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Writing Holocaust History across the Iron Curtain: Alberto Nirenstein's *A Tower from the Enemy* / *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*

Like many Jews of his generation, the historian Alberto Nirenstein lived a life shaped by migration and return, moving frequently across national borders.¹ His life, and his work, highlight the limitations of a national perspective on the history of Jewish memory and Holocaust historiography. People and their ideas, documents, and memoirs moved between countries and languages, and crossed the “Iron Curtain,” which was not as impermeable as Cold Warriors liked to pretend. Nirenstein aimed to make sense of the genocide of European Jews while moving between East and West and thus relied on and responded to different frameworks in his efforts to understand the past. In the reception of Nirenstein’s source collection, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek* (translated as *A Tower from the Enemy*), we can see the importance of the diverse communities with which he engaged. Published in 1958, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek* was one of the first history books in Italian on the Holocaust. A year after its publication, the book was translated into English. The work, which was highly praised in Italy, including by Italian Jews, was condemned as ideologically biased by Polish-Jewish exiles in the United States. These different communities of memory evaluated the book and its author differently and their alignment within the Cold War divide influenced their perception.

Albert(o) (Aaron) Nirenstein

According to his handwritten CV from his file at the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI), Aaron (Alberto) Nirenstein² was born into a petty bourgeois family in the shtetl of Baranów, northwest of Lublin, in 1915. His father was a shopkeeper, his

1 Several variations in the spelling of his last name can be found across documents and publications, depending on their language and national context, ranging from Nirenstein, Nirensztejn, Nirensztajn to Nirenstajn.

2 He used “Aaron” in Yiddish and Hebrew, “Albert” in English and Polish, and “Alberto” in Italian.

Note: We would like to thank the Fondazione di Studi Storici “Filippo Turati” as well as the Nirenstein family for granting us access to the letters exchanged between Alberto and Wanda Nirenstein.

mother died when he was still a small child. After finishing primary school in Baranów, he attended a state high school (*gimnazjum*) in Lublin, which he had to discontinue, however, due to financial problems. From 1932 to 1935, he received training at a seminary for teachers in Warsaw. During this time, he became involved with the Socialist-Zionist Hashomer Hatzair youth movement. In 1936, he emigrated to Palestine, where he took up studies at Hebrew University, which, however, he soon quit, again due to financial difficulties. From 1937 to 1942, he worked as a teacher in different rural schools in Palestine. During this time, he became involved with the Communist Party of Palestine.³ In 1942 he joined the Jewish Brigade, a section of the British army and participated in battles in the North Africa campaign. While in the army, Nirenstein, according to his CV, continued his Communist political activity forming and leading anti-fascist groups among the soldiers.⁴ In 1943, he landed with the Allied armies in Salerno, Italy, moving up the Italian peninsula. He joined other Brigade soldiers in their efforts to engage with the local Jewish communities and encourage illegal immigration to Palestine.⁵

While stationed in Italy, Nirenstein met his future wife, Wanda Lattes, a Jewish woman from a middle-class family who had been a member of *Giustizia e Libertà* (Justice and Freedom), a non-Communist partisan group during the war. They married in March 1945. After the war, Wanda Lattes worked as a journalist for the leftist paper *Il Nuovo Corriere* (The New Courier) and after his demobilization Nirenstein likewise pursued a career as a journalist and correspondent for Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew newspapers. From 1948–1950, he worked for the Polish embassy in Rome.

Nirenstein's sisters had left for Palestine before the war, however, his father and other relatives who remained in Poland were deported to Sobibór and did not survive. Nirenstein returned to Poland in the early 1950s, according to most accounts, to gather material for a history of the Warsaw and other ghettos in occupied Poland. His family's autobiographical work, *Come le cinque dita di una*

3 Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute (Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego, AŻIH) signature 47, Personal file of Albert Nirensztein, folio (f.) 3 of the personal survey form (*ankieta personalna*).

4 AŻIH signature 47, Personal file of Albert Nirensztein, f. 3. Surely, Nirenstein emphasized his dedication to the Communist cause in the CV he wrote for the JHI. Regarding autobiographical writing in Soviet regimes, see Jochen Hellbeck, "Galaxy of Black Stars: The Power of Soviet Biography," *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (2009): 615–624.

