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A bookstorehouse of knowledge

By Zohar Shavit

"Bechanuto shel mocher hasfarim: chanuyot sfarim yehudiot bemizrah eropa bamachatit hashniya shel hame'a ha-19 ("At the Bookseller's Shop: The Jewish Book Trade in Eastern Europe in the Nineteenth Century") by Hagit Cohen, Magnes Press, 181 pages

Years before the name Steimatzky became synonymous with Hebrew bookstores, privately owned shops in Eastern Europe were already selling books in Hebrew. These stores began to develop in the latter half of the 19th century and reached their zenith in the 1880s and 1890s. Some specialized in maskilic (Enlightenment) writings, others in religious books, but all of the stores usually carried both kinds of titles, along with belles-lettres, popular fiction, non-Hebrew literature and popular science in Russian, German, Polish and Yiddish.

In her fascinating book, Hagit Cohen describes the growth of these bookstores in Eastern Europe. From her account emerges a microcosmic view of Jewish cultural life in the region, a picture of Jewish existence that sheds light on how Jews lived and what they cared about: what they chose to read, what seemed to them interesting and what did not, to what extent they found popular science appealing, and how many of them fell prey to the convoluted plots of Schund ("trash") fiction.

The avid hunger for secular literature seized the Jewish public at a time when books played a central role in the struggle for Jewish public opinion. The republic of letters was then a primary arena of the culture wars, first between the Jewish maskilim, followers of the Enlightenment, and their opponents; between those who supported materialist scientific views and those who fervently denounced Darwin and his fellow heretics; and later between

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rival ideological and political camps.

Following Western scholarship, Hagit Cohen's basic assumption is that books played a central part in Europe's cultural life during the 18th and 19th centuries. Studying the sociology of the book and the role it played in social and historical processes is considered essential not only for gaining insight into literary life, but also for comprehending the changes that a particular society underwent.

central role

A study like Cohen's, which is a history of bookstores, naturally touches on issues that pertain to the history of publishing. And although this is not a central argument of Cohen's book, her work suggests that it took decades for Hebrew publishing to become a modern publishing system in the European sense - that is, for it to have a "division of labor" between the author, the publisher, the printer, the bookseller, the book-buying public and the public who read the books in libraries. The history of the bookstores suggests that they played a central role in the Hebrew publishing industry at its pre-modern stage.

The bookstores originated in publishing houses that gave customers on-site reading privileges and even let them borrow volumes for a fee. Religious books could also be read at the beit midrash (house of religious study) and in some cases borrowed as well. Societies established in various townships took upon themselves to buy books for the public. Alongside small local organizations such as Safa Berura in Pinsk or the congregation of the Ohel Moshe Zionist synagogue in Warsaw, the Hevrat Mefitzei Haskala society operated all through Eastern Europe. It helped to buy books for the Jewish public, establish libraries and subsidize certain of the bookstores.

Stores whose main or secondary objective was to sell books did not emerge until later, toward the latter half of the 19th century. However, these stores at first looked very different from the ones we know today. The bookstore was often part of the owner's household, as in the case of bookseller Avraham Zuckerman of Nalewki St. in Warsaw, who also founded a small candy factory in his apartment to augment the family's livelihood.

The appearance of several dozen Jewish bookstores in Eastern Europe was part of a broader process that characterized the culture of the book in czarist Russia and Congress Poland. In 1864 only 63 bookstores existed in Russia, whereas by 1874 their number had increased nearly tenfold (to 611); during 1893-1894 estimates placed their number at some 3,000. Even when Jewish bookstores concentrated on selling books, they never did only that. The stores were a place where book lovers could meet and talk; this was especially important for the maskilim among them, who could not gather in the beit midrash, did not want to meet in a tavern and could not afford to convene in a coffeehouse. Memoirs from this period contain a wealth of reminiscences attesting to the role that bookstores played as a place for meeting and exchanging views. It was said of the author Asher Ginsberg (Ahad Ha'am) that he took his first steps in Odessa in Ephraim Deinard's bookstore, where he first met members of the Bnei Zion group and used to purchase books on philosophy, history and the study of languages.

Meeting place

In the memoirs of Gershom Bader and Abba Achimeir, the bookstore is described as a meeting place for avid readers and as a framework that provided intellectual stimulation and a chance to catch up on newspapers, journals and new books. "For many years, [Aron] Faust's store was the only center of Jewish culture in town ... In his store you could hear about what was new in town, glance at new books, and read Jewish press from all over the world," Bader

years for raping woman soldier in his unit

21:30 Senior Iranian official suspected of spying on Iran's nuclear program

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writes.

