

Mark L. Smith, *The Yiddish Historians and the Struggle for a Jewish History of the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019), pp. 462.

by Daniela Ozacky-Stern

On February 1, 1945, a woman survivor addressed a large gathering of the Histadrut (Labor Federation) in Tel-Aviv, to tell the audience—who heard it for the first time in person—what had happened to the Jews in Europe during The Second World War. She spoke Yiddish, her mother's tongue, and the language of most victims of the Holocaust. Not everyone in the room understood it but those who did were engrossed and deeply moved. Ruzka Korczak was a survivor of the Vilna Ghetto and a former partisan in the nearby forests, a member of Ha'shomer Ha'tzair, zionist socialist youth movement, certainly a heroin in the eyes of the listeners, who were overwhelmed by her stories.<sup>1</sup>

David Ben Gurion, the head of the Histadrut and a few years later the first prime minister of the newly born state of Israel, stood up to speak after her. He started by criticizing Korczak for speaking in “a foreign and grating language”... but could not continue his speech and had to step down, because of the rage that swept the attendees.<sup>2</sup>

This notorious incident was reported widely and thus strongly affected the Israeli attitude towards the Yiddish language and its speakers for years to come. The passionate desire to build a new Jewish nationhood, and a different life from that of the Jews in the diaspora, with Hebrew as its pivotal common language, was at the basis of Ben Gurion's remark.

Given this background, it is no wonder that scholarly works on the Holocaust written in Yiddish were not well received nor widely read in Israel at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> The full version of the speech can be found in the *Moreshet Archive* (located at Givat Haviva, Israel), D.I.441.

<sup>2</sup> Dina Porat, “With Forgiveness and Grace: The Meeting between Ruzka Korczak and the Yeshuv and its Leaders,” *Moreshet Journal* 52 (1992): 14-15; Rachel Rozanski, “A foreign and grating language indeed? The question of Ben Gurion attitude to Yiddish after the Holocaust,” *Iyunim Be'tkumat Israel* 15 (2005): 463.

Moreover, most of the “Second Generation” children born in Israel, America and around the world to Holocaust survivors had not mastered this “foreign” language and could not read these works nor use them for research in later years, until now.

Mark L. Smith took it upon himself to do justice to five historians who were Holocaust survivors themselves and wrote pioneering books and papers on the Holocaust in the early years after the war. Despite being pioneers in this academic field, they have not been properly acknowledged due to the language of their writing—Yiddish. Smith analyzes their methodologies and their unique “Jewish way” of telling a story and puts their works in the wider context of writing Jewish history in Yiddish in the 20th century.

The historians he refers to are Philip Friedman, Isaiah Trunk, Nachman Blumental, Joseph Kermish and Mark Dworzecki. All are briefly introduced in the first chapter, which provides some personal details and summaries of their careers before the war. The author claims that “each historian merits an individual treatment, but as this study relates to a group phenomenon, I have preferred to allow the details of their lives to emerge within the themes to be discussed” (p. 22). They all shared historical awareness and sense of urgency, and despite their personal suffering—or perhaps because of it—started right after the war to collect testimonies, documents, and evidences, so as not to leave any detail unremembered.

Friedman, who had earned a doctorate in history in Vienna in 1925 and was already a well-known and active historian before the war, became the first director of the Central Historical Commission of Poland (CJHC), established as early as November 1944. Blumental, previously a researcher of Jewish ethnography, joined him while in Lublin and so did Kermish, who had gained his doctorate in Polish history two years before the war. Trunk, Friedman’s former student, joined them in early 1946 when he came back from exile in the Soviet far East.

The four of them became known as “the leading historians of the CJHC.” Together with Rachel Auerbach, one of the few survivors of the Oneg Shabat documentation and research organization which was active in the Warsaw Ghetto,

they were able to collect and organize over 6,000 survivors' personal testimonies, laying an important infrastructure for future research.<sup>3</sup>

Mark Dworzecki walked in a different path. A medical doctor who worked in the hospital of the Vilna Ghetto during the war and later was deported to concentration camps, he managed to escape a death march in April 1945 and settled in Paris. There, he published his first study on the Vilna Ghetto in Yiddish,<sup>4</sup> which according to Smith became “one of the most ubiquitously cited sources” on this place (p. 31).

Smith points out several important and unique characteristics of the body of research created by these five scholars: it dealt with the victims and not with their perpetrators; it investigated *life* of Jews under the Nazis, rather than their *death*; it did not consider the Holocaust a rupture in Jewish life and history but rather its continuation; their approach was “non-martyrological” and anti-lachrymose and focused on the Jewish struggle to sustain life. As Isaiah Trunk argued: “until the moment of final destruction, the ghetto *existed* for two-three years... For us, the question of how the ghetto lived is no less important than the question of how it was murdered” (p. 65).

I find this approach very refreshing and brave and would like to argue that some of the early works of Holocaust history written by survivors in Hebrew in Israel display similar features. I refer to books about the Jewish resistance by former partisans in the forests of Lithuania and Belarus, which were written in the 1940s and 1950s by authors like Ruzka Korczak, Chaim Lazar, and Moshe Kahanovicz.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Oneg Shabat* (Joy of Shabbat) was an underground archival initiative headed by historian Emanuel Ringelblum, that was active in the Warsaw Ghetto, with the aim of collecting information and documenting the Jewish lives in the ghetto. Three survivors of this clandestine archive were Rachel Auerbach, Hersz Wasser and his wife Bluma Wasser. They all immigrated to Israel over the years.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Dworzecki, *Yerusholayim d'lite in kamf un umkum* (Paris: Folksfarband in Frankraykh, 1948). See its details in p. 396, in “Bibliography of Mark Dworzecki.”

