

GAL-ED | On the History and Culture of Polish Jewry

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On the History and Culture of Polish Jewry

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**The Institute for the History of Polish Jewry and Israel-Poland Relations
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PREFACE

We are pleased and honored to present the latest volume of Gal-Ed to the scholarly and general reading public. The width, breadth, and disciplinary variety in the field of Polish-Jewish studies are once again demonstrated by the studies included. Our two distinguished associate editors have contributed groundbreaking studies in their respective fields of research. Avner Holtzman provides new perspectives on the long, creative career of Nahum Sokolow (photo reproduced on this issue's cover) in journalism, Zionist politics, and Hebrew literature. He notes that the latter subject is relatively neglected in scholarly writings and devotes most of his article to exploring Sokolow's contribution, particularly his editing of the journal *He'Asif*. In the journal, Sokolow aspired to a synthesis of three major elements: the classic Maskilic desire to prepare the Jews for assimilation into modern European reality; preserving the connection with the traditional world through scholarly studies of the Talmudic sages and Jewish scholars throughout the generations; crystallizing a Jewish national identity via historical compositions, extolling the figures who could serve as a focus for identification, and at the same time cultivating *belles lettres* in Hebrew. The success of the journal, which sold 10,000-12,000 copies per issue, proved the existence of a Hebrew reading public eager for his approach, thus providing a stimulus to the founding of several daily newspapers in Hebrew, as well as a series of literary and informative annuals. Holtzman also traces the evolution of Sokolow's views on Zionism and Herzl from opponent and skeptic to enthusiastic supporter, eventually succeeding Herzl in the leadership of the movement as a whole.

Adam Teller contributes an innovative analysis of the commonalities and growing differences between Ashkenazi Jews of Central and Eastern Europe through a felicitous combination of quantitative and qualitative data from the latter part of the seventeenth century.

Arguing for the need to understand the cultural development of Ashkenazi Jewry through a detailed analysis of the ways in which its various component parts interacted, his article focuses on just one of these types of connections/disconnections between Ashkenazi Jews, namely those created in the pursuit of economic activity. It deals with three major questions: first, how prevalent were economic contacts between Jewish merchants from the two regions within early modern Ashkenaz? Second, what was the nature of those connections? And third, which cultural factors shaped those connections?

Of central importance to Teller's analysis are lists of registered Jewish visitors to two of Europe's major transregional fairs during the second half of the seventeenth century – the large and very important Leipzig fair and the smaller but still significant Wrocław (Breslau) fair. These lists provide data on how many visits were made to the fair each year by Jews from different localities. Although the lists were published in the nineteenth century in German Jewish scholarly journals, here for the first time Teller subjects them to a systematic analysis aimed at characterizing the amount and intensity of cross-border Jewish trade between Central and Eastern Europe. Qualitative sources as well are central to his analysis, including the well-known memoirs of Glikl Hamel (1646-1724), the correspondence of a group of Ashkenazi Jewish merchants from Hamburg temporarily working out of Copenhagen in the 1670s, and Yiddish chapbooks (cheaply published pamphlets aimed at the popular market containing short humorous texts referencing stereotypes of Polish Jews) from the second half of the seventeenth century, all of which provide insight on some of the cultural factors that shaped the meetings at the fairs of the Jewish merchants from the Holy Roman Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

The history of basic Jewish institutions constitutes a common theme for several of the articles in the present volume, from the early modern period to the Shoah. Aryeh Yariv continues his study of the office of Judge of the Karaite community of Poland-Lithuania with biographical notes on all the holders of that office over three centuries. He examines the circumstances of their election, their

activity while in office, their struggles within the community and on its behalf, their achievements and failures, and their family connections.

Asaf Kaniel contributes yet another original study of the changes undergone by nineteenth and early twentieth-century East European Jewry in the realm of religious observance and the functioning of religious institutions. This time he focuses on the mikveh, or ritual bath, a prominent feature of every Jewish community since ancient times, but little studied in the modern period. Through a comprehensive analysis of the contemporary Jewish press and other sources, Kaniel considers the economic and organizational model of the mikvehs, their physical condition, and the problems faced by women using the mikveh, concluding with an analysis of the phenomenon of women refraining from attending the ritual bath, and the reactions of traditional society to this change. Kaniel contends that via an examination of the mikveh, a ritual institution, we can learn not only about observance of the commandments of Jewish law, but also about the place of women in the family and community, and about the conduct of the *kehillot* vis-à-vis the conflicting interests of the community members and the pressures of reality.