5 On the Jewish Brigade in Italy, see Dina Porat, "One Side of a Jewish Triangle in Italy: The Encounter of Italian Jews with Holocaust Survivors and with Hebrew Soldiers and Zionist Representatives in Italy, 1944–1946," *Italia Judaica* 4 (1993): 487–513.

mano (Like the five fingers of the hand), states that he returned to Poland to “find impossible traces” and remained to study documents about the extermination of Polish Jews.⁶

It seems surprising that as a Jew he decided to return to Poland at a point in time when many Polish Jews tried to leave the country, in particular since he had Polish but not Italian citizenship and left a young family behind in Florence – his daughter Fiamma was born in 1945, and not much later the couple had two more children. Nirenstein’s return to Poland may have been linked to his employment with the Polish embassy. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, extensive purges took place in the Polish Foreign Ministry and diplomatic service. Numerous employees of foreign missions were first ordered back to headquarters in Warsaw and then dismissed. Among the reasons listed in the documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were demonstrative Zionism and political unreliability.⁷ Nirenstein’s immigration to Palestine, his membership in the Jewish Brigade of the British Army, and his activity as a correspondent for Yiddish and Hebrew newspapers would have provided more than enough evidence to justify such accusations from the point of view of the Polish Communist authorities, though no record indicates that Nirenstein was asked to return.

Once in Poland, however, Nirenstein’s Zionist background must have played a role in why the state authorities did not let him return to Italy until after Stalin’s death. Despite the long separation, Wanda and Alberto remained close, exchanging frequent letters and phone calls, comforting one another, and grappling with the uncertainty of the situation. The letters primarily focus on family life, Alberto’s loneliness in Poland, and his initial efforts to settle and find work. Awareness of postal censorship may have prevented them from discussing other topics.⁸ Leftist ideas and concerns play a part in their exchange. At one point Wanda, for instance, evokes the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci to remind her husband to keep studying and read histories of the workers’ movement. Later she encour-

6 Alberto Nirenstajn, *Come le cinque dita di una mano: Storie di una famiglia di ebrei da Firenze a Gerusalemme* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1998), 11.

7 On the purges in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its justifications, see: Zbigniew Giryński, “Czystki polityczne w Ministerstwie Spraw Zagranicznych w latach 1947–1956,” *Czasy Nowożytne – periodyk poświęcony dziejom polskim i europejskim od XV do XX wieku* 4 (1999): 27–36, esp. 29–32.

8 See Corrispondenza inviata da Wanda Lattes a Alberto Nirenstein, sottoserie 1946–1953 and Corrispondenza inviata da Alberto Nirenstein a Wanda Lattes, sottoserie 1945–1953, Fondazione di Studi Storici “Filippo Turati,” Florence, Italy.

ages him by reminding him of the importance of their common struggle, using the Polish phrase “Walka o pokój” (struggle for peace).⁹

As Nirenstein’s records at the JHI show, he took up a position at the Wrocław branch of the Central Textile Office (*Centrala Tekstylna*), the state wholesale trade from December 1950 to mid-February 1951, before joining the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) in Warsaw as a researcher.¹⁰ The JHI was a formally independent Jewish institution, however, funded by the state. Its director, Ber Mark, was a Jewish Communist, journalist, and historian who had been in trouble several times with the Communist authorities in the Soviet Union during World War II and later in postwar Poland because of his decidedly Jewish perspective. Yet his political skills enabled him to overcome these difficulties. As director of the JHI, he used his position to support other Jewish scholars and activists in Poland who had run into comparable problems.¹¹

Little is known about the exact circumstances under which Nirenstein was able to leave Poland in 1954. He had become stateless after his return to Italy, indicating that he had to give up his Polish citizenship to leave the country, which was common for emigrants. Poles leaving the country lost their citizenship and passport and were supplied with a “travel document,” which stated their identity and stateless status.¹² Even though he spent the rest of his life in Italy, Nirenstein never became an Italian citizen. He had applied for Italian citizenship at one point, but his application was rejected, possibly because of his Communist sympathies. While changes to the Italian citizenship legislation would have most likely made a later application successful, he did not reapply. Obituaries published after his death speculate that on some level Nirenstein never felt that he entirely belonged and that, in the end, he preferred to remain stateless.¹³ After his return to Italy, Nirenstein continued to write and publish in Italian, Hebrew, and Yiddish. In 1958 he published his book on the Holocaust, titled *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek* (Remember what Amalek did to you), later translated into English as *A Tower from the Enemy: Contributions to a History of Jewish Resistance in Poland*.