<sup>5</sup> Ruzka Korczak, *Flames in the Ashes (Lehavot Bafer)* (Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1946); Chaim Lazar, *Destruction and Resistance (Horban Vamered)* (Tel Aviv: Massuot, 1950); Moshe Kahanovicz, *War of the Jewish Partisans (Milhemet Hapartizanim Hayehudim)* (Tel Aviv: Ayanot, 1954).

I tend to agree with Smith's argument that the new field of Holocaust historiography has been created by survivors, whereas Jewish historians who managed to leave Europe before the war and continued their career in historical research in America or in Israel did not write about the Holocaust but rather focused their attention "only to earlier periods of Jewish history or to locations outside of Europe" (p. 110). Israeli historian Boaz Cohen discusses this in length in his book about the development of Holocaust research in the early years in Israel.<sup>6</sup>

Resistance was another significant issue discussed by the Yiddish historians after the Holocaust, "the question of questions," as the author puts it (p. 230). Here too, Smith points to a different approach in the works under discussion. He shows how they were the first to identify other ways of resistance apart from taking arms. They worked at a time when Jews were accused of passive behavior during the war and were blamed for going to their death "like sheep to the slaughter."<sup>7</sup> These Yiddish historians were the first to point out that spiritual steadfastness, struggling daily for existence and survival, or holding on in hiding were no less heroic than actively fighting in the ghettos and in the forests, and they wrote about it passionately. Moreover, they dared to discuss the fact that the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, for example, and the organization of partisan groups in the forests had come only in the final stages of the war and asked the question why were they so late? Friedman and Trunk published an article in April 1953, a decade after the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, in which they analyzed and explained the various obstacles to the mounting of an armed Jewish resistance and came to the conclusion that "Despite Jewish resistance coming so *late*, it came *much sooner* than that of other oppressed people" (p. 233). Smith identifies two waves of discussion around this dilemma in the work of Yiddish historians: the first started in 1945 and lasted until 1953 as a response to the internal dialogue of the survivors themselves; the second came later, after the Adolf Eichmann trial in 1961, and

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<sup>6</sup> Boaz Cohen, *The Future Generations. How will they know? The Emergence and Development of Israeli Holocaust Research* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2010) (in Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> This phrase refers to those who supposedly went to their death without resisting, and Jewish Holocaust survivors were accused of passivity in the face of Genocide, See Neima Barzel's article "The Concept of Bravery in the Holocaust, From Collective National Memory to Privatized National Memory" *Dapim for the Holocaust Research* 16 (2000): 86-124.

lasted till 1981. In recent years some of these works have been translated and quoted in new research on the Holocaust and Jewish resistance (p. 237).

This is an important point, because as I see it, none of these five Yiddish historians remained anonymous to the general public nor to the Holocaust studies academic community. All of them continued their mission and published important scholarly works on the Holocaust in Hebrew and in English that were much appreciated. Kermish and Blumental joined Yad Vashem (Israel's official Holocaust memorial center), Trunk was affiliated with the Ghetto Fighters House (Holocaust memorial in the north of Israel), Friedman was involved with the Yivo-Institute for Jewish Research, and taught at Columbia University and Dworzecki, who was active in Holocaust survivors' organizations in Israel, established a chair for Holocaust studies at Bar Ilan University and continued to publish works in Hebrew. It cannot be claimed that they disappeared from the Holocaust research scene. And yet, Smith's thorough research and the rich bibliography attached to it are extremely important. Over 100 pages of his book are devoted to a meticulous list of the Yiddish historians' articles, papers, and books, thus enabling readers to understand and appreciate the scope of their contribution. The author hopes "to encourage greater use of the Yiddish historians' work" (p. 319) and he certainly provides the tools for this.

By conclusion, I would like to sum up the uniqueness of this phenomenon of survivors-researchers-historians, who arose out of the ashes and vowed to tell the unbelievable story of the Holocaust in the language of its victims. As Smith emphasizes time and again, their most significant contributions were:

1. Writing about the history of the Jewish councils (Judenrates) in the ghettos.
2. Pointing to the continued influence of prewar political affiliations in defining relations among Jews under Nazi occupation.
3. Stressing social differentiation and class conflict.

4. Identifying forms of unarmed Jewish resistance during the Holocaust and highlighting them.
5. Proving the Holocaust to be an integral continuation of former processes in Jewish history, rather than considering it as a separate field of research (pp. 316-317).
6. Relying on testimonies, eye-witness accounts, and memoirs, in the absence of documentary sources (p. 315).

I can testify from my own experience researching Jewish resistance in the framework of partisan units, that all of the above is still valid in Holocaust studies today. Strange and even tragic, in my view, is the fact that politics did play a major role not only in the ghettos but also among fighters and partisans and has later affected the historiography and remembrance of the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup> Testimonies given in later stages of the survivors' lives, especially video testimonies, such as the valuable collections in the *USC Shoah Foundation Visual Archive* and *The Fortunoff Archive* at Yale University, are again used as solid sources after most of them had passed away. Also, it is common knowledge among researchers today that even though the Holocaust was a mega-event in Jewish history, it does not mean that it is a separate part of it, in the same way in which it is an integral part of the Second World War itself.

In the end, it becomes obvious that these Yiddish historians were indeed pioneers in their vision, perceptions and methodologies and I salute Mark L. Smith for giving them the platform and honor they deserve in his notable work.

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<sup>8</sup> On this issue see my article: Daniela Ozacky Stern, "Executions of Jewish Partisans in the Lithuanian Forests: The Case of Natan Ring", *International Journal of Military History and Historiography* 40 (2020): 219-244.

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