In the nineteenth century, the Romm printing house in Vilna was arguably the premier publisher of religious texts in Eastern Europe, most notably for its famous edition of the Babylonian Talmud. Through a study of the colorful figure Shmuel Shraga Feigenzon, known by the acronym "ShaFaN," Ada Gebel presents some previously unknown facts and anecdotes on the Romm press and other unrelated historical events. Feigenzon, having been intimately involved in the activities of the Romm enterprise, used his insider's view to write a history of the company. Gebel publishes for the first time missing material from his study that provides important information about the press and its fate at the time of the Polish uprising of 1863, as well as the complex relationship with government censors, and a shocking story of cruel actions by Russian forces in the efforts to suppress pockets of Polish resistance in the area of Ponevezh (Panevėžys), Feigenzon's hometown. Gebel notes,

however, that the latter narrative, although it mentions details and personalities known locally, remains uncorroborated.

Two articles in this volume deal with the history and memory of Jewish educational institutions in Poland in the interwar period. Ester Lapon-Kandelshein details the 50-year existence of the Yehudiah School for girls in Warsaw, an institution that has been termed the flagship of the Zionist movement in the field of Hebrew education for girls. Basing herself on a wide variety of sources, the author presents a detailed survey of the school's history, demonstrating the challenges and achievements of private, Jewish nationalist education for girls. The article also catalogs a long list of leading intellectuals and educators who were connected with the school over the years, on its board, in the administration, or among the teaching staff, such as Nahum Sokolow, Puah Rakovsky – the feminist Zionist pioneer who was principal of the school – and the teachers Emanuel Ringelblum and Abraham Lewin, the latter two better known for their activity during the Holocaust.

Emma Zohar contributes an instructive case study of the use of Holocaust memorial volumes as a historical source through the career of the teacher Leah Chmielewski of the Borochof School of the CYSHO network in Kalisz. A comparison of the draft submitted by Chmielewski and the chapter subsequently published in the *Yizkor* book reveals a significant gap between the two narratives. Most notably, almost every expression of emotion or personal opinion was removed from the edited text. Thus, the published version edited out the personal experiences of Chmielewski, such as her expressions of deep pain over the loss of the old life as well as her mourning over her acquaintances who perished in the Holocaust. Analysis of the editing process and the tendency to unify the style of the Kalisz volume and other such books demonstrates that the common view that the narratives contained in *Yizkor* books are simply anthologies of collective egodocuments is mistaken and misleading. Zohar's findings on the editing and nature of *Yizkor* books are an important cautionary tale for any scholar or reader utilizing the important and vast library of hundreds of memorial volumes.

The final article on institutions brings us to the present. Teresa Klimowicz analyzes the place of the almost 1,200 (as of 2017) Jewish cemeteries in contemporary Poland in the formation of fresh approaches to Polish national memory and the place of Jews in that narrative. She surveys the activities of three different organizations, each of which focuses on a different phase of time: the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage addresses the present, while the Matzevah Foundation is dedicated to the past, and the Well of Memory Association is directed towards the future. The present physical condition of the cemeteries reflects decades of deliberate neglect, a lack of living descendants who might have cultivated memory, and the inherited ignorance of the local communities containing or bordering the abandoned cemeteries.

In her view, the debates over preserving or erasing Jewish cemeteries reflect power plays and become lenses that focus on issues of conflicting identities and historical narratives. What the author terms the "heritagization of a dissonant heritage," as in the case of Jewish cemeteries, might serve as a tool for the critical reinterpretation of Polish national memory and identity.

Three articles in the present volume focus on literature and Jewish thought. Oz Bluman contributes another of his sensitive analyses of the intellectual and philosophical developments in the career of the author, mystic, and journalist Hillel Zeitlin, studying the changes in Zeitlin's attitude to Buddhism in the first decades of the twentieth century. In Zeitlin's early articles, he expressed a generally negative attitude, regarding Buddhism as an extremely pessimistic worldview. He began to express increasingly positive views on Buddhism and Eastern religions in general after World War I, even comparing them positively to Judaism and translating some Buddhist texts into Hebrew. While conventional biographies of Zeitlin regard this decade as belonging to the "newly penitent" stage of his life, Bluman convincingly attributes the change to newly founded spiritual and esoteric movements in Poland, Russia, and Germany, and especially to the theosophical lodges in Warsaw. These theosophical circles have attracted scant scholarly attention, particularly in the Jewish context. Zeitlin's new views on Buddhism

are well illustrated in his Yiddish essay "On High Roads," translated into Hebrew and appended to Bluman's article.