9 See Wanda Lattes to Alberto Nirenstein, October 18, 1950, and December 28, 1950, corrispondenza inviata da Wanda Lattes a Alberto Nirenstein, sottoserie 1946–1953, I.1.4, 1950, Fondazione di Studi Storici “Filippo Turati,” Florence.

10 AŻIH signature 47, Personal file of Albert Nirensztein, f. 5, 12.

11 On the JHI, see Stephan Stach, “The Prospects and Perils of Holocaust Research in Communist Poland: The First Twenty Years of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 52, no. 2–3 (2022): 137–164.

12 See Dariusz Stola, *Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949–1989* (Warsaw: IPN, 2010), 39.

13 Ernesto Galli della Loggia, “L’ebreo che volle farsi apolide,” *Corriere della Sera*, September 3, 2007; Leonardo Tirabassi, “Con Alberto Nirenstein è andato via un pezzo di storia,” *Il Giornale della Toscana*, September 4, 2007.

Publications at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw

Nirenstein joined the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw at a moment when its transformation from a research institution rooted in the academic tradition of YIVO and Emanuel Ringelblum's *historiker krayz* into an institute that studied the history of Polish Jews from a Marxist-Leninist perspective was – at least formally – completed. The JHI emerged in 1947 from the Central Jewish Historical Commission, which historian Philip Friedman had directed from 1944 until his emigration in 1946. His successors Nachman Blumental and Józef Kermisz (Joseph Kermish) transformed the commission into a Jewish research institute during a brief period when autonomous Jewish life in postwar Poland appeared possible.¹⁴ Mark, in turn, brought the Institute ideologically on the course set by the Communist leadership, while he preserved its distinctly Jewish character. As he explained in a text published in the Institute's Yiddish Bulletin in 1949, such an alignment entailed that the situation in the ghettos had to be analyzed from the perspective of class struggle, while the German mass murder of Jews had to be understood as a consequence of the capitalist order in its imperialist manifestation.¹⁵

Even as Stalinism tightened its grip on Poland, research on the Holocaust remained possible, albeit as a marginal topic that had to be approached from a Marxist-Leninist perspective.¹⁶ Historians had to use appropriate, often artificial, terminology, drawing a clear distinction between “progressive” and “reactionary” elements in history, and frequently citing the works of Stalin and Lenin.¹⁷ The historian Shmuel Krakowski, who later worked at Yad Vashem, explained how this translated into practice: “until 1956 there was a quite strict interference of the

14 Stephan Stach, “‘The Spirit of the Time Left Its Stamp on These Works’: Writing the History of the Shoah at the Jewish Historical Institute in Stalinist Poland,” *Remembrance and Solidarity: Studies in 20th Century European History*, no. 5 (2016): 185–211, esp. 186–188.

15 “Undzere tsil,” in *Yedies: Byuletin fun yidisher historisher institut in polyn*. November 1949, 1.

16 Artur Eisenbach, for instance, another JHI staff member, received his doctorate (1953) and habilitation (1955) at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences with work related to the Holocaust, see Artur Eisenbach, *Hitlerowska polityka eksterminacji Żydów w latach 1939–1945 jako jeden z przejawów imperializmu niemieckiego* [Hitler's policy of extermination of the Jews between 1939 and 1945 as one of the manifestations of German imperialism] (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 1953); Eisenbach, *Pertraktacje anglo-amerykańskie z Niemcami a los ludności żydowskiej podczas II wojny światowej* [Anglo-American negotiations with Germany and the fate of the Jewish people during World War II] (Warsaw: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 1955).

