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Strange encounters: Expat and refugee Polish-Jewish journalists in Poland and Germany shortly after World War II

The "Old Country"

Accounts of Nazi atrocities long predated the termination of the war. Information from the killing fields filtered out by various means – through official Soviet press briefings with extensive photographic documentation,[1] through Polish diplomatic channels and Jewish soldiers and chaplains, or through embedded Western and Red Army correspondents as they made contact with survivors in newly liberated territory.[2] Although what came to be known as the Holocaust was of concern to Jews in general, Yiddish readers were particularly eager to learn about what remained of Jewish life in occupied Europe and especially in Poland. A very large number had originated there and, long after emigrating to Western Europe, the Americas and elsewhere, they generally retained familial and personal connections to that country either through visits or through correspondence.[3] Consequently, with the cessation of hostilities, immigrant Jewish journalists were eager to report on the land of their birth; and quite a few managed to do so between 1945 and 1948. These correspondents produced a substantial body of reportage which for a time appeared regularly in the Yiddish and Hebrew press in the U.S. and elsewhere. It was sufficiently popular as reading material for a good deal of it to be republished in book form, and in a few cases in English translation. Of course, the period in which they wrote was one of increasing dispersion of survivors out of, and away from, regions within the Soviet sphere of influence. So, Polish Jews were as likely to be found in DP camps in Germany as they were in the land of their birth. Not surprisingly, during the same period, a

1 David Shneer, *Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), esp. 164–167.

2 Alex Grobman, *Rekindling the Flame: American Jewish Chaplains and the Survivors of European Jewry, 1944–1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 135; Philip S. Bernstein, *Rabbis at War: The CANRA Story* (Waltham, Mass: American Jewish Historical Society, 1971).

3 Jack Kugelmass, ed., *Yivo Annual, Volume 21, Going Home* (Evanson, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993).

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number of writers made trips to the American Zone in Germany and their reportage, too, was compiled and republished in separate volumes.

For those visiting the DP camps in Germany, the emotional resonance of their journeys lay not in the landscape nor in the sense of return to idyllic scenes of childhood. It was limited to the narratives collected. Nor did the recent past hold much fascination – even in a dystopian sense, as it would eventually – since the recent past in post-war Germany was, to paraphrase William Faulkner, not only not dead, but not even past. In Poland the past was, relatively speaking, more dead. And besides narratives, there were relics that could be gathered up, some of considerable historical value, or even things as ordinary as a piece of stone from a former residence or a snapshot taken of a family tombstone. Like all mother countries, Poland had a certain erotic charge for its émigré Jews. And returning to it, or trying to uncover it, by sifting through the ruins, had the fundaments of a modern-day quest narrative. Indeed, a particularly striking feature of the Polish material is how readily it maps itself onto the conventions of travel writing. It does so by foregrounding the means of transportation getting to and from Europe and the infrastructure of travel within it, including descriptions of hotels, drivers (both reliable and untrustworthy) and restaurants – the latter less for the food purveyed than for the goings-on within it.[4] In the immediate post-war world, a restaurant in Warsaw's only remaining luxury hotel might have the semblance of an intergalactic café in the film *Star Wars*. It could accommodate foreign visitors and cater for diplomats, military attachés, journalists with government accreditation, black-marketeers, and even couriers from ultranationalist resistance groups who believed that the presence of foreign diplomats within the establishment's confines gave them a certain degree of immunity. For any journalist who made these journeys, transatlantic air travel and treks across Europe were grist to the mill. It was a novelty to them and their readers, and all the more so because civilian transportation had been heavily curtailed, and on some routes almost nonexistent, during the war years. Travel was particularly adventuresome under early post-war conditions in which the use of American Lend Lease and hand-me-down, rickety ex-military craft (originally intended for parachutists and largely unadapted for civilian use) were commonly used vehicles, and these sometimes lacked properly functioning navigation equipment.[5] Ground transportation for civilian use had only partly been reinaugurated in Poland – which meant the absence of glass panes in train and bus windows

4 See, for example: Ya'akov Zerubavel, *Barg khurbn: Kapitlen Poyln* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral farband fun poylishe Yidn in Argentina, 1946), 28–29.

