

**Jerzy Tomaszewski, [Review on *Journey to a Nineteenth-Century Shtetl*], *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*, 1 (2006), pp. 86-88**

*Journey to a Nineteenth Century Shtetl, memoirs of Yehezkel Kotik.* Edited with an introduction and notes by David Assaf [...]

The first volume of Yehezkel Kotik (1847-1921)' memoirs entitled *Mayne zichroynes* – which English translation we have got recently; was published originally in Yiddish in 1913 (Warsaw, Gitlin) and in 1922 (Berlin, Klal Verlag). Back then the book met with positive response from the readers. Sholem Aleichem appreciated both style and contents of the book (the current edition includes his letter). Kotik describes the family story starting from his grand-grandfather, born in 1798 and reaches his own childhood and youth in the end of sixties [of 19<sup>th</sup> c.] in Kamieniec – 35 km from Brzesc on the old border between Great Duchy of Lithuania and Crown, in those times Russia, today Byelorussia, where Jews were the majority of the inhabitants.

Second volume was published in Warsaw in 1914 and in Berlin in 1922. The third volume stayed unpublished, and there is no information regarding what happened with the manuscript. Few years ago, when I read part of the first volume, I was trying to find publisher for prospective Polish translation – unfortunately unsuccessfully – nevertheless I consider the book very valuable source not only as far as history of Jews, but also Poland and Byelorussia. It gives the insight on social, ethnic, and political relations on the Polish-Byelorussian borderland in the times of significant social changes (rural reforms, January Uprising, changes in the situation of Jews), which is different from the insight we can find in memoirs of Polish authors - mainly of gentry origins. Local peasants, as we know, did not write memoirs in those times, because they did not know to write.

Kotik wrote his memoirs in Warsaw where he lived with the family. He ran a restaurant, which was his source of income. He was known as a social activist. His children inspired him to write. His intention was to describe the times and environment totally unfamiliar to them and even – to some extent – exotic. The memoirs are a kind of storytelling. It is not systematic relation showing the facts in order, but the author based mostly on his memory. He describes way of life, customs, relations between local Jewish community and Polish gentry (local peasants, which probably spoke Byelorussian dialect occurred in the book only as a secondary issue, mainly as victims of oppression which rebelled when rural reforms were implemented), family events, the author's own story of intelligent and ready to learn boy, who together with his friends gradually brakes away the restrictions of strict religious environment, inner Jewish community's conflict; religious conflict (between Mitnagedim and Hassidim), social conflicts (the author came from rich and important family of town, but was full of compassion to the poor) are important issue of the book as well.

David Assaf in his excellent introduction draws our attention to the fact that the memoirs of Kotik have plenty of chronological mistakes; sometimes contradictory descriptions can be found in different chapters. We should have in mind that Kotik wrote not only about things he saw and experienced by himself, but also incorporated stories which he had heard from others. In more than one instance we can recognize his wish to describe extreme cases both negative and positive, what may be seen similar to nowadays journalism looking for

sensation. Large part of the book consists of descriptions of brutal gentry's attitude to peasants and especially its despotic attitude to Jews, lawlessness and even crime. No doubt that some figures fascinate the author, for instance the landowner who used to beat his serfs brutally to whet before dinner. Nevertheless, Kotik does not forget to mention that there have been also landowners which have had good relations with Jews. Nevertheless he describes only one such a case – probably because this landowner played important role in the life of the author's family.

The situation in the local Jewish community is the central subject of the memoirs. The author's grandfather played important role in the community and had significant influence on the representatives of Russian administration (to far extend thanks to bribery). He co-operated with grange's owners. His authority in the town was established, however sometimes constrained by force. According to Kotik traditional shtetl, usually portrayed in literature in the sublimated way, seems to be community on the one hand consolidated, on the other deeply divided by the conflicts built on the religious, social, and personal background, in which adherents involve Russian administration and not refrain even from denunciation.

Other subject is January Uprising perceived by Jewish community as menace. Majority of Jews does not expect victory, however, in the book appears as well the figure of Jew – Polish patriot, who strongly believes in the success of uprising and deeply regrets its failure. On the other hand gentry's forces entering the town are real danger, and even bigger are the Russian soldiers (especially Cossacks) persecuting everyone who might have any connection with rebellion. The uprising and the former rural reform cause the crisis of grange's economy and collapse of the economic relation between landowners and Jewish town.

Jewish town as portrayed by Kotik is a place of rapid economical changes; the fortunes fall down, new possibilities of money making appear, social relations change. Even of more importance are the changes of social consciousness; secular science and literature influence youth. As for the author it means refraining from the restrictions of the small town, authority of rabbi, tzaddik and local religious power, and entering modern reality. Shtetl and its inhabitants go through the process of modernization.

Some details are significant to the historian in particular. For instance, information about the way of Jews' registration which causes to give much smaller than real number of inhabitants, or about the mechanism of corruption, which on the one hand influenced on stability of Jewish town, but allowed malpractice of power, and even crime committed by landowners on the other hand. Bribery, smuggle and tax's frauds were not treated as dishonesty, they were element of everyday life. Even people with the authority of totally honest persons took part in this reality. I am not sure if range of bribe given by Kotik are true, but the method and the mechanism of bribery seem to be shown faithfully.

Kotik's Memoirs has been published in meticulous academic edition. Assaf in his comprehensive introduction informs about Kotik's biography, history of his town, analyzes literary and academic aspects of the memoirs, and shows problematic moments (especially from the perspective of memoirs as historical source), history of manuscript, and reception of the book by its contemporary readers. Large footnotes explain to the American reader details, which need Talmudic and historical knowledge. Assaf is a specialist of the subject. Nevertheless there are still some misunderstandings and not clear details in the text. Polish reader may be surprised by the note (p.464, footnote 7), that participant of the Uprising 1863 took off the Russian eagle and instead of them put "their own symbol, a double-headed white

eagle”. Also quite surprisingly the author calls the Second Commonwealth of Poland as “interregnum between two world wars” (p.20). In few cases we find misunderstandings of translation origin – where Polish or Russian reader has no problem with the original text when reads about “gulden”, it still may be difficult for the translator. “Gulden” means simply “zloty” – 2 zloty divided in 30 groshes was fixed rate of 1 ruble. Also the Polish reader may be astonished why 20 groshes is more than half gulden (p. 138).

I am deeply convinced that Kotik’s memoirs should be translated into Polish (not from English or Hebrew but from original Yiddish) and should be published in academic edition adjusted to the needs of Polish readers. This is not only important historical evidence, but interesting literature, which shows well known events from a new perspective as well.

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Translated from Polish by Zuzanna Solakiewicz