17 Rafał Stobiecki, *Historiografia PRL. Ani dobra, ani mądra, ani piękna . . . ale skomplikowana* (Warsaw: Trio, 2007), 58–59.

Party and others and the course this took is called Stalinist. So, it is natural that tight boundaries were imposed on Jewish – and not only Jewish – historians [. . .], which one was not allowed to exceed, also a certain language and method. [. . .] Another method was to simply force historians to falsify history and accept certain non-existent facts, in order to exaggerate the importance of the communists.”¹⁸ Accordingly, the articles Nirenstein published while working at the Jewish Historical Institute had to comply with the state’s Communist perspective on the past though they did not downplay or marginalize the persecution of Jews during the war.

In his piece “Ruch oporu Żydów w Krakowie pod okupacją hitlerowską” (The Jewish resistance movement in Krakow under Hitlerite occupation) published in *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego* in January 1952, Nirenstein presents the Jewish resistance in Krakow as a movement which mainly consisted of two groups: 1) the Communists, who gathered around the activists of the Polish Workers’ Party (PPR), together with their armed organization, the People’s Guard (*Gwardia Ludowa* – GW), and 2) the Akiba group, consisting of members of Zionist, Bundist, and even orthodox youth organizations.¹⁹ In his lengthy article, he narrates the development and activity chronologically, supplementing the narrative with thematic subchapters at the end. Nirenstein situates the resistance against the background of the non-Jewish Polish resistance movement, which, according to the article, was composed of different groups: antisemitic and nationalist bandits that attacked Jews; passive Socialists, who were indifferent towards the fate of the Jews; and Communists, who showed full solidarity and support for the Jewish resistance.

In his article, Nirenstein claims that the Communists’ political and factual leadership was accepted without opposition in the Jewish resistance movement from which the Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB) emerged. He also underscores Jewish Communists’ experience in clandestine work and their close contacts with the non-Jewish Communist resistance outside the Warsaw Ghetto. At the same time, he points to the presumed lack of both these assets among Akiba. More generally, he describes the Jewish resistance as part of the anti-fascist national front, which fought along with Communist Poles against the Nazis. Besides the political framing of Communists as the leaders of the resistance, he describes the contribution of both, Akiba and Communists, to the resistance in detail. He also points to

¹⁸ Interview with Stefan [Shmuel] Krakowski, Oral History Archives of the Oral History Department of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University Jerusalem [OHD] (0050)0031, page 7.

¹⁹ Albert Nirensztein, “Ruch oporu Żydów w Krakowie pod okupacją hitlerowską,” *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, no. 3 (1952): 126–186. The article was also published in Yiddish, see A. Nirensztein, “Vidershtand fun yidn in kroke bes der hitlerisher okupatsye,” *Bleter far geszichte* vol. 5, no. 1–2 (1952): 226–263.

passive segments of Jewish society in the ghetto and Płaszów camp as well as those he perceived as traitors – the Jewish police (*Ordnungsdienst*) and Jewish Gestapo-collaborators.

The narrative presentation in the article follows the above outlined Marxist-Leninist historiography in its assessment of the respective groups in the Polish and Jewish resistance and also in the Jewish community as a whole. Through their leadership, the Communists succeed in persuading passive groups – the socialists in the Polish resistance and the non-Communist members of the resistance in the Jewish community – to act. In the Jewish context, the role of reactionary forces falls to the Jewish councils (*Judenräte*) and the Jewish police, while in the Polish resistance, ultimately, all groups beyond the Communists and socialists are considered as such. This kind of piecemeal division of society undoubtedly distorts the much more complex historical reality in which Polish and Jewish actors operated in occupied Poland. The Polish underground was dominated not by the Communists, but by the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa* – AK), whose allegiance was to the Polish government-in-exile in London. The armed resistance also included Socialist groups. The Home Army's relationship with the Jewish population was marked by major regional differences and depended heavily on local structures, but it was by no means generally anti-Jewish, and, if only occasionally, included Jewish fighters in its ranks.²⁰ Yet given the Home Army's decidedly anti-Communist stance, some of whose units also resisted the Red Army, made it impossible to portray the organization in a positive light. In contrast to the Home Army, the National Armed Forces (*Narodowe Siły Zbrojne*, NSZ), which were politically to the right, were openly antisemitic.²¹