5 Samuel Wohl, *Mayn rayze kayn Varshe* (New York: Samuel Wohl, 1947), 5.

and non-functioning heaters, passengers having to resort to vegetable sacks for blankets. And this is not to mention the ruined state of the terminals and stations along the way, which made train travel painfully slow.[6] Despite these difficulties, accounts of journeys to Poland, unlike those in Germany, convey a sense of excitement at returning to once-familiar haunts. But excitement or no, the accounts also highlight a descent into a now unfamiliar world, an alterity: trauma had caused friends and acquaintances to age almost beyond recognition,[7] and places connected with youth and childhood had been transmuted by the obliteration of Jewish landmarks. The destruction had come both from the Germans during the war, and from locals who, after the war's end, used the wooden interiors of abandoned synagogues for firewood or removed the roofing from Jewish communal buildings, which now stood eerily empty like useless shells. Even the walls of concentration camp barracks had been plundered to build new dwellings or home additions for Polish families.[8]

But that sense of alterity, at least for Poland, is only part of the story. In contrast to the feelings they had towards Germany, the Yiddish journalists felt a profound emotional connection with Poland. For many, Polish was as much their native tongue as was Yiddish. They often had an attachment to the national literature and great respect for its writings. And, raised in the public culture of early twentieth-century Europe, they were intimate with the country's landscapes, both natural and human-made; and they savored them.[9] They were, after all, not just Jews, but Poles. Indeed, these journeys to the homeland were undertaken not just to document the plight of survivors and assess the prospects of a resurrection of Jewish communal life there; they were also a "return home", a deeply personal encounter with the past – if only via memory and whatever physical traces remained.

Despite the personal nature of many of these reports, the accounts exhibit varying degrees of professionalism in style and objectivity. Hayyim Shoshkes was an accomplished travel writer who crafted his narratives accordingly; Sh. L. Shneiderman specialized in literary and political reportage and used the opportunity, while in the field, to report on social and cultural developments through lengthy interviews with significant players on the national scene.

6 Shimon Samet, *B'voi l'mkhorat: masa b'Polin – 1946* (Tel Aviv: Ts. Laynman, 1946), 28–29.
7 Hayyim Shoshkes, *Poyln 1946: ayndrukn fun a rayze* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral farband fun poylishe Yidn in Argentina, 1946).
8 See especially: Mordkhe Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok: a rayze iber hundert khorev-gevorene khiles in Poyln* (Tel Aviv: Letste nayes, 1952), 44–48.
9 See, for example: Hayyim Shoshkes' travel pieces within interwar Poland in his book, *Lender un shtet* (Vilna: Kletskin 1930).

Most of the journalists, if not all, were sympathetic to the politics of the new government in Poland, which was relatively progressive – certainly in contrast with the reactionary regimes that had been in power in the 1930s. And officials were cooperative with the journalists too, arranging excursions to the newly acquired territory in Silesia, and even air transport to witness the trial and sentencing of the perpetrators of the Kielce Pogrom.[10] They extended visas when needed, warned would-be travelers where security could not be guaranteed, and provided letters of access to sites closed to the general public.[11] None of the journalists reported any interference in their work. This was so despite the fact that their pieces were serialized in the Yiddish press and sometimes appeared while the writers were still in Poland, where copies were obtainable and could be read by at least some government officials and security staff. One journalist did indeed face retribution – but this was for his critical assessment of the state of Jewish patrimony in Poland, and it came not from the government but from official representatives of the Jewish community, who had him pulled from a train on the border with Slovakia as he was about to depart from Poland. They subjected him to an inquest for supposedly defaming the country to readers abroad.[12]

Encountering Germans

Although a number of the journalists concerned themselves exclusively with Jewish subjects, some had broader interests and reported accordingly. Shimen Samet, from *HaAretz*, was one of the first of the journalists to write about the condition of surviving Jews in Poland. Born in the Ukraine in 1904, he had left for Palestine in the 1920s but had visited the land of his birth frequently afterwards, one of these visits being just before the outbreak of World War II. Born in Kazimierz, Poland in 1906 and trained as a journalist, Sh. L. Shneiderman emigrated to France in the early 1930s departing for South Africa at the outbreak of the war, and a year later moving on to New York.[13] He visited Germany at around the same time as his journey to Poland and, in June 1946, reported on the Nuremberg Trials for New York's *Morgn Zhurnal*. He had already commented briefly on the DPs in the fall of 1945. Regrettably for us, he did not produce

10 S. L. Shneiderman, *Tsvishn shrek un hofenung*, 90 – 119.

11 Shimon Samet, *B'voi l'mkhorat: masa b'Polin – 1946* (Tel Aviv: Ts. Laynman, 1946), 127 – 137.

12 Mordkhe Tsanin, "*Forverts korespondent dertseylt vi azoy er iz arestirt gevorn baym aroysforn fun Poyln*," *Forverts*, Friday 16 January 948, 2, 7.

