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The Literary and the Historical

Reflections on a Jewish Memoir

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JOURNEY TO A NINETEENTH-CENTURY SHTETL: The Memoirs of Yekhezkel Kotik. Edited with an introduction and notes by David Assaf. Translated from the Yiddish by Margaret Birstein and edited by Sharon Makover-Assaf. Raphael Patai Series in Jewish Folklore and Anthropology. Detroit: Wayne State University Press in cooperation with The Diaspora Research Institute, Tel Aviv University, 2002. Pp. 540.

Given the enthusiastic response to *Mayne zikhroynes* (My Memoirs, 1913) by acclaimed writers such as Sholem Aleichem, prominent historians such as Simon Dubnow, and renowned critics such as Bal Makhshoves (Yisrael Elyashev), making the English version was not a trivial task, particularly since Yekhezkel Kotik (1847–1921), the memoirist, was hardly known as a man of letters to his contemporaries in early-twentieth-century Warsaw. Rather, they knew him as an outstanding Jewish social activist. In the years between 1890 and 1920, Kotik conceived, established, and supported a number of self-governing social institutions such as *Achieser*, a social relief society, *'Ezrat ḥolim* (sick fund) and *'Ezrat yetomim* (orphans' fund) societies, *Linat tsedek* (shelter for travelers), *Moshav zekenim* (old age) society, and others—while the moment they were put into operation he withdrew himself from his projects, leaving the honors and privileges to the self-proclaimed founders.

Kotik had always been socially engaged: his efforts to create a network of Jewish voluntary social relief societies to accommodate the wave of Jewish émigrés from Lithuania in turn-of-the-century Warsaw was a continuation of his consistent, though unsuccessful, attempts to create similar organizations when he was still a shtetl teenager. Suffice to mention that, following a misleading editorial in *Ha-maggid*, Kotik took pains to collect money, buy land in Palestine, and establish the organization of colonizers, all long before the pioneering Bilu came into the fore. Though

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not all of his social relief societies survived inner Judaic wars and financial hardships, at least one of the public institutions Kotik established had a long-lasting impact on Warsaw Jews. His 31 Nalewki Street Milk Café operated for twenty years as the quintessential social club for Lithuanian immigrants, self-styled Warsaw street politicians, destitute Vilna maskilim, vagabond Zionist preachers, clandestine Bundists, budding Yiddish journalists and literary critics—that is, for anybody who, with a penny in the pocket, sought hot inexpensive food and no less hot political controversy. Kotik himself was far more immersed in sociopolitical debate with his customers than involved in running his small business. When Kotik emerged with the first volume of his Yiddish memoirs, only a few believed that the robust, tall Nalewki café-owner was also an astonishingly gifted Yiddish writer. David Assaf, the editor of Kotik's memoirs (who already published a two-volume Hebrew version),[1] noted the amazement of Kotik's contemporaries, epitomized in Sholem Aleichem's rhetorical question to Kotik: "Where have you been till now?"

Assaf's preface answers Sholem Aleichem's query. It furnishes a detailed portrayal of Kotik's native Kamenets (Grodno province); an analysis of historical circumstances that shaped Kotik's worldview as a self-made Maskil; a meticulously reconstructed biography; an insightful depiction of the reception of Kotik's memoirs among Yiddish writers and critics; a sad tale of the sour response to the memoir's second volume and of the apparently irretrievable loss (or even destruction) of its third volume; and, finally, reflections on the memoir's importance as a cultural and historical source. Assaf also provides the reader with notes, a list of Kotik's publications, and a selected bibliography on Kotik, by no means a minor accomplishment. Painstakingly reconstructing the table of Kotik's genealogy, he includes a glossary comprising Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian terms, and a very helpful thirty-page bibliography which in itself is a useful publication on the history and culture of an East European shtetl. Moreover, Assaf appends an entire set of self-contained thematic indexes—names, places, and subjects. I would have suggested including a separate, brief index of the classical Jewish sources Kotik cited, thereby emphasizing the pivotal role of *Muwar* (ethical) literature in the *Weltanschauung* of Kotik, a paradigmatic mid-rank nineteenth-century East European Jew.