In the Jewish resistance, Communists played a more prominent role, relying on existing organizational structures. Communist and leftist youth movements had been strong among Polish Jews before the war. However, Nirenstein's narration of the Communists' indisputable leadership among the Jewish resistance in Krakow remains questionable. In the volume *Ruch podziemny w gettach i obozach* [The underground movement in ghettos and camps], published in 1946 in a series issued by the Krakow branch of the Jewish Historical Commission, the editor Betti Ajzensztajn presents the situation differently. Citing members of the Jewish

20 Włodzimierz Borodziej, *Geschichte Polens im 20. Jahrhundert* (München: C.H.Beck, 2010), 210–216. In the area surrounding the town of Miechów, located almost 40 km north of Kraków, was a unit of the Home Army under the command of the Jewish socialist Michał Borwicz, who would head the Kraków branch of the Jewish Historical Commission immediately after the war. See Klaus Kempter, *Joseph Wulf. Ein Historikerschicksal in Deutschland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 2013), 78.

21 Borodziej, *Geschichte Polens*, 210–216.

underground, she described the relationship between Akiba and the Communists thus: “Although ideologically distant from each other (which quite often caused friction and dissonance), the mentioned organizations cooperated in a number of anti-German actions.”²²

The portrayal of the Jewish resistance within the framework enforced by the Communist party led to some distortions in Nirenstein’s work, such as the exaggerated role given to the Communists as well as the schematic representation of social groups in occupied Poland, which ultimately serves to portray the historical situation in a pattern of class struggle.²³ In the contemporary Polish historiography, however, such framing was a condition for being able to publish scholarly works. Nirenstein’s later writings in Italian show his ability to depict the role of the separate groups within the resistance in a more nuanced way. Other aspects which from today’s perspective appear biased or problematic, like his depiction of the Jewish councils and the Jewish police, are not necessarily due to political pressure. A critical perspective on “Jewish traitors” was widespread among surviving Jews, not merely among those on the far left or those within Communist Europe.

Nirenstein wrote another article while working at the Jewish Historical Institute, which treats the situation of the Jews in Upper Silesia, especially in the Dąbrowa Coal Basin, a highly industrialized region in Poland’s southwest, which had been annexed to the German Reich in 1939. The article, however, remained unpublished until Nirenstein left Poland in 1954. A heavily abridged version of the text was published in 2001 in the *Jewish History Quarterly*, the journal of the JHI.²⁴

The lengthy manuscript begins with an introductory section titled “general background.” There Nirenstein frames the Jewish resistance in the region as an integral part of the general Polish resistance, which he – in accordance with the Stalinist historical narrative – describes as an exclusive effort of Communist and left-wing socialist actors.²⁵ His description of the prewar Jewish communities of Sosnowiec and Katowice as dominated by “cosmopolitan, wealthy bourgeoisie,” which he contrasts with the predominantly working-class Jewish community in

22 Betti Ajzensztajn, *Ruch podziemny w ghettach i obozach, Materiały i dokumenty* (Kraków: Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna w Polsce, 1946), 82.

23 Borodziej, *Geschichte Polens*, 210–216.

24 Albert Nirensztajn, “Ruch oporu Żydów Zagłębiu Dąbrowskim pod okupacją hitlerowską,” *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów / Jewish History Quarterly*, no. 200 (2001): 587–606.

25 The original manuscript does not have an archival signature but is located in AŻIH as: Alberto Nirensztajn, “Ruch Oporu Żydów na Śląsku pod okupacją niemiecką.” It is 119 typewritten pages in length. The part on the general background comprises pages 1–5.