Agnieszka Karczewska surveys the literary work of Minka Silberman, one of many young Jewish writers of the interwar period whose work is as of yet unexplored, since most of their literary output was scattered in various newspapers and periodicals, including magazines for children. Some of these materials were subsequently lost in the destruction of World War II and the Holocaust. In the case of Silberman, Karczewska examines her poetry published in Polish-Jewish children's magazines and her journalistic pieces, as well as her single published collection of poems, which appeared in 1937. Zionism was a dominant theme in her short poems and plays for children. In her view, the answer to the problems and sorrows of the Diaspora could be found in the young generation of new Jews, strong and proud, for whom the struggle to return to Eretz Israel is the most important task in their lives. As opposed to these occasional pieces, Silberman's collection of poems, *W cieniu życia* (In the Shadow of Life), which was aimed at a more mature audience, expresses an entirely different mood. No longer the sunny works for children or politically motivated Zionist poems, here she stressed instead the bleak shadows of everyday life, oppression, discouragement, and sometimes bitterness, with no mention of Jewish themes.

In the third and final article in this section, Avihai Tzur attempts to unravel the strict dichotomy usually applied to the question of the activism or passivity of Jews during the Holocaust, and instead to build new terms that better describe their historical agency. The author accomplishes this by analyzing a specific case: the character of Rabbi Shmuel Shlomo Leiner, the Rebbe of Radzyń, and his unique religious stance that emerges from the hagiographic literature on him, and from tales and legends about his actions during the Holocaust. As historical sources, these materials have limited value. Tzur's aim in his article is different: to offer a phenomenological-hermeneutic analysis of Leiner's spiritual stance as reflected in collective memory, which over time referred to him as the "Warrior Rebbe." Such a portrayal emerges most clearly from the various

and often conflicting versions of his exploits, even exaggerations, rumors, and invented tales. The author situates the historical image of the Rebbe both in the context of the events of the Holocaust and, no less importantly, in the terminology and theological approach of Izbica-Radzyń Hasidism, which began in the mid-nineteenth century.

Two historical studies on the late nineteenth-early twentieth century conclude the roster of articles in the present volume of Gal-Ed. Menahem Blondheim and Jaap Colthof contribute what is in essence a historiographical study of the attempted assassination of Joseph Zvi Duenner in Kraków in 1857. Duenner, then 24 years old, survived the attack and went on to become the long-serving chief rabbi of Amsterdam and a noted Talmudic scholar. What remained unclear, however, was the motive for the attack by the would-be assassin. Blondheim's article reviews the four different motives attributed to the attacker. Two of them focus on Duenner's personality, namely his intellect and his determination, while the other two focus on controversial religious views he purportedly espoused: the Enlightenment and Zionism. The authors evaluate all four of the explanations for the attack on Duenner, rejecting some but adopting and adapting others. All of the various historiographic approaches, however, draw parallels between the event of 1857 and his subsequent long and impressive rabbinical and scholarly career in Amsterdam.

Jewish emigration from Galicia, whether to Vienna and other major centers within the Empire, or the significant emigration abroad, has attracted scholarly attention for decades. Tomasz Lis presents a pioneering study of the numerically small, but still noteworthy phenomenon of Ashkenazi Galician Jews settling in Bosnia Herzegovina. He traces the demographic growth of the Ashkenazi element, the economic and social structure of that community, its complex relations with the veteran Sephardi community, and social and cultural institutions, all of this within the wider context of overall Austrian policy in the region. For these Jewish migrants, living in a country with Islam as one of its dominant faiths was a new experience.

Finally, Elzbieta Kossewska has written a moving obituary for the late Professor Shevah Weiss, who passed away in 2023. She focuses on the many years of her personal acquaintance with Weiss in Poland and emphasizes that, beyond his official status as the Israeli ambassador to Poland, Weiss remained for years afterward a popular figure in Poland. He played a significant role in preserving historical memory, acknowledging the scars of the past while searching for constructive ways to further relations between Poland, Israel, and the Jewish people. He was an unofficial spokesman and ambassador for the two nations, with deep feelings and connections to both. Professor Weiss also had a longstanding connection with the Center for Study of Polish Jewry at Tel Aviv University and with Gal-Ed, as a founder and board member.

A series of book reviews and a list of books received round out Volume 28.

Upon the completion of Volume 28 of Gal-Ed, I offer my deepest thanks to all those who have made its production possible. First of all, to my associate editors, Avner Holtzman, Scott Ury, and Adam Teller, who are always ready to assist in every possible way, and whose own work graces the present volume. Special thanks to my managing editor, Dror Segev, who has accompanied with skill, patience, and uncompromising attention to detail the long process, culminating in the volume now presented to the reading public. Last but not least, my thanks to the many people who, in material matters and those of the spirit, made the publication of this volume possible: Prof. Havi Dreifuss, head of the Institute for the History of Polish Jewry and Israel-Poland Relations at Tel Aviv University; Prof. Avraham Novershtern, head of Shalom Aleikhem House; Avi Ben-Amitay, language editor of the Hebrew section; Ruvik Danieli, editor of the English section; and Sara Appel, secretary of the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center at Tel Aviv University. To all of them, our thanks and appreciation for their important assistance.

Gershon Bacon