Assaf entitled his Hebrew edition of Kotik's memoir *What I Have Seen (Ma-she-ra'iti)*, but I think there were good reasons to alter the English

1. Hebrew second volume is in print with *Merkaz le-ḥeker toldot ha-yehudim be-polin u-morashtam* at Tel Aviv University.

edition title to *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl*. Kotik's role as narrator in his memoir is far more complex than that of a witness who simply depicts what he sees. Whether Kotik intended his "journey" as history or not, it is evident that Kotik was unable to "see" with his own eyes a good half of the events, arguably the most interesting ones, that made their way into his narrative. He could not witness his grandfather blackmailing a town rabbi in order to secure a good future match for Kotik's father; nor could he see his father, scandalously, leaving his grandfather's mitnagged (rabbinic) household for a ḥasidic court. He could not have watched his grandfather courageously defend the town tax-payers from an annoying Russian government inspector, nor could he hear his grandfather consoling Polish gentry after the liberation of serfs in 1861 and the Polish uprising of 1863. Likewise, the revealing narrative about the relations between his father, a devoted ḥasid, and his mother, who came from an illustrious mitnagged family, or the fascinating story of Berl-Bendet, his grandfather's son-in-law, a leaseholder for a Polish landlord Sikhowski—these and other wonderful stories were beyond the reach of Kotik's own memory. Yet Kotik painstakingly depicts all these comings and goings, providing the most detailed entourage, creating sophisticated dialogue, furnishing the insightful remarks of a stage director, even if not reproducing the exact emphatic tone of the participants. For the sake of comparison, one should remember that the second volume of Kotik's memoirs did not succeed with his ample readership even though, for the most part, it depicted events experienced by Kotik himself. The vivid events portrayed in it, such as the pogrom in Kiev or Kotik's picaresque travels between Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov, and Warsaw in search of a stable salary, could not save the second volume from literary failure.

Hence there is a need to complement Assaf's otherwise thorough analysis of Kotik's historical context with an assessment of Kotik's text from a literary perspective. Such an assessment is pivotal, since Assaf himself tries to depict Kotik as a "storyteller." If one translates genre theory into a language more adequate to sociological and historical discourse, one might argue that Kotik made his straight yet by no means narrow journey into a narrative about himself through a thick layer of Jewish history. A metaphor based on Sholem Aleichem's writings helps to characterize Kotik's literary ambitions. Imagine a person who began the epos of *Kasrilevke*, the paradigmatic shtetl, and ended with the intimately autobiographical *Funem yarid* (From the Fair). Indeed, Kotik turns to his own life-story only at the end of *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl*. His first effort to organize a coherent cell of Talmud students, his rebellious, almost revolutionary, attempt to launch a strike against an obstinate and greedy keeper

of the *bet-midrash,* his discovery of those parts of the Tanach "inappropriate for study" in a traditional community, his strong desire to abandon his family and attend the famous Volozhin yeshivah, and his ambiguous anti-ḥasidic reflections—all these personal events are carefully interwoven into a broader narrative that constitutes only the last third of his "journey." The first two thirds of this memoir cover what could be cautiously called the Jewish collective memory. Relying on dozens of voices other than his own, Kotik portrays the history and social stratification of his native Kamenets, the relations between Jews and Poles, the encounter between the traditional Jewish community and the Russian social and military administration, and the crisis of Jewish-Polish relations. Eventually, the Jewish historical narrative brings Kotik to the discovery of himself, and he finally becomes part of his own narrative.[2] This transition from communal to individual memory performs a crucial role in Kotik's self-discovery. Hence the idiosyncratic features of Kotik's memoir: Jewish historical memories arranged around the shtetl, Kotik's personal memories, and his own autobiography. Perhaps this genre led the critics to praise the first volume of Kotik's book, while the further genre modifications triggered their censure or reticence. Apparently Kotik was not unaware of the genre innovations of his first volume: as if realizing that he was altering this genre by eliminating a good deal of the "collective memory," he mentioned at the beginning of his second volume that he was a little bit "overrepresented" in it.

Assaf's Hebrew title for Kotik's memoirs (*What I Have Seen*) suggests a question: why insist on this tantalizing claim, when the majority of the events depicted in his memoirs Kotik had never seen? The answer to this question may lie in the sphere of literary style: whatever he narrates, Kotik realizes as if he were immediately present. Indeed, Kotik makes theatricality his major stylistic device.[3] He compensates for his absence from most of the events he portrays by attempting to revive them in the form of a play. Kotik's narration is a making visible, evident not only in his theatrically designed scenes of Jewish-Polish life but, among other things, in his consistently introduced visual metaphors, comparing, for

2. To compare, modern autobiographies go in the opposite direction: for example, Trudy Alexi's *The Mezuzah in the Madonna's Foot: Marranos and Other Secret Jews—A Woman Discovers Her Spiritual Heritage* (San Francisco, 1993) starts as a personal narrative of a search for self-identity only to transform itself into a historical and sociocultural research.