The bookstores functioned as lending libraries, and their owners took part in publishing projects, published books themselves and printed others. They also handled book purchases from publishers, writers and printers in Eastern Europe and sometimes in Central Europe, especially in Berlin, and later in the United States as well, after Yiddish began to flourish there. The booksellers maintained an elaborate network of connections in Eastern Europe and abroad, and sometimes they used their contacts not only for bookselling purposes, but as a way of becoming involved in public affairs, including helping agunot (women whose husbands refuse or are unavailable to grant them a divorce). The bookseller Eliezer Yitzhak Shapira, owner of a bookstore on 7 Nalewki Street in Warsaw, published advertisements offering help to such women in the Hamegid newspaper and apparently had a few successes in this area.

The bookstores not only provided books to the residents of their city (and all of the large bookstores were located in the large cities - Warsaw, Odessa, Krakow, Brisk [Brest-Litovsk], Lvov and Vilna), but served as retail centers for traveling book salesmen, who sold books and other goods door-to-door or in synagogue courtyards. Already by the 1860s Alexander Zederbaum, editor of the Hamelitz newspaper, claimed that the most efficient way to sell books was through the peddlers: "There is nothing better than using those who carry books from house to house along with straps and fringes, for they alone know how to appeal to the people to buy from them, and one cannot rely on the booksellers' shops, for in all the trouble of seeking a livelihood, people are not inclined to go about seeking new books."

To the reader accustomed today to buying books in many different stores - not to mention online - the 19th century book trade appears very tedious indeed. Readers could only learn that books even existed from the press or from catalogs issued by the store owners. Catalogs could usually be purchased directly from the bookseller. Odessa bookseller Ephraim Deinard sold his catalogs in 1884 for 10 kopeks. Aron Faust provided the catalogs free of charge to longtime customers, but charged new ones 20 kreutzers. Faust even noted with disapproval those young readers who collected catalogs even though they could not afford the books themselves. However, it is lucky for us that the 19th-century book trade relied on these methods. To scholars of book history, the catalogs are an invaluable source of information: not only an important bibliographic source, but one that allows us to track the dissemination of books as well as the demand for them.

Books were expensive; they had to be ordered and, since they were sold without bindings, needed to be bound as well. The reader could choose from among various binding options: paper, cloth, leather, pseudo-leather, as well as more ornate options, so that the same book might look very different depending on the buyer's budget. The high cost of books was also an obstacle to eager readers, who usually did not get any discounts; these were given to booksellers only, if at all. Many readers could not afford to keep a library at home and had to settle for borrowing books. The maskil Binyamin Mandelstam noted in his book that the high price of Talmudic tracts made them difficult to purchase, and many buyers used to pay for them in installments. The drop in the prices of religious books (suggested by Cohen's analysis of the comprehensive catalogs issued by Aron Faust in Krakow) led to a considerable rise in the volume of sales. Yiddish books also sold better after their prices dropped, but this development came hand in hand with a hike in the prices of books in Hebrew, which sold less and less well as Yiddish grew more popular. The differences in book prices reflected not only the varied sizes of different editions, but also the difficulty involved in producing the book; a popular novel in Yiddish cost much less to print than a science book in Hebrew.

Bookstore catalogs offer a unique and interesting perspective on book history. We can learn from them about such issues as supply and demand, changing ratios of Yiddish and Hebrew books, the rise of Hebrew literature for children, the secularization of literature and the backlash against it later - and also about the role played by market forces, the falling status of Hebrew science books and belles-lettres in the early 20th century and the rise of popular novels in Yiddish. One memoirist recalls how readers of the poorer classes would arrive every Friday at Yitzhak Funke's Vilna bookstore, where for 5 kopeks they could borrow a Yiddish book or magazine for the Sabbath, to be returned within one week: "Everyone rushed to finish his part precisely in midweek, knowing that others were waiting for it; and when one [reader] brought in the third volume and found that the fourth had been detained by a reader for another week, he would be very sorry to have to stop reading the novel just at the most interesting point."

The meteoric rise of popular Schund literature in Yiddish forced booksellers to make room for it on their shelves, even if they disliked or downright loathed this kind of writing. Deinard, who considered himself a maskil and refused at first to let these popular Yiddish booklets into his store, recounted in his memoirs how he had to give in to the public's demand out of concern for his livelihood: "I myself, when opening my store in Odessa in 1881, never even considered bringing this filth into my home, and only after a whole year, when I had learned that without it I would be out of business, was I forced to bring this garbage into my home."

