

*Premiers savoirs de la Shoah*, ed. Judith Lindenberg, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2017), pp. 334.

by *Antoine Burgard*

This collection of essays draws on and enriches the growing body of works that reject or, at least, add nuance to the idea of a silence about the Holocaust before the 1960s. It does this by documenting early knowledge production of the “Destruction” (*khurban*) – a term that most authors rightfully favor to avoid other anachronistic names. Several contributors have pioneered this historiographical trend, especially Samuel Kassow and Laura Jockusch, while others are developing it further.<sup>1</sup> The book’s ambitions are clearly laid out in the first pages of its introduction: it aims to historicize Holocaust testimonies – “*objet évident*” (p. 7) – by examining the prehistory of the ‘era of the witness’ and focusing on the Polish Jewish world. This choice to focus on Polish Jewry – which neither the book’s title nor its abstract reflect – could have been further explained, beyond the sole quantity of available material “without equivalent in Europe” (p. 9).<sup>2</sup> This limitation is, however, nuanced by the various contributors’ efforts to insist on the collective nature of the act of writing, editing, collection, and preservation (p. 14-15) and to capture the “vast transnational network” (p. 17) that developed during and immediately after the genocide. Looking beyond the spatial borders of Poland and its Jewish communities, the book also challenges the disciplinary boundaries between history and literature and the artificial and *a posteriori* distinction between early historiography (“*première historiographie sur le génocide*”) and testimonial literature (“*littérature de témoignage*”).

The book’s structure in three sections is not always self-evident but does not affect the reading. The first section predominantly focuses on trajectories of authors and their writing: Peretz Opoczynski that “virulently” documented the everyday life and complex mosaic of the Warsaw ghetto (Samuel Kassow); Oskar Rosenfeld and Jan Karski, whose understanding of the ghetto as a “world” is thoroughly examined by Catherine Coquio who brings into dialogue Hannah Arendt, Michael Foessel, and Abraham Cytryn, among others; and Michel Borwicz, who wrote *Écrits des condamnés à mort sous l’occupation nazie* in 1953 (*Writings of Those Sentenced to Death Under Nazi Occupation*) and whose trajectory from

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Simon Perego, *Pleurons-les. Les Juifs de Paris et la commémoration de la Shoah, 1944-1967*, (Ceyzérieu: Champ Vallon, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Translations are mine.

literature to history is analyzed by Judith Lyon-Caen. Borwicz's book, Lyon-Caen demonstrates, can be seen as a pioneer in its French context but "comes less as a surprise" if understood in its Polish Jewish context (pp. 82-83). In the second part of the first section, Arnaud Bikard examines the work – "essential because somewhat originating from the margins" (p. 110) – of Avrom Zak and explores in detail his experience of survival and displacement in the Soviet Union, first as a refugee and then as a prisoner of the Gulag. Carole Ksiazenicer-Matheron focuses on Leib Rochman, author of *Mit blinde trit iber der erd* (*With Blind Steps upon the Earth*), and discussed his work in the light of others, from Terrence des Pres to Paul Auster. Laetitia Tordjman explores the trajectory of Oser Warszawski that wrote *Rezidentsn* in 1943, an account – "both immediate testimony and novel" (p. 128) – of his survival in France until his evacuation to Rome in September 1943. In the final contribution of this section, Anna Ciarkowska interrogates the influence of Lwów and its multicultural dimension – what she terms, using her own coinage, "lwowism" – on the writings of Piotr Rawicz. She argues that reconstructing the vanished world of the city can help better understand the life of the writer, especially his youth.

In the second section, Laura Jockush gives a detailed overview of early Jewish historical commissions and documentation centers in France, Poland, and Germany. One of the pioneers of the field, Jockush concludes her chapter by putting forward potential avenues for future research, especially the necessity to assess the relations between the various initiatives and the impact of non-Jewish institutions (p. 185). The contribution of Cecile E. Kuznitz is a useful account of the work of YIVO between 1940 and 1953, during which period the institution tried to help European Jewry, document the destruction, commemorate the victims but also "look towards the future by focusing on its new American homeland" (p. 205). Like Jockush, Kassow, and Schwarz, Kuznitz's chapter is her first work available in French. The section ends with a contribution of Aurélia Kalisky, who looks at Abraham Levite's introduction to the proposed Auschwitz collection – a long excerpt is reproduced in the first pages of the chapter – and examines the complicated trajectory of the text, often edited, shortened, and translated from one language to another (p. 213).

The third part of the book explores more specifically two crucial spaces of knowledge production about the Destruction, Buenos Aires and Paris. Its first section focuses on the series "*Dos poylische yidntum*" (Polish Jewry), published between 1946 and 1966. By analyzing the transnational networks that developed through the series, Jan Schwarz interrogates the myth of "the genocide as the end

of Yiddish.” The series, he argues, “embody the diversity and abundant production of Yiddish culture during the twenty years that followed the Holocaust but also its complete invisibility outside its own linguistic and cultural boundaries” (p. 242). This invisibility should not erase the essential role such work played in the recomposition of Yiddish culture in Hebrew and English. Malena Chinski looks at the role of Marc Turkow, one of the main instigators of the series, and thoroughly examines his correspondence. Through this material, she highlights many unknown components of “*Dos poylische yidntum*”’s two decades of existence. She insists on the massive influence of the Claims conference financial support, especially after 1955. The Claims’ narrow understanding of what surviving the Holocaust meant – the individual and direct victim – clashed with Turkow’s idea that all Polish Jews were collective survivors of a “vanished world” (p. 254). Judith Lindenberg offers a close reading of several books of the series that are all “writings of historians” but not always “writings of history” (p. 257). By doing so, she restores the multiple identities of their authors (writer, resistant fighter, victim, and more) and the various fields they were involved in (history alongside sociology, literary criticism, and others). The second part of this section focuses on Paris as the ‘center of the Yiddish world.’ Constance Pâris de la Bollardière explores the trajectory and work of Yankev Pat, secretary general of the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC), especially his correspondence between 1946 and 1948. This material reveals the political and artistic activism of Pat and, through him, the important role of the JLC as well as the “entangled relations between the memory agenda and the reconstruction efforts of the Polish Jewry” (p. 290). In his contribution, Simon Perego asks the crucial question of the reception and the uses of this early literature about the Destruction by examining the diverse corpus of texts that was used during Paris-based Jewish commemoration practices between the end of World War II and the Six-Day War. He highlights how such use contributed to a different commemorative approach to the Warsaw ghetto uprising, one that relied on emotions and grieving rather than on a celebration of heroism and political engagement. In the last chapter of the book, Éléonore Biezunski analyzes the forgotten *De Teater Shpigl*. This unique theatre journal, created by Aaron Poliakoff in 1951 and whose first chief editor was Elie Wiesel, participated in a wider reflection about the past and the future of the Yiddish language and culture. Through the almost ten years of the journal’s publications, Biezunski unravels the social networks of the Parisian Yiddish world in the aftermath of the war – networks that were animated by a constant flow of “uprooted” artists that were either migrating or on tour (p. 320).

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*Premiers savoirs de la Shoah* offers a detailed depiction of the many early initiatives to document the genocide and the vanished world of Polish Jewry. If the contributions are uneven in their efforts to overcome the boundaries between literature and history, the book as the whole successfully portrays the diverse trajectories of the authors and the wide-ranging nature of their works that constituted a complex corpus crucial to the understanding of the genocide and its memorialization.

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