13 *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* (New York: Alveltlekhn yidishn kultur kongres, 1961), 761 – 2.

enough material on his German visit for a book or even an extended series, as he did on the Polish visit in a lengthy volume.[14]

In Poland, the journalists' itineraries generally focused on Warsaw or what remained of it, and wherever possible included visits to their own towns or cities of origin. The more inquisitive used the opportunity to see the country's reconstruction firsthand – an interest already apparent in the subtitle of Shneiderman's book: *A rayze iber dem nayem Poyln* ('A Journey through the New Poland'). Both Samet and Shneiderman visited Lower Silesia, and in both cases what they reported on was not just the increasing Jewish presence in villages and towns that had had no Jewish inhabitants for well over a century, but also the condition of the German population then being displaced.[15] Samet's account is largely one of statistics along with snippets from interviews with government officials overseeing the resettlement of Poles in Silesia. These Poles were being repatriated from the former eastern parts of the country, which now belonged to the Ukraine. Samet does, however, include a photograph of a pathetic-looking German farmer, his bags packed, on the road that will take him to Germany. The caption of the photo reads, "The last German." It is an eloquent image, still very powerful despite the abysmal quality of reproduction.[16] Indeed, what it manages to do, perhaps inadvertently perhaps not, is to represent a human tragedy that unexpectedly evokes a degree of compassion in the Hebrew reader – especially now, so many years after the war's end.

Aside from the photograph, Samet's narrative tells us nothing about his response to the ongoing expulsion of Silesian Germans, though – somewhat counter-intuitively – Shneiderman's account laments their departure obliquely. When he interviewed newly relocated Jews in Lower Silesia who had opened stores in the area, they reported having very good relations with the local Germans. With the newly settled Poles, relations were not so good. The latter had already started a boycott of Jewish establishments, much as they had done in the later interwar years.[17]

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14 S. L. Shneiderman, *Tsvishn shrek un hofenung: a rayze iber dem nayem Poyln* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral farband fun poylishe Yidn in Argentina, 1947).

15 Between 1945 and 1947 some two million Poles of German background were transferred to the Soviet Zone in Germany. But many ethnic Germans had already fled the area in the wake of collapse of the German army towards the end of the war. Joseph Schechtman, *Postwar Population Transfers in Europe, 1945–1955* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), 180–212.

16 Samet, photos inserted between pages 80 and 81.

17 The treatment of Jews in the "Recovered Territories" is a complex story. In part, Jews were used by the Polish authorities to help re-Polonize the region, but the Polishness of settlers was sometimes a matter of dispute, especially in the case of non-native Polish speakers – includ-

Although calls for retribution are not really present in the narratives, an explicit sense of *Schadenfreude* is. And this is certainly evident when some of the journalists describe passing through ruined German cities on the way in and out of Poland or, in the case of Hayyim Shoshkes, while traveling through the Sudetenland after leaving Poland. There, without any empathy at all, he witnessed Czech mistreatment of local Germans, to whom they issued special ration cards, putting markers on their clothing.[18]

Shoshkes was born in Bialystok in 1891, lived in Warsaw, and arrived in the U.S. as a refugee in December 1939. An applied economist who traveled throughout Poland in the 1920s to set up and inspect local cooperative banks, his vignettes on the places he visited were a regular feature of *Haynt*, Warsaw's premier Yiddish daily. The columns were popular enough for him to extend the range of his travels to include parts of Europe, North America and the Middle East. He was the most traveled of all the journalists but, although he wrote about other parts of Europe, he seems to have avoided Germany. Particularly telling is his account of a tour of Majdanek in the late 1950s during one of his frequent return trips to Poland. In an episode he recounts: while resting on a bench, he was approached by two visitors from East Germany, a father and son. The older man, a professor and engineer, proclaimed his shame as a German for what took place in the camp and suggested that all Germans should be brought to it, "to see with their own eyes what war and fascism can lead to, how a civilized and cultured people were transformed into animals." Probably dismayed by the common obfuscation of substituting war for genocide, Shoshkes was unwilling to engage in further discussion: "Don't denigrate animals. They aren't capable of such things," he admonished. And he then continued, "I have no idea what kind of education and how many generations it will take to transform the Germans. So let's better be silent. It's too soon to find a way to speak to one another."[19]

Perhaps, had Shoshkes been more open to his German interlocutors, the Yiddish reportage I've been examining on early post-war Germany could have had a somewhat different feel to it. It might have included elements of the travel writer's nose for the marvelous and his proclivity for finding remarkable individuals. (Actually, there is some of that even in this account, since the professor was

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ing some German-speaking Jews indigenous to the region. Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944–48* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 152–165.

18 *Poyln 1946: ayndrukn fun a rayze* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral farband fun poylishe Yidn in Argentina, 1946), 188–189.