Whether they were closer in nature to traditionalists or to the maskilim, the bookstores all carried the same kind of inventory, differing from each other in emphasis rather than in essence. An advertisement published by L.B. Warhaftig, a bookseller from Brest-Litovsk, in the Hatzfira newspaper in 1878 describes his holdings, which are typical of other bookstores as well: Russian works and Hebrew literature available on loan or for sale, and textbooks for sale only. Or, in his words: "Recently I have collected in this house past books by illustrious authors, to be read for a pittance or for sale according to the catalog price, and I invite the learned and distinguished in our town to come to my store, so that they might see and delight in the goodness of fine and helpful books."

Non-religious vs. religious

Cohen's comparative analysis of two bookstores, Zvi Hersch Necheles' religious-orientated traditional Jewish store in Lvov and Ephraim Deinard's Enlightenment-oriented shop in Odessa, suggests that they carried similar selections of non-religious books in Hebrew and Yiddish. Both sold popular science books in Hebrew and popular fiction in Yiddish. Necheles carried relatively many religious books in Yiddish (18 out of 619), whereas Deinard's list featured only one. The main difference between the two stores lay in the ratio of religious books to non-religious ones. In Necheles' store 68 percent of the books were religious writings, whereas in Deinard's they accounted for only 24 percent of the inventory. The stores also varied greatly in the number of non-Hebrew titles they sold. Deinard kept many books in other languages, giving a place of prominence to works of Jewish philosophy, especially in German. Necheles had no non-Hebrew holdings at all, probably because most of his customers were traditional Jews or young men with nationalist affinities who longed for the Hebrew language.

In addition to books, the stores carried newspapers in Hebrew, German and Russian, and some of them sold literature in German, especially the popular historical novels of Marcus Lehmann, Hermann Reckendorf and Ludwig Philippsohn. German literature commanded a place of prominence even in the late 19th century, and sometimes the stores sold German translations of classics, such as the works of Jules Verne and Emile Zola (as well Sherlock Holmes stories and books about the Wild West, translated into Polish).

All of the store owners had to cope with multiple problems caused by the state of the book market. They especially suffered from the system of subscribers (Prenumeranten), who paid an advance sum that helped fund the publication of a book. Some buyers forgot to pay a book's full price after having received it for a smaller preliminary payment. The costs of shipping by post or train were fairly high, and the habit of intermediary salesmen not to pass on the payment after receiving the books did not make matters any easier.

However, the greatest obstacles were posed by the authorities. As we can see from the survey of Jewish reading habits that was published in the Russian newspaper Kievlianin (and probably conducted by the convert Fedorov, the censor for Hebrew books in Kiev), the authorities considered the Jews' reading habits and book culture to be of considerable importance and imposed strict censorship to keep the books from conveying subversive conservative or Hasidic ideas that might hamper the Jews' "Russification" and their integration into civic life. These censorship problems, not shared by gentile booksellers and printers, placed the Jewish booksellers at a disadvantage. Moreover, the booksellers had to deal not only with the long and difficult process of obtaining a publishing license, but with laws forbidding them to sell non-Hebrew books. Cohen's work and other studies suggest that these restrictions were not always enforced, but they were certainly a nuisance and made life more difficult for the booksellers.

At the beginning of the 20th century, with the appearance of larger organizations and wealthy investors, the competition within the bookselling market became fiercer, and the existence of the small bookstores was placed in jeopardy. A typical feature of their "swan song" was the dispute between the Achiasaf publishing house and the widow and sons of the bookseller Zuckerman. Displeased by the opening of an Achiasaf store near their own shop on Nalewki Street, which they thought created unfair competition and a threat to their livelihood, the Zuckermans embarked on a personal smear campaign that would have looked right at home in today's gossip columns. Many of the small bookstore owners could not adapt to the modernization of the Jewish book market and they, or their heirs, had no choice but to close up shop.

Hagit Cohen's book is a fine demonstration of the saying "Tell me what books you buy and read, and I'll tell you who you are." Her research is based on a plentiful array of sources, including bookstore catalogs, the booksellers' personal correspondence, advertisements in the newspapers of the period and memoirs. To her credit, she seems not to have overlooked any source. The rich research attests to the enormous potential of studying the social history of book culture. Although the Jewish republic of books and its history are of central importance for understanding the social history of the Jews in Europe, no comprehensive account of this subject exists to date. With the exception of important works by a number of scholars, including Moshe Rosman, Mordechai Zalkin, Zeev Gries, Shaul Stampfer and Shifra Baruchson-Arbib, the history of Jewish and Hebrew book culture has yet to be written in full.

Cohen's book is a welcome harbinger of progress in this direction, a first and primary project that creates an appetite and desire for more.

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