, and it was not until I studied Judaism that I could actually decipher the meaning behind them. Without going into details, some of the "strange" things my great-grandmother used to do were keep her milk and meat dishes separate and follow strict rules when baking challah bread, including the laws of hafrashat challah—removing a piece of the dough from the batch, and covering the two challah loaves with a cloth. She had only one elusive answer to any questions her children or grandchildren asked about the obscure rules: "It's just a custom." She knew the customs from her mother—my great-great-grandmother—and in fact we

suspect today that perhaps it was my great-great-grandmother who made sure that the family's Jewishness would eventually be successfully obscured. She could not have known that a few generations later I would come along and mess with her plan. After all, Great-Grandma had a point when she used to call me meshuggeneh, which means "crazy" in Yiddish.... In my early twenties, I ended up immigrating to Israel, where I lived for almost five years... As a largely secular person today, I continue to bewilder many Jews and non-Jews alike with the fact that I continue to perform many Jewish rituals, that I shake the "four species" on the Jewish holiday of sukkot, that I make kiddush over wine, or that I refuse to work on shabbat. My grandmother as well as my parents turned out to be fully sympathetic to my decision to pursue a Jewish affiliation, and to my amazement and pride, my parents chose to declare double nationality—Polish and Jewish—in the recent Polish national census.

Katka Reszke, Return of the Jew: Identity Narratives of the Third Post-Holocaust Generation of Jews in Poland, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019, pp. 18-20.

The twentieth century carried a promise for East-European Jews. But it also failed all hopes, bringing havoc, death and destruction to the Jewish world. It brought Jewish women the possibility to pursue their professional careers and express themselves in the public realm. But it also brought loss, trauma and unprecedented violence that scarred the Eastern European Jews for generations. Even in the aftermath of the Holocaust, however, Jewish life did continue in the "bloodlands" of Eastern Europe and, despite continuing antisemitism, Jews found new ways to maintain communal bonds, carry on their traditions and maintain their Jewish identities in this unquiet part of the world.

Footnotes

1. Grzegorz Berendt, Życie od nowa: Instytucje i organizacje żydowskie (1944-1950) in Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk-Grabowska (eds.) Następstwa zagłady Żydów Polska 1944-2010, Lublin: UMCS, 2012, 191-214.