

Book Reviews

Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl: The Memoirs of Yekhezkel Kotik

Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl: The Memoirs of Yekhezkel Kotik. Edited with an introduction and notes by David Assaf. Hardcover, 540 pages. Published by Wayne State University Press, Detroit, in cooperation with the Diaspora Research Institute, Tel Aviv University.

This engaging memoir, which Yekhezkel Kotik wrote and published in Yiddish in 1913 when he was in his sixties, focuses on the activities of his prominent family and other notable characters in and around the Polish shtetl of Kamenets, south of Bialystok in Grodno province, from the 1830s through the 1860s.

Born in Kamenets in 1847, Kotik's childhood reminiscences are colorful and informative; he demonstrates surprising knowledge of the affairs of people who were already old when he came into the world. His great-grandfather, Velvel, had been the town's *parnas khodesh* (community leader), a powerful post that fell to Velvel's shrewd, intelligent son, Aharon-Leyzer, the author's grandfather. A central figure in the memoirs, Aharon-Leyzer became the town's *sborshchik* (person responsible for collecting taxes from the Jewish community on behalf of the state treasury). With a finger in every pie, the imperious and autocratic figure was also a trusted business advisor to many local Polish nobles and sometimes helped one or another regain a family fortune squandered at cards. "Distilleries for vodka and beer, oil presses, sawmills and mechanized water mills started appearing on the grounds of lords' estates, all of which were the result of Grandfather's ingenious business acumen," his grandson writes.

At the beginning of the era that Kotik writes about, there was a strong feudal quality to Polish society: a few well-placed Jews (like Aharon-Leyzer) profited enormously by acting as intermediaries between the wealthy nobility and the impoverished serflike peasant underclass. Many Polish lords relied on Jews to help them run their affairs, but still treated them with contempt and humiliation; the Jews depended on the lords for economic benefit, but feared and mistrusted them. Civil rights were sorely lacking, and landowners were permitted to flog misbehaving tenants with impunity, even unto death; instructors of Jewish study houses could also be merciless with the lash. In this rough and often cruel milieu, a powerful autocrat like Aharon-Leyzer thrived by using strong and arbitrary measures as required, thus gaining fear and respect from all quarters. Many town officials were convinced that only he could keep the precarious social fabric from unravel-

ing.

"Generally speaking, it is doubtful whether there exists another *such* detailed Jewish description of the relationship between Jews and Polish lords, their mutual interdependence and involvement in each other's lives," editor David Assaf, who provided the erudite editorial notes, comments about Kotik's memoir in an impressive introductory essay.

In the early years, Kamenets was a town consisting of "250 old houses, black and small with shingled roofs," with only 450 Jews listed in the *skaska*—the government registry otherwise known as the *revizski skazki* (book of residents). But Kotik divulges that as many as two-thirds of the Jews went unreported due to the prevalent fear of the military draft. Year after year, just before the arrival of a touring government official, he would warn all the unregistered Jews to get out of town for a few days, then slip the inspector a 200-ruble bribe in exchange for his silence about the irregularities in the official registry. Then the bureaucrat, accompanied by the entire town gendarmerie, would make his rounds from door to door throughout the shtetl.

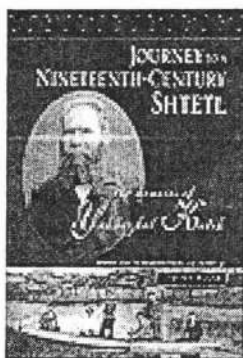
On inspection day many houses were locked up, their tenants fled, and scarcely a living soul was seen in the streets. The place resembled a ghost town—a cemetery.... [But] like every prior year, the inspector left Kamenets after signing the protocol that everything was in perfect order.

Aharon-Leyzer's "talk" with the inspector usually produced the desired result, but one time he felt compelled to slap a particularly stubborn official twice across the face and threaten him with a beating. When it became clear that his nervy gambit had succeeded, relieved town officials praised him to the sky.

Communal officials sometimes added invented names and employed other deceptions to inflate the apparent number of residents in the registries, Kotik writes. The motive was usually to help the townsfolk evade military conscription. In those ruthless and cruel days, kidnappers (sometimes Jewish) roamed the countryside in search of draft evaders whose names appeared on government rolls. As heartbroken parents discovered, the so-called *khappers* could not be swayed by love or money.

Words cannot describe what kind of hearts made of stone those kidnappers must have had. They were a lot more loathsome and hated than the hangman of our day. Every attempt at kidnapping involved atrocious beatings and severe physical injuries. The wailing and weeping of the fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers, and other family members left those callous kidnappers cold and indifferent.

Eventually, the inaccuracies of the communal registries became so pronounced that in 1874 the czar issued a manifesto that the "hidden" (i.e., unregistered) Jews would not be punished if they agreed to register themselves. Commissioners traveled from town to village



across the Pale of Settlement to attempt a more accurate registration.