3. On the rise of theatricality in late-nineteenth-century European literature and thought, see Martin Puchner's *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore and London, 2002), 6–18.

example, ḥasidic mores and those of army soldiers. In fact, was it not strange that in his desire to look and see, Kotik went as far as to commission a glass entrance door for his Warsaw café—a partition that made the café customers both actors and spectators vis-à-vis passersby. He does the same in the memoir: if not he himself, then at least his reader will "watch" his stories. Theatricality, Kotik's main stylistic device, places the memoir not so much among other memoirs written by fin-de-siècle Jews as in the context of the advanced literary endeavors of the early twentieth century—and, indeed, in the context of the *shund* (lit.: scornful and worthless waste), a melodramatic Yiddish mass-culture production that made theatricality its major artistic device.[4]

In his memoirs, Y. L. Peretz went in the opposite direction, making the *inner* spiritual growth and intimate experience of a protagonist the focus of his autobiographical memoir. Peretz captures the response of a fragile inner self to the empirical reality of his native Zamość, whereas Kotik emphasizes the reaction of those on an imaginary stage. Peretz's world is monocentric, if not egocentric, while Kotik's is predominantly polycentric. Peretz contemplates the world through the prism of an introverted and disturbed teenager, while Kotik observes himself through the eyes of others, mostly adults. As a formidable positivist bereft of introspection into the human psyche, Kotik has no desire to "reimpose authorial control over the unconscious and accidental forces that shaped his development."[5] When he approaches the psychological (such as the dramatic relationship between his parents), he drops the curtain. As in the memoir of Mendele Mokher Seforim (Shalom Yakov Abramowitz, 1835–1917), "at most, his individual experience is presented as paradigmatic of the ordeal of some larger collective."[6] Kotik's shtetl is filmed by Cecil B. DeMill, not by Milos Forman.

A memoirist need not read history books to realize that historical anecdotes and family legends are historically valuable. The same cannot be claimed in the case of food, clothes, monies, and other minutiae of routine Jewish life that Kotik painstakingly amassed, making them an intrinsic part of his memoir and fostering through them its unparalleled literary freshness. While Kotik—as he somewhat cunningly and self-indulgently

4. On *shund* as melodramatic theatrical escapist entertainment in Yiddish theater, see Michael Steinlauf, "Fear of Purim: Y. L. Peretz and the Canonization of Yiddish Theater," *Jewish Social Studies* 3.1 (1995): 44–65.

5. See Ruth Wisse, "Introduction," in *The I. L. Peretz Reader* (New York, 1990), xxix.

6. Alan Mintz, *"Banished from Their Father's Table:" Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington, Ind., 1989), 18.

mentioned in his letter to Sholem Aleichem—claimed that his familiarity with Jewish literature left much to be desired, he was neither unaware of the literary and cultural endeavors of Eastern European Jewish intellectuals nor was he ignorant of contemporary Russian literature and Yiddish translations from other languages. Kotik did read a lot, and books, not only *sifre kodesh,* occupied a paramount place in his life. Given Kotik's abrupt maskilic strivings, as well as his later involvement in hot cultural debates and possibly literary disputes held in his Nalewki Street coffeehouse, it seems more likely that Kotik was aware of contemporary European literary trends, public debates on Jewish ethnography, and new Russian literature.

