

Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews. Choice and Survival during the Holocaust*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 296.

by Dan Zeits

“We know that the Jews were murdered,” Yehuda Bauer, the doyen of Israeli Holocaust scholarship, wrote several years ago, “We have a fairly detailed account of who murdered them, where, how and when... But what we want to know, and do not know, is how the Jews lived before they were murdered, what their reactions were in the face of the sudden, unexpected, and, for them, inexplicable assault on their lives by a power whose policies they did not and could not understand.”<sup>1</sup>

Evgeny Finkel’s *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival during the Holocaust* gives one of the possible answers to the issue raised by Bauer. The book shifts the focus from the Holocaust perpetrators to their victims<sup>2</sup> and deals with the variety of “choiceless choices,” the Jews were faced with during the most tragic period in their history. “Whether to escape or stay put, enlist in the Jewish police or join the resistance, that was the choice of the Jews. Limited and hopeless as it usually was, it was still their choice” (p. 18). Finkel puts forward two major and closely related questions in this regard: what made individual Jews choose particular behavioral strategies, and why did the distribution of these strategies vary across localities?

As an instrument to answer these questions, the researcher developed his own typology of four main strategies used by the Jews: cooperation and collaboration with the Germans, coping with the danger and trying to survive without leaving, evasion via escape, and resistance. Relying on over five hundred witness testimonies, Finkel applies this typology for the examination of behavioral patterns adopted by Jews in three large Eastern European communities: Minsk, Kraków, and Białystok during the Holocaust. The selection, he explains, was determined by a number of important similarities shared between these communities: the prewar size and the percentage of Jews

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<sup>1</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>2</sup> It is not by chance that the book’s title alludes to the terms ‘ordinary men’ and ‘ordinary Germans’ developed by Christopher Browning and Daniel Goldhagen respectively regarding Holocaust perpetrators.

in the total population, the enclosed ghettos established in each one of the three cities and the similar ghetto institutions, the level of the Nazi security services' control on the ground and the subjection to the Nazis' total extermination policies.

The thorough analysis conducted by Finkel shows, that all four types of strategies could be found in each one of the three cities under discussion. At the same time, both the distribution of these strategies and their content varied significantly from one place to another. In opinion of the researcher, these variations on the individual and community levels were primarily impacted by the factors originating in the pre-Holocaust period: cohesiveness of the community, level of Jewish political activism, integration into the broader society, and the patterns of state repression in each city. All of these factors, in turn, were shaped by one crucial variable: the city's pre-war political regime.

*Ordinary Jews* has a number of limitations both in the research scope and in the selection of sources. Most of them are deliberate and pointed out by the author. "This book," Finkel writes, "... is first and foremost an attempt to understand the Jews' behavior and therefore, by design, it almost entirely excludes important actors such as the Germans and, to a lesser extent, the local Slavic population..." (p. 18). Consequently, the regional variations in the tenor and tempo of the implementation of the Final Solution are mentioned only in passing; their possible impact on the difference in behavioral patterns of the prisoners between Minsk, Kraków, and Białystok ghettos is not discussed in depth.

This narrow approach also determined the selection of the sources. The main part of the study is based almost entirely on the post-war accounts of the Holocaust survivors. The other types of sources are referred only in very rare cases. "My goal is to understand internal Jewish perspectives and decisions. For that reason I intentionally do not rely on materials produced by the perpetrators," Finkel explains (p. 15). In fact, this exclusion covers all the wartime records of a non-Jewish origin, and not of the Nazis alone. Further triage of sources derives from the language skills of the author. Specifically, the post-war testimonies in Yiddish or German are also omitted from the analysis.