19 Hayyim Shoshkes, *Fun Moskve biz Ever HaYarden* (Tel Aviv: I.L. Peretz, 1961), 278–279.

Count Nolde, who was an engineer in General Paulus's staff at Stalingrad, and who then spent eight years as a prisoner of war. The brief account suggests what Shoshkes's reportage on Germany might have been like had he been one of the visitors.) But for Jewish travel writers, the marvelous typically had to do with finding a Jewish presence where one would least expect it, or a personage of some significance to Jews; and, along with either, some appreciation of the twists of fate that had been part and parcel of the European Jewish experience during and after the war. Perhaps Shoshkes's remarkable book on early post-war Poland, *Poyln 1946*, with its mix of adventure, remarkable characters, plethora of people in unlikely disguises, and dark humor, could not have been written about the people found within the DP camps.[20] I will have more to say about that shortly.

The "Old Country" displaced

Although many of the journalists traveled to Poland via Germany, their observations on the latter were perfunctory. They were either in a hurry to get to their Old Country or to return to the New World, their current home. Some went, as noted above, to report on the Nuremberg trials. But those in Germany most concerned with Polish-Jewish survivors were principally drawn not to the few German Jews who had survived the war or recently returned from exile, but to the DP camps. There were a lot of them,[21] and those who visited traveled to the parts of the American Zone where the camps were located. Here, too, newspaper reports often made their way into books: Yisroel Efros's *Heymloze Yidn* (1947), Emma Schaver's *Mir zaynen do* (1948), Ilya Trotsky's *Goles Daytshland* (1950) and H. Leivick's *Mit der sheyres hapleyte* (1947) – the latter not surprisingly the most compelling of these, given Leivick's reputation as a poet and writer.

20 This issue is probably more complex than can be properly assessed from the limited data looked at here. Certainly in camps not specifically intended for Jewish DPs, one could find Jewish individuals who had passed as non-Jews during the war and continued to do so for a time afterwards. Adam R. Seipp, *Strangers in the Wild Place: Refugees, Americans and a German Town, 1945–1952* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 60.

21 By January 1946 more than 30,000 Jews living in the American Zone of Germany were in DP camps while a little more than half that number lived privately in homes or in larger German cities. By the end of the year more than 94,000 lived in 64 camps, while just over a third of that number were scattered over 143 communities. Zeev W. Mankowitz, *Life Between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21–22.

Like the authors who traveled to Poland, these reporters were all of East European provenance. Yisroel Efros was born in 1891 in Ostrog, Poland and emigrated with his family to the U.S. at the age of 13. He wrote in Yiddish, was a Hebrew poet and a professor of Hebrew. Emma Schaver was born in Russia and emigrated to the U.S. before reaching the age of two in 1906. She was a singer of Yiddish and Hebrew songs and a member of the first cultural mission to Europe sponsored by the World Jewish Congress. Ilya Trotsky was born in Romny in the Ukraine in 1879. He later moved to Berlin and in 1933 to Buenos Aires; he settled in the U.S. in 1949. Trotsky wrote in Yiddish and Russian. H. Leivick was born in White Russia in 1888. He was exiled to Siberia for Bundist activity and escaped to the U.S. in 1913. Leivick was one of the world's most popular Yiddish poets.

To some extent, the books produced by the visitors to Germany replicated those recounting journeys to Poland. Both involved travel from the New World to the Old; both recorded traveling within an environment where danger lurked (although probably less in Germany than in Poland, because of the occupation); and both brought the travelers face to face with Jews whose stories they had come to collect. Since the travelers were just as likely to come across familiar faces in the DP camps as they were in a visit to their former homeland, one might assume that the kinds of narrative collected in Poland and Germany would be more or less the same. But they were not. Perhaps this may have been a function of different writers having different sensibilities. The latter group of those mentioned contained a preponderance of artists and literati. They took it as a given that they would be ministering to despondent, homeless Jews. The mission of the group mentioned before them was more inflected by certain conventions of journalism, especially travel narratives. But I believe the difference also had a great deal to do with *place*, as the writers anticipated and then experienced it. Poland was the "Old Country" for the journalists, albeit more a memory than a living reality. So, even if family and friends were no more, locations themselves held considerable significance. Germany had never been "home" and was not an object of longing for the latter group. The difference may also have had something to do with the camps, their continuing centrality in the lives of the DPs and the fact that the Jews who remained in Poland were relatively more settled – though many were considering emigrating, especially after Kielce – and were attempting to move on with their lives.