Whatever Kotik penned about his precocious yet unaccomplished maskilic career, one should cast no doubt on his knowledge of the literature of Haskalah. He read Jewish philosophers avidly when he was still wandering between Bialystok, Moscow, Kharkov, and Kiev. He subscribed to major maskilic newspapers, *Ha-maggid* and *Ha-melits,* and read out loud from them to his fellow Jews. He ironically nicknamed himself "Menahem Mendel," referring to the well-known personage of the classic Sholem Aleichem story. In passing, he remarked that one of his protagonists at a certain point fell in love "up to her ears, to use the expression of Shomer" (alluding to Nahum Meir Szaikewitz, 1849–1905). Kotik recollected a "sorry old nag" of the itinerant booksellers and compared it to Mendele Mokher Seforim's *The Mare*. In addition to these explicit literary references, there are other, less evident but no less significant allusions testifying to an expanded reading list underpinning his memoir. The story of a certain Yosele, the only son of a widow, who became an idiot after being kidnapped and drafted into the Russian army, is likely Kotik's variation on a popular plot borrowed from the Yiddish translation of parts of Grigorii Bogrov's novel *The Notes of a Jew*.[7] Indeed, in his self-presentation Kotik conscientiously concealed his cultural literacy. It is particularly astonishing that he was able not only to read the Russian-language *Zaria* and *Kievlianin* newspapers but also to grasp the between-the-lines anti-Jewish implications of their reports on 1881 pogroms! In view of Kotik's intense reading as well as his involvement in his "literary club" discussions over a glass of milk or coffee, one could argue that Kotik found himself in the epicenter of the Russian-Jewish and Polish-Jewish cultural broth and was fully aware of its ingredients.

7. On the importance of the separate Yiddish edition of parts of Bogrov's thousand-page novel dedicated to a kidnapped Jew, Yosele, see Olga Litvak, "The Literary Response to Conscription: Individuality and Authority in the Russian Jewish Enlightment" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1999), 196.

Hence the complexity of Kotik's memoirs. To say that Kotik penned them by relying *ad libitum* on the whims of his memory, or by faithfully reproducing "life as it is," is to deceive oneself. Kotik's memoir is superbly designed. He follows a premeditated structure, keeping in mind the book in its entirety, that does not allow him to digress. Whatever his memory prompts him, there always is a metal more attractive—namely, his memoir's genre and structure. To illuminate the contours of well-designed structure, it suffices to glance at the first and longest chapter of part one, which has the following sequence carefully mapping the town's hierarchy: (1) *szlachta* (Polish gentry) and relations between its members; (2) *szlachta* and the Jews; (3) Jews and the social stratification of the shtetl; (4) local Jewish tycoons; (5) five upper-class Jewish families of the town; (6) rabbis; (7) yeshivah students (Kotik dubs them *prushim*); (8) schemers and informers; (9) suburban Jews; (10) low-level private teachers (*melamdim*); (11) ḥeder boys; (12) non-Jews—assessors and doctors; (13) talmud-torah; (14) a shelter for itinerant beggars (*hekdesh*); (15) visiting preachers (*magidim*); (16) study house (*bet-midrash*); (17) synagogal cantor (*ḥazzan*); (18) cemetery. Although number 12 (non-Jews—assessors and doctors) apparently contradicts this hierarchical sequence, the overarching scheme seems too clear-cut and premeditated to suggest a naïve writer behind it.

The overall structure of the memoir supports this hypothesis: Kotik starts with the sociocultural portrayal of the shtetl and its inhabitants, then moves to his family, and finishes with modest insights into his personal story. He opens up with the collective and closes with personal memory. Some twenty-five years come to represent several centuries of premodern Polish Jewry and its suddenly becoming modern, and then Russian. He roots his narrative in a Polish-Jewish symbiosis and finalizes it in the wake of the 1863 Polish uprising when this symbiosis comes to naught. He focuses on his grandfather's family and brings the memoir to a close when his grandmother dies, thus underscoring the old-fashioned patriarchal/matriarchal character of the world he depicts. At the outset of his polycentric narrative he makes audible all the voices of the shtetl, and at the end brings out his own. He transforms his narrative of the good old shtetl into the autobiographical self-portrait of a maskil as a young man, to paraphrase the parlance of Shmuel Werses.[8] The "collective" steadily metamorphoses into the "personal" against the backdrop of the

8. See Shmuel Werses, "Portrait of a Maskil as a Young Man," *New Perspectives on the Haskalah*, ed. S. Feiner and D. Sorkin (London and Portland, Ore., 2001), 128–43.

demise of a relatively stable shtetl culture that gradually became the past. If this is not a Jewish version of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901), then what do we call a novel?