Kotik's well-rounded reminiscences of Jewish life in the region include a description of the short-lived panic of 1842, when a credible rumor spread throughout Lithuania and Volhin that the government soon would prohibit Jews from marrying before the age of 20. "Whoever had an eight-year-old son or daughter wasted no time in marrying him or her off," he relates. "In order to keep the police in the dark, the marriages took place in utter secrecy and without lavish ceremony." Even in normal times, however, it was rare for a child to reach 15 and still be unmarried. Kotik's uncle, Berl-Bendet, and his wife, who had four daughters and a son, were only twelve-and-a-half years older than their eldest daughter.

Kotik also describes at great lengths the various antagonisms and quarrels that stood between the Hasidim and their philosophical opponents, the Mitnagdim—a rift that also penetrated his own family. Firmly in the camp of the Mitnagdim, Aharon-Leyzer was appalled when his son Moshe turned to Hasidism. He regarded it as a personal tragedy, a punishment inflicted by God and treated him as an outcast. But after Moshe's wife produced a son, Aharon-Leyzer and Moshe were reconciled on the day of Yehezkel's circumcision.

Moshe (fourteen and a half years old) fell weeping into his father's arms and, as often before, begged him to be his beloved father once again. The only thing though, he told his father, that could not be altered was his remaining a hasid. It was something he was unable to give up, not even if he were threatened with death. His father's heart softened, he gave in to his son's pleadings, and peace was restored between them.

A generation later, similar emotional scenes were repeated as Yehezkel rejected the Hasidic way of life and allied himself with the Mitnagdim as his grandfather had done.

Kotik chronicles the upheavals in Polish society, including the liberation of the serfs and the Polish rebellion of 1863 that altered its semi-feudal nature and brought it into the modern age. He also describes the *beit midrash* (study house) rebellion in Kamenets, of which he was the chief architect. Frustrated by the decrepit condition of many older volumes of Talmud, the local yeshiva students boycotted the study hall until they were promised access to some well-preserved Talmudic tomes that had for years been kept under lock and key.

Time lends an enormous poignancy to Kotik's tales. He seems aware that he is describing a world that was irretrievably gone. As Attaf astutely notes, it was modernity—not catastrophe—that brought this world to an end.

By 1912, the rapid pace of modernization and the inroads made by emigration, urbanization, industrialization and secularization made it self-evident to many that the old shtetl was disappearing.

This volume of Kotik's memoirs, the first and reputedly the best of the three volumes that he wrote, met with an

enthusiastic critical reception upon its first publication. "This is not just a book—this is a treasure, a garden. A paradise full of blossoming flowers and singing birds . . . I am crazed with delight!" wrote Sholem Aleichem, the leading Yiddish author and literary critic of the day. Similarly, the warm reception accorded to an annotated Hebrew edition in 1998 prompted Attaf to make the work accessible to English readers. Margaret Birstein of Jerusalem deserves much credit for the fluid English translation. For those interested in the daily life of the shtetl as well as in its folklore and rituals, this volume is bound to make fascinating reading.

Bill Gladstone

Quellen zur Geschichte der Juden in Polnischen Archiven Biographisches Handbuch der Rabbiner

When Angelika Ellmann-Krüger published her insightful review, "Resources Relating to the History of the Jews in the Archives of the Former German Democratic Republic (East Germany)," the publisher, K.G. Saur, planned a seventh volume in the series Ellmann-Krüger discussed, presumably dealing with archival holdings in Poland. That series, however, ended with volume 6. Then the publisher, K. G. Saur, started a new series of two volumes, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Juden in Polnischen Archiven* (Sources on the History of the Jews in Polish Archives),² of which the first volume has appeared.

Its contents are virtually a complete list of all such available archives, including non-governmental ones. Perhaps the only public sources not included are a few at the municipal level that have occasional items not in municipal archives. Often these files are not officially archived and so are not within the scope of the series.³ K.G. Saur's website offers extensive information about both *Quellen* series.⁴ The website notes:

Almost two-thirds of all Prussian and one-third of all German Jews lived in the regions of present-day Poland which were formerly Prussia's eastern provinces. Nevertheless, until now the history of the Jews in the regions to the east of today's German border has remained an area distinctly neglected by research. The reason for this lay in the extreme difficulty, if not sheer impossibility, of gaining access to the Polish archives.

The scope of the series's research was extensive.⁵ The first volume of the Polish series covers the former Prussian provinces in the Polish State Archives in Koszalin/Köslin, Szczecin/Stettin, Gdańsk/Danzig, Elbląg/Elbing, Olsztyn/Allenstein, Suwałki/Suwalki, Toruń /Thorn, Poznań /Posen, Bydgoszcz/Bromberg, Kalisz/Kalisch, Leszno/Lissa and Białystok/Bialystok, including the respective subdivisions and the main archive of older files, Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych (Archives of Older Records) in Warsaw. The first volume has concordances of Polish-German town names, German-Polish town names, a discussion of finding aids for each collection and