Encounters

In Germany, the visitors were escorted by private jeep and stayed in accommodation reserved either for American military personnel or UNRRA (the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration). So these visitors inhabited the equivalent of the tourists' or journalists' bubble in ways those traveling within Poland seldom did. That bubble was reinforced by the fact that none of the writers other than Ilya Trotsky had lived in Germany before the war. Moreover, the DP camps were not comparable to the places the journalists visited in Poland. They were not former hometowns, but camps, and their inmates were often sealed off from the surrounding non-Jewish population. Visits were controlled by UNRRA, and sometimes tightly so, with officials asking to read scripts of speeches in advance of their delivery or insisting that the visitors dine with UNRRA personnel away from the DPs.[22] And UNRRA staff controlled both the visitors' itineraries and their duration, refusing to make time extensions if the intended itinerary was not yet complete. Of course, Germany was an occupied country and there were no government officials with whom the visitors could interact. They had recourse only to representatives of the primary NGO that hosted them; and, unlike Polish government representatives, these had no vested interest in how the country would be portrayed by the visitors. Supervised by UNRRA, the visitors also had next to no contact with local Germans – only here and there the owner of a house in which they boarded, or a driver, cook or porter.

No efforts were made either by UNRRA or by the journalists to meet with local German intellectuals and artists with whom, one assumes, the visitors might have had things to discuss. There may have been good reason for this. Trotsky describes being invited to a meeting by a group of journalists and artists in Munich. All were anti-Nazis and they included both exiles and those who had been imprisoned during the Nazi regime because of their convictions. There was much to agree on when it came to social problems and their solutions. But German responsibility for the murder of European Jewry was a different matter. That, the hosts insisted, was entirely the responsibility of the Nazi leadership and not of ordinary Germans.[23] The latter, they maintained, had known nothing

22 Yisroel Efros, *Heymloze Yidn: A bazukh in di yidishe lagern in Daytshland* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral farband fun poylishe Yidn in Argentina, 1947), 178–181.

23 Given the focus of the most prominent of the war crimes trials on the Nazi leadership and the fact that the Jewish genocide was only one factor among many with which the accused were charged, it is not hard to understand how easily this obfuscation could hold. For a summary of the Jewish presence and absence in the Nuremberg trials see: Laura Jockusch, "Justice at Nur-

about the camps.[24] "The same German woman who had asked me if I believed in the legend of millions of gassed and burnt Jews tried to argue that the German nation had already paid for the bestiality of the brown barbarians."[25] Much to the astonishment of the others present, she further argued that the Jewish nation had already had its revenge. "What revenge?" Trotsky inquired. Her answer: the conditions in which German children were growing up, living within ruins, going to school in empty cold classrooms and playing on mounds of rubble. These children would be psychological cripples unable to contribute much to Germany's future. "Is that not sufficient revenge?"[26] Indeed, as Tony Judt has noted in regard to early post-war public opinion, Germans certainly resented the consequences of Hitler's actions, but more because of the harm he had caused to them than to others. From this perspective, the decision to eliminate the Jews "was not so much Hitler's greatest crime as his greatest error." Judt then adds that in a survey conducted in 1952, "nearly two in five adults in West Germany did not hesitate to inform pollsters that they thought it was 'better' for Germany to have no Jews on its territory."[27]

Landscapes of terror

As noted, unlike the visiting journalists in Poland, those sojourning in Germany remained isolated from the locals, especially when they had come to investigate Jewish DPs living in camps and were not paying attention to the large number who lived outside these institutions. It is hard to say how much language difficulties interfered with the work of the correspondents. One assumes that Ilya Trotsky was a proficient German-speaker, having spent fifteen years in the country. The others, probably had some facility with the language, being middle European intellectuals and Yiddish speakers. But German had certainly never been their everyday language and being surrounded by German-speakers would have offered none of the pleasures of an immersion in the familiar tongue of Jewish intellectuals raised in Poland. Still, the most striking difference in the German and Polish accounts has less to do with language and culture than with re-

emberg?: Jewish Responses to Nazi War-Crime Trials in Occupied Germany," *Jewish Social Studies*, *Vol 19*, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 107–147, especially 130.

24 Ilya Trotsky, *Goles Daytshland* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral farband fun poylishe Yidn in Argentina, 1950), 103.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 102–103.

27 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Pimlico, 2007), 809.

sponse to the landscape. In Poland, the areas the journalists traveled through were by no means the country's most scenic. But, though flat and unimpressive, the terrain they visited, was familiar and to a degree comforting – albeit disturbing, frequently without a Jewish presence either in the form of people or of many historic buildings, or even intact family tombstones. In Germany, the opposite was true. There was nothing home-like about the country, since the journalists had grown up elsewhere. Yet the visitors were in awe of the landscape. Perhaps, this is not so surprising, given the location of the American Zone where the main DP camps were. Indeed, because of their connection with the Nazi leadership and their setting, Hitler's Bavarian Alpine retreats were a must-see for the journalists.[28] Of course, the visitors could not disassociate the landscape from the crimes that had been perpetrated or planned there. Repeatedly they spoke of Germany as a bloodied land or a bloody "Naziland" – a description they never used for Poland, despite the numerous sites of killings and mass burials they encountered, the unpleasant and ample evidence of a lingering hatred for Jews and the frequent news of attacks on, and murder of, survivors. The truth is that, even in Poland, the past was not entirely the past.