The impact of the limitations on the analysis might be illustrated by several examples, of which I will select only one: the treatment of the evasion strategy adopted by the Minsk ghetto prisoners. According to Finkel, after the large-scale killing action in July 1942, "...the ghetto was spared for just over a year. During that time, realizing that their days were numbered, up to 15,000 Jews tried to escape into the forests, where Soviet partisans had established their bases. [Of those]... thousands, possibly as many as 10,000, managed to reach safety and survive" (p. 30). The author repeatedly refers to this extremely high estimate of 15,000, without specifying its source, as it serves to confirm the more general thesis about the pre-war Jews' integration into non-Jewish society as a major factor in contributing to the decision to evade. In the context of the above quotation, the estimate seems surprising: according to the Nazi records, after the action in July 1942, no more than 10 to 12,000 Jews remained in Minsk, the vast majority of which were killed throughout 1943.<sup>3</sup> Unlike that, the assertion about 10,000 escapees from the Minsk ghetto who joined - or, alternatively, attempted to join - the partisan units appears in several dozens of publications, academic and popular alike,<sup>4</sup> - sometimes referring to the testimony of Hersh Smolar, the head of the ghetto underground (Finkel also relies upon it).

However, the thorough analysis of the archival data on the matter including the muster rolls of the Byelorussian Staff of Partisan Movement (BSPM), yields a very different result. The total number of the Minsk ghetto prisoners in the units (including those who subsequently fell in partisan combat) might be put at not more than 1,500. This estimate is also well confirmed by the early testimonies of mid-1940s. The additional, and no less important, conclusion can be reached after examination of the escapees' distribution among the units: about 70% of the partisans from the Minsk ghetto were in the detachments organized by Jews themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> For details, see Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944*, (Hamburg: Hamburger Ed., 1999), 736, n.1257, 740-2.

<sup>4</sup> For example, as Massimo Arico claims, "Secondo una stima accreditata, furono circa 10.000 gli ebrei di Minsk che riuscirono a fuggire dal ghetto, raggiungendo la foresta ed unendosi ai gruppi partigiani: il che significa - in rapporto ai circa 820 giorni di esistenza del ghetto (dal 20 luglio 1941 al 21 ottobre 1943), una media giornaliera di circa una dozzina di evasioni, attuate grazie ad una diffusa rete di complicità instauratasi tra gli ebrei e i bielorusi." Available at <http://www.ordnungspolizei.org/j259/it/articles/4-5-atto-il-polizei-bataillon-322-e-l-eccidio-di-minsk-1-settembre-1941.html>.

Concerning Finkel's research, the above data leads to certain conclusions. First, it is a good illustration for the point made by the author: "it is the narrative that emerges from a large number of testimonies that proves a hypothesis, not this or that individual quotation, no matter how colorful" (p. 207). Specifically, the attempt to estimate the number of the Minsk Jews in the partisan units must rely on the whole scope of available materials, rather than on the late statement by Smolar.<sup>5</sup> Second, though the high level of integration into the broad society is an important factor to consider, it is only one side of the coin. The point mentioned in dozens of testimonies, given for the most part by culturally assimilated and well-integrated people, is that despite the general awareness of the Germans' genocidal plans, which arose in Minsk very early, there was no place to escape: the locals at best were not ready to hide their Jewish neighbors, friends, and colleagues, and at worst turned them in to the Germans. For these people the possibility to join the partisan units established by the Jews themselves was the only chance to stay alive. The fact, that 70% of the Jewish partisans from Minsk and, at my estimate, about half of all the ghetto survivors saved that way, allows us to view the entire process - the establishment of the national units and sending the guides from there to get the people out of the ghetto – as the wide scale self-rescue activity, for which the intra-ethnic social networks were, probably, more important, than the inter-ethnic ones.

More generally, it can be assumed, that the research limitations, for the most part, stem from the collision between its primary strength of comparative analysis on one hand, and the relatively small overall size of the study on the other. In that situation, the author must inevitably narrow down his discussion on each one of the three ghettos and the source-base used for that purpose. Thus, some of the important issues are either omitted or mentioned only occasionally.

Despite its limitations, *Ordinary Jews* deserves every appreciation. This is indeed a type of research that the Holocaust literature lacked. The methodology applied by Finkel to reveal the similarities and differences in the behavioral patterns across localities may be helpful for any future study dealing with the Holocaust victims.

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<sup>5</sup> The 10000 estimate appears in Smolar's memories only in 1970s; it is missing in all of his several detailed accounts from mid-1940s to 1960s.

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