Assaf cautiously mentions that some of Kotik's contemporaries were aware of an editor or a literary supervisor who combed Kotik's verbose style or even rewrote the whole text on his behalf. Yet whoever penned or edited Kotik's memoirs, it would have been inconceivable that he could have portrayed the social hierarchy of such Polish private towns as Kamenets without an intimate idea of how to depict a shtetl, ethnographically, culturally, and socially; and equally impossible without at least some familiarity with what was occurring in early-twentieth-century Jewish ethnography. In regard to Jewish history and ethnography, Kotik read much more than he claimed; for example, as if relying on Dubnow's concept of eighteenth-century Ḥasidism, Kotik dubs it a "revolution" in the life of Jews—I doubt that he could find this sort of appraisal in regular maskilic (and predominantly anti-ḥasidic) literature. Perhaps Kotik, an avid reader of the Jewish press, also knew that S. Ansky (Shloyme Zanvl Rapoport, 1863–1920), as well as other members of the Jewish Society for History and Ethnography (*Evreĭskoe ĭstoriko-etnograficheskoe obshchestvo* [founded in 1908]), was planning an expedition to the *shtetlekh* of the Pale of Settlement. The participants of the expedition designed (and sent out) a detailed questionnaire concerning each and every minutia of shtetl life, including Kotik's most choice themes. Could it have been possible for Kotik to get hold of Ansky's expedition questionnaire, drafted by the crème of the crème of Russian-Jewish ethnographers, and in some peculiar manner answer it in his memoirs? If not, was he at least aware of the statistical expedition of the early 1890s to the Jewish towns in Poland, in which Y. L. Peretz participated? Whatever the answer to these questions, students of Jewish memoir and autobiography will necessarily have to integrate Kotik's memoir into an East European Jewish ethnography; the wealth of amassed data in Kotik's memoir makes his book as valuable for a scholar of East European Jewish culture as later compilations dedicated to the shtetl. In addition, one can hardly avoid noting that Kotik's memoirs and Ansky's expedition were both based on the assumption that the shtetl manifests a vanishing world that requires redemption, either through a mnemonic effort, as in the case of Kotik, or through an ethnographic effort, as in the case of Ansky.

The main strength of the memoir—as well as of the "historically attested" Kotik—is in its invaluable social, cultural, and economic data. The relations between government inspectors and Jewish leaseholders, leaseholders and the taxpayers, vodka smugglers and governmentally ap-

pointed owners of *propinacja* (alcohol distilling) business, obstinate communal leaders and the younger generation of town-dwellers, mitnagged fathers and their Ḥasidic sons, Ḥasidic fathers and their mitnagged sons, mocked rabbis and their respected wives, the Jewish mob and the town's nouveau riche, make Kotik's memoir indispensable for a social historian. Kotik's shtetl, portrayed not without the strong impact of Marxist class theory, is informed by social clashes between various estates (*sosłovia*) of the Russian empire. In this sense it should be placed alongside Yankev Dinezon's novel *The Crisis* (1905), which "goes beyond the limits of economic reality and elucidates the growing conflict between the traditional Jewish system of values and the moral instability caused by capitalist development."[9] As for its insights into what Isaac Rivkind once dubbed *yidishe gelt*, it would be fascinating to assign a student to read Kotik's memoir in order to trace a table of prices, salaries, expenses, family budgets; to compare rank-and-file leaseholder families, slaughterers, and village settlers; to contrast the 1840s and the 1860s; and to examine the evidence of memoir proper to the economic data obtained from, say, Russian sources.[10] This could be a first-class paper. As for history, the historicity of Kotik's memoir is its genre. It is a story of the advent of an enlightened Jewish individual, avid for social action, broad education, vernacular languages, a subtle stance vis-à-vis Judaism, and independent thinking. In other words, the tale of a modern East European Jewish intellectual who emerged from the thick of the traditional, very much premodern Jewish communal and patriarchal world. In this sense, Kotik's memoir is a must for a course in Jewish history as well as Jewish autobiography. And last but not least, Kotik's memoir is excellent reading for students of Yiddish fin-de-siècle literature, for it suggests a pivotal methodological question asked by Marcus Moseley: Is it possible to write an autobiography without the narrative models provided by literature? A question to be answered in the negative.[11]

9. Mikhail Krutikov, *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity, 1905–1914* (Stanford, Calif., 2001), 26.

10. Think too of the possibility of tracing Kotik's obsession with money issues and the similar obsession of Ber Bolechow, the eighteenth-century East European memoirist (*The Memoirs of Ber of Bolechow*, translated from the original Hebrew MS with an introduction, notes, and a map by M. Vishnitzer [New York, 1973]), despite Noah Prylucki's criticism of Kotik's pretensions to report a multitude of data (he published his reviews of Kotik in 1913 in *Der Moment*).

11. For more detail, see Marcus Moseley, "Life, Literature: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Interwar Poland," *Jewish Social Studies* 7.3 (2001): 1–51.