Disguise

However, the most striking difference between the accounts of the journeys to Poland and those of observers who went to Germany has to do with the nature of the narratives gathered. There were some similarities, it is true. Both included ample testimony to the rampant murder and destruction that had befallen European Jewry over the war years, and to the terrible losses of family that those narrating the accounts had endured. But the Polish accounts have a different feel to them. They are often enigmatic and sometimes even darkly humorous. They sometimes convey a certain degree of optimism about Poland's future; Shneiderman's book is titled *Tvishn shrek un hofenung* ('Between Fear and Hope'). Undoubtedly, some of this is due to the fact that, unlike those living in the DP camps of Germany, those who remained in Poland had begun to rebuild their lives. Although, many felt as though they were in limbo, were uncertain of their future and wondered whether or not to emigrate, they were much closer to a normal existence than those in the DP camps. Consequently, the narratives almost always reflect the resilience of survivors, a redeeming quality seemingly absent in the DP narratives.

28 Trotsky, "In di Alpn-berg," 107–116.

Also, the Polish material has a certain libidinal quality to it, probably stemming from the fact that disguise plays a very prominent role, since generally this is how the narrators survived the war. The nightmare they lived through was often enough not just the camps, but the ever-present fear of discovery. Robert J. Lifton speaks of the imprint on survivors who have experienced death as something profoundly inappropriate, because it has occurred randomly and pervasively with "no reasonable relationship to life span or life cycle."[29] This "Death Anxiety" seems less pronounced a feature in the Polish accounts. That is not to say that it is absent; just less pronounced. This is probably because many of those living in that country after the war were sufficiently Polonized to have survived in hiding, or else they had fled to the Soviet Union and escaped much of the killing. Though the randomness of death is often present in their narratives, the dramatic weight of their accounts is more about survival and the remarkable way they managed to come through. This is certainly true of Shoshkes's reportage on Poland. Indeed, early on, he presents us with a person he describes as a quintessentially authoritarian concierge, determining the fate of would-be guests at Warsaw's Hotel Polonia. He presumes that this figure is an anti-Semitic Polish type, only to find that it is a Jew he had known from a remote shtetl he had visited before the war.[30] And he mentions a female acquaintance who had once stood out among Warsaw's Jewish elite as a dark beauty. Her family was murdered during the war but, because of her attractive appearance, this woman escaped the initial deportations and assumed the identity of an Armenian, settling in a village near Warsaw. Having survived the Shoah disguised as a Christian, she was terrified that her neighbors might learn the truth and seek revenge for her having deceived them. When her uncle, who had moved in with her, died suddenly, she circumvented the village burial society lest in washing the corpse they should discover that the uncle was circumcized. The narrative concludes with the woman unable to sleep, tortured in her dreams by her deceased uncle for having buried this former Hasid clasping a cross in a decrepit Christian cemetery.[31]

The German accounts, collected in the world of the DP camps, are more singularly dark. Humor does not figure in them. Nor does disguise, hiding or escape. And this, I think, is because their narrators had no faith in the surrounding population and, at least at that time, could see no future for Jews in post-war Germany. This absence of simulation makes a significant difference, for disguise

29 Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (New York: Vintage, 1969), 487.
30 Shoshkes, *Poyln 1946*, 53.
31 Shoshkes, *Poyln 1946*, 78 – 80.

was a critical and often continuing factor in the lives of a great many survivors the reporters met in Poland. Moreover, where it does occur, disguise in the post-war German accounts has little to do with resilience. In one case it is much more about counterfeit and the corruption of Jewish and non-Jewish life brought about by Nazi ideology. Trotsky, for example, concludes his chapter on the Jews of post-war Germany with an anecdote concerning two young men arrested in Belgium after police became suspicious of their lavish lifestyle. One of the men was German, the other a Jew who had made a career in Viennese cabarets as a Hitler impersonator. After the war's end, the German had organized a scam to collect money from naïve Nazi sympathizers to help rescue "Hitler's son" from Soviet imprisonment. (Obviously no such person existed.) The two managed to gain access to a secret radio transmitter and broadcast Hitler parodies performed by the Jewish actor. Apparently, a good number of people accepted the speeches as real because a lot of money was sent in. An amusing anecdote, certainly. But for Trotsky, it is a symptom of the persistence of a pernicious ideology among ordinary Germans, who "have learned nothing from their national debacle."[32] The past was not the past.

