

larger society, they hit a Jewish community that had been unalterably transformed in the interim.

The discussion of the law in this analysis goes beyond the number of Jews in the legal profession. Nathans also explores the importance of the law as a tool used by a new cadre of Jewish leaders in order to combat discrimination, to seek redress for victims of assault, and to delineate a conception of citizenship and identity that fused Russianness with Jewishness. Nathans introduces readers to the career of Genrykh Sliozberg, the exemplar of the Jewish advocate articulating a vision of a harmonious Russian-Jewish coexistence. In Sliozberg, Nathans has found the individual who brings together all of the threads of this story: here is a modern, educated St Petersburg Jewish lawyer denied the right to practise and thus forced to turn to Jewish defence, and thereby moved to construct a future reality in which individuals such as himself could find self-realization and fulfilment in Russia.

Benjamin Nathans has written an important and creative book. It is methodologically sophisticated and based on archival research buttressed by a commanding control of a wide-ranging set of secondary and published sources. He has addressed and grappled with large and important questions that explore the experiences of Russian Jewry, and he relates that story to key issues of modern Jewish life and the nature of its evolution. We are indebted to him for his effort.

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YEKHEZKEL KOTIK

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

EDITED BY  
DAVID ASSAF

TRANSLATED BY  
MARGARET BIRSTEIN

(Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002); pp. 540

This first volume of Yekhezkel Kotik's memoirs presents a fascinating and informative picture of shtetl life in the period around 1860. Kotik (1847–1921) is an excellent storyteller who graphically describes his family, his town of Kamenets, and life in the province of Grodno. First published in Yiddish in 1913 as *Mayne zikhroynes* ('My Memoirs'), this English translation by Margaret Birstein has been supplemented by David Assaf's masterful notes.



Kotik depicts many facets of everyday life in the nineteenth-century shtetl such as business, Jewish education, religious life, home life, dealings with the Polish nobles, and secular leanings. The inner conflicts between the hasidim and the mit-nagedim take on special significance for Kotik, because his father joined the small circle of hasidim in Kamenets. He also gives accounts of broader historical events such as the liberation of the serfs and the Polish revolt of 1863.

A reader who has only vague notions of how Jews worked for Polish nobles has much to gain from this book. Kotik's grandfather was a powerful community leader who worked with the local estate owners, held leases on their properties and on vodka sales, and sometimes became involved in their personal affairs. According to Kotik, Lord Sihowski attended a family wedding and 'went into raptures over Shepsl's [klezmer] music, maintaining that he'd never heard the likes of it during his entire life' (p. 276); after that occasion, 'Shepsl and two other players would perform four times a year at the balls given by the Sihowskis for the surrounding gentry' (p. 276).

Kotik is highly critical of the traditional Jewish education he received. The *heder* education seems to have been dominated by rote learning, legends, and whippings. His father—more concerned that he become a God-fearing hasid than that he receive a rigorous training—opposed his wish to study at the famous yeshiva in Volozhin.

Among the many customs Kotik describes are the exorcism of a dybbuk (p. 231) and cholera weddings<sup>1</sup> at the cemetery (p. 383).

Perhaps the most horrific chapter describes the press-gangs (*khapers*; lit. 'kidnappers') who were sent to capture young boys for military service. Yiddish readers may be familiar with a comic portrayal of this phenomenon in S. Y. Abramovitsh's *The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third* (1878). During the Crimean War (1853–6) 8-year-old boys were conscripted, and the sordid reality of this practice is the subject of chapter 9, which tells how Kotik's friend Yosele was kidnapped by a press-gang. When the townspeople caught sight of him again, 'his face was swollen and pale, like that of a corpse. . . . He had become like a log' (p. 236).

Yet David Assaf points out that Kotik's memoirs focus more on the consequences of modernization than on catastrophic events. Unlike post-Holocaust memoirists, Kotik 'did not view his past through the threatening storm of physical destruction' (p. 70).

Kotik tells anecdotes that make it easier to visualize well-known historical events. For example, he describes how the liberation of the serfs was announced in 1861:

On Sunday at twelve noon, when the market was teeming with peasants, the *ispravnik* [district chief of police] . . . read the proclamation out to them.

<sup>1</sup> It was believed that a wedding of young people in a cemetery could halt the progress of a cholera epidemic.



After hearing the proclamation, the peasants went home and refused to work, although, according to the proclamation, they were supposed to do so until the end of the summer. They didn't want to wait until then, and, since the lord was forbidden to flog them, they instigated a revolt. (p. 340)

Kotik then explains how this development impoverished both the estate owners and the Jews. Next he turns to the Polish rebellion of 1863, which made matters even more difficult for the Jewish inhabitants of Kamenets. Although he is not entirely reliable with regard to historical details, Kotik makes up for this in vivid portrayals of the conflict.

Kotik writes at length about the internal Jewish conflict between the dominant *mitnagedim* and the emerging *hasidim* of Kamenets. He points out that, in traditional rabbinic Judaism, prestige was measured by 'lineage of wealth and lineage of learning' (p. 400). Hence 'the penniless and the illiterate felt degraded and humiliated by their treatment in the synagogues and study houses', whereas 'to the simple Jew Hasidism brought genuine happiness. He became worthy' (pp. 400, 406). Yet Kotik himself was put off by the hasidic adulation of the *rebbe*; moreover, he was shocked by the poverty and hunger among hasidic families, in which the men seemed unconcerned about the fate of their wives and children (p. 409). The conflict touches close to home when Kotik recalls how his father fought his decision to leave hasidism.

This English translation by Margaret Birstein (edited by Sharon Makover-Assaf) reads well. The notes and bibliography by David Assaf greatly enrich the text by providing explanatory materials and some critical commentary. Assaf does not blindly accept Kotik's assertions, which sometimes seem hyperbolic. For example, he provides historical data indicating that Kotik's statements suggesting that there was a sharp rise in the divorce rate between the 1860s and the 1890s are inaccurate (p. 475 n. 14).

David Frishman once wrote that, if 'some flood came over the world and effaced from the earth the entire universe of Jewish street life', S. Y. Abramovitsh's fictional works could help a researcher reconstruct that world. It would seem, however, that Kotik's memoirs could serve an equally important role in such a reconstruction.

Kotik's memoirs should contribute to a more thorough understanding of *shtetl* life in the second half of the nineteenth century. In doing so, this book provides a welcome antidote to *shtetl* nostalgia and kitsch.

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