But Trotsky relates a much darker account of disguise, told to him while he was being escorted by a survivor, Zhenye Shakhnovski, and her daughter, Sonye, through the Alps. The scenery was breathtaking and presented a stark contrast to the horrific story the woman related about her daughter's near-miraculous survival during the round-up of children in Stutthof (east of Gdansk), the concentration camp in which she and her daughter had been held. The mother bribed the guard of the morgue and instructed the daughter that, if she wanted to live, she would have to spend the next twenty-four hours hidden among the gassed corpses.[33] It is a story about disguise, but not of the libidinal kind gathered in Poland describing acts of impersonation and requiring an exquisite virtuoso performance. As one Polish-Jewish survivor explained: "We were all actors [...] We had to play the role of *goyim*. We even played the part of priests, of nuns, of sisters of mercy, of shepherds, of drunks, of hunters, of beggars, of wealthy magnates. For a false note [or] improper expression one paid with one's life."[34] Here, the disguise was entirely silent pantomime – to lie still and play dead.

32 Trotsky, "In di Alpn-berg," 185–186.

33 Ibid, 108–109.

34 Jacob Pat, *Ash un fayer* (New York: CYCO, 1946), 94–95.

Thanatos

By contrast, even a story of seemingly successful disguise from a chapter in Emma Schaver's book *Mir zaynen do!* ends in death. The narrative is of Dr. Zalmen Grinberg (Chair of the Central Committee of the Liberated Jews in the American Sector), who had managed to shield his child from a likely round-up by lugging him around in a backpack while he went off to work each day. When no longer able to keep this up, he drugged the child to make him unconscious, then threw the bag into the courtyard of a Lithuanian peasant. After the liberation, the father was reunited with his wife and the two were able to get their child back. They emigrated to Israel. But the child soon died of leukemia – the father attributing the disease to the hardships the boy had endured during the war.[35] The book also includes very brief accounts of survivors unable to persevere much beyond their liberation,[36]or dying from suddenly eating too much.[37] Such narratives do not appear in the accounts from Poland.

Let me finish with a few brief examples that further elucidate the difference between the DP narratives and those gathered among survivors in Poland. First, the penultimate chapter of Shoshkes's *Poyln 1946*.[38] Here we find him standing in the lobby of Warsaw's Hotel Polonia waiting for the car that will take him to the airport; and there in the lobby he bumps into an old acquaintance, a very funny man named Shleyen. Shoshkes asks his friend the "usual" question, meaning, "How did you survive the war?" The answer: simple, as a priest. Shleyen proceeds to narrate a story of hiding in the eastern part of the country in the home of a good-natured Orthodox priest who reasoned with him that the war could go on for some time and he could not spend forever holed upt. Knowing that Shleyen had a good baritone voice, the priest suggested that he learn the Orthodox liturgy and work as his deacon. Shleyen agreed, and let his beard grow long and unkempt. Every Sunday he would sing the appropriate prayers while swinging a burning incense censer as he followed behind the priest. Eventually, a bishop learned of his knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and came to rely on him to write his sermons. Fortunately, Shleyen adds sardonically, the bishop never discovered that he was also learned in the Talmud. "And that's how I survived the war until liberated by the Red Army."

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35 Emma Schaver, *Mir zaynen do! Ayndrukn un batrakhtungen bay der sheyres hapleyta* (New York, 1948), 37–38.

36 Ibid, 38.

37 Ibid, 67.

38 Shoshkes, "*Farshtelt zikh vi a dyakon*," 180–184.

Shoshkes then completes the book with a chapter on leaving Warsaw by hitching a ride on a large Soviet plane. Designed for airborne troops, the plane had no seats, only benches along the side and a rope to hold on to. Since Shoshkes was the only passenger, the cabin wasn't heated either. Increasingly uncomfortable because of the cold, he finally mustered the courage to knock on the cockpit door. The crew invited him to join them as they raised glasses in repeated toasts of vodka and sang odes to comrade Stalin.

From the writers who visited the DP camps, there is nothing even remotely as ironic or darkly comical and libidinal as what sometimes appears in the accounts of the Polish travelers. Even the survival narratives gathered from the DPs leave us unpleasantly suspended in the realm of death. *Thanatos* reigns in these accounts. Yisroel Efros describes a meeting he had with political activists in Feldafing and tells his readers how stridently they condemned the lack of world effort to resolve their situation. Then, out of nowhere, someone whispered into his ear, "'Me, the SS castrated.' What made him tell me that? There are sufferings here that should burn and extinguish themselves in secret, without seeking something to contain the smoke. There is suffering here for which the redemption of language does not exist and a person must carry within himself to the grave. Pain and shame enveloped me."[39]

A liminal space

Leivick was arguably the most talented of the Yiddish writers to visit Germany, and not surprisingly, the most proficient at ferreting out compelling narrative. His anecdote from a survivor of a death march is only one of a series of utterly macabre accounts he presents. In the following story, SS guards had escorted camp inmates away from the approaching American soldiers. Eventually the captives flee into the forest and then come to a clearing where they discover an abandoned freight train filled with clothing, food and alcohol.

> No one could possibly imagine what kind of tumult erupted among us. What kind of ecstasy. What kind of a carnival of satiation. We swallow, we drink, and at the same time we toss away our lice ridden rags and don new clothing, shoes, uniforms, coats and hunt for bottle after bottle of things to drink—cognac, liquor and what not. We become inebriated and we exit the train heading into the nearby woods with revelry, dancing and with wild impassioned singing. And here at the edge of the forest lay dozens of our campmates – those who could not hold out and fell dead. We jump over them, we circle around them in a

39 Efros, *Heymloze Yidn*, 162–163.

> dance – drunk, entranced. From afar we hear shooting. Closer. Someone runs to us shouting jubilantly: "The Americans are coming!" Our dance becomes more frenzied. Our throats hoarse. We collapse and sink into a deep sleep.[40]

Where does this account leave us? In the world of the living, or the dead? Or, perhaps in a liminal space which, in a more concrete sense, is precisely what the DP camps were. It is as if place itself was a conditioning factor of the narrative. The DPs may have been the same types of survivor the journalists encountered in Poland, with the same cultural background, and they may even have gone through the same experiences. But they had not yet returned to a *normal world* and their narratives reflect this. For survivors in Poland it was a different story, at least in 1946, when most of the accounts were recorded. The country's Jews oscillated ambivalently between fear and hope, to use the title of Shneiderman's book. They weren't entirely sure about their future there. But for a brief period of time, when it seemed that a new Poland might be emerging, they could not write off the country as a place where there could be continued Jewish existence. By contrast, Germany was a conquered land, many of its residents resentful of the Allied occupation, and there was no telling what the fate of Jews would be without the presence of an outsider military force.[41] Nor, right after the war, did Germans who accepted the Holocaust as fact believe that responsibility for the extermination of European Jewry went beyond the inner circle of Hitler's regime. And, fairly or not, they viewed the DPs of foreign origin (Jews well represented among them) as black-marketeers and counterfeiters, and some, especially among the non-Jews, as much worse – hardly as the paragons of virtue who could make ordinary Germans ashamed of their treatment of others.[42]

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40 H. Leivik, *Mit der sheyres-hapleyte: Tog-bukhfartseykhenungen fun mayn rayze iber di yidishe lagern fun der amerikaner zone in Daytshland* (Toronto: H. Leivick yubeley fond, CYCO, 1947), 149–150.

41 For negative German attitudes towards the occupation, see: Giles MacDonogh, *After the Reich: The Brutal History of the Allied Occupation* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), especially 240–241.

42 For a brief description of black-marketing within DP camps of various nationalities, see: Mark Wyman, *DPs: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945–1951* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 116–117; also Adam R. Seipp, *Strangers in the Wild Place*, op. cit., 97–141; Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 124. Focusing largely on non-Jewish black-marketeers, Giles MacDonogh provides graphic examples of the criminal brazenness of some DPs, especially Polish and Russian ones. and describes how they took advantage of a divided city like Berlin to escape from one zone into another: Giles MacDonogh, *After the Reich* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 372–380.

It goes without saying that the Yiddish journalists visiting the DP camps were very sympathetic to their subjects, even when they recognized the presence among them of certain "pathologies". As one observer remarked, having endured what they did during the war, the inmates felt justified in doing nothing; they did not even clean their own dwellings. That same observer noted that, for the typical American soldier who had not been at the front, the relatively friendly and hospitable Germans whom he now encountered, living in clean surroundings and properly dressed, made a much more positive impression than the dishevelled Jewish DPs.[43] The same must have been true for Germans encountering Jewish survivors. Perhaps partly for this reason, the reconciliation that would soon begin to take place between Germans and Jews occurred not with those Jews living on German soil (most of whom were foreign-born and largely in transit), but with the newly proclaimed political/geographical representation of the Jewish people—the state of Israel. Whatever Chancellor Adenauer's motivation may have been to accept the American idea of reconciliation through reparations – whether it was simply an attempt to rehabilitate Germany's name, or was meant to secure Jewish support for state loans from western banks[44] – the positive impact was considerable. It is a great irony of history that in the course of time, the Jewish responses to Germany and to Poland would become reversed. Germany would, in a certain sense, be not exactly forgiven, but have its crimes relegated to the past; Poland has remained suspect for much longer.

43 Schaver, *Mir zaynen do!*, 39 – 42.

44 Jay Howard Geller, *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany, 1945 – 1953* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 238.