Będzin, serves as an example of his Marxist approach.²⁶ Nirenstein's reference to the fate of the resistance fighter Jadzia Szpigelman towards the end of the article is a telling example of the need to emphasize the positive role of the Soviet Union and at the same time underlines the limits of what could be said, or written, under Stalinism. Referring to her report recorded in the JHI, he writes about Szpigelman's successful escape via Slovakia to Moscow in 1944 thanks to the support of Soviet partisans.²⁷ He fails to mention that soon after her arrival she was imprisoned on charges of espionage in the notorious Lubyanka prison, where she remained until her deportation to Poland in early 1948.²⁸

However, in the sections on Jewish youth organizations, whose members had formed the Jewish Fighting Organization, Nirenstein hardly mentions Communists but focuses almost entirely on Zionist groups like Hashomer Hatzair or Dror. He tried to circumvent this ideologically delicate problem by pointing out that the groups involved in the Jewish resistance movement "did not concern themselves with the obsolete and irrelevant issues of their Zionist ideology at the time" but "treated the current issues in a realistic way."²⁹ Nevertheless, it seemed important to him to mention the names of the organizations in his article instead of concealing their Zionist orientation with nebulous words.

The article also extensively treats the role of the Jewish councils, highlighting that they bore part of the responsibility for the deportations. The Nazis established these administrative institutions in the ghettos of occupied Eastern Europe to assist in implementing their orders and directives, to supply forced labor, and eventually to cooperate in the deportations. Since the Jewish councils had to play the role of middlemen between the Germans and the Jewish populations, the ghetto inhabitants directed much of their frustration and anger at the *Judenräte* as well as the Jewish police, and many Eastern European Jewish ghetto writers and chroniclers as well as postwar memoirists depicted the Jewish police and *Judenräte* leaders as collaborators and villains.³⁰ While a negative perception or even condemnation of the *Judenrat* was common among members of the underground as well as among survivors, Nirenstein's writing situates the *Judenrat* within a Marxist understanding of class conflict between impoverished Jewish

²⁶ Nirensztejn, "Ruch Oporu Żydów na Śląsku," 36.

²⁷ Nirensztejn, "Ruch Oporu Żydów na Śląsku," 102–104.

²⁸ AŻIH, signature 301/3536, Testimony of Jadzia Szpigelman, February 6, 1948, f. 4.

²⁹ Nirenstein, "Ruch Oporu Żydów na Śląsku," 39.

³⁰ See Avinoam Patt, "Jewish Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto," in *Jewish Resistance against the Nazis*, ed. Patrick Henry (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 393–425; Katarzyna Person, *Warsaw Ghetto Police: The Jewish Order Service during the Nazi Occupation*, trans. Zygmunt Nowak-Soliński (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

masses on the one side, and wealthy Jews, the *Judenrat*, and Jewish police on the other. According to this essay, the resistance was an uprising against the “Oligarchy of the *Judenrat*.”

Nirenstein's, as well as other publications produced at the Jewish Historical Institute during this period, contain sometimes crude ideological concessions to Stalinist propaganda and exaggerate the role of Communists in the Jewish resistance. These concessions resulted from general political pressure to adopt a narrative shaped according to the political line, as well as concrete fears of antisemitic repression. During the Slánský trial in Prague, for instance, the government received a letter denouncing the institute's employees as “Jewish nationalists.”³¹ At the same time, the JHI researchers often were Communists or had a Marxist background and understood the Holocaust from this perspective. All these factors influenced the character of the articles published by JHI researchers to varying degrees.

Nevertheless, the texts published in Stalinist Poland contained quotations and information from sources that were not accessible in the West and thus provided crucial information for Western historians of the Holocaust. Nirenstein was aware of the limited exposure to Eastern European sources in Western scholarship, a point which he highlighted in a review of the London-based *Wiener Library Bulletin* (WLB). Beyond accusing the WLB of pretending to be “progressive,” while failing to unmask the “true sources and forces of the neo-Nazism in West Germany,” Nirenstein also claimed that the journal disregarded literature from outside the Western hemisphere.³² The WLB editors ignored the ideological attack, but staunchly rejected the accusation that they were ignoring literature from the Communist part of Europe.³³ The dispute soon turned into a friendly exchange of letters. The Wiener Library took the first step with a letter, proposing an exchange of publications between the two institutions, an offer the JHI happily accepted.³⁴ Thus, even before his return to Italy, Nirenstein had been aware of the need to make sources and literature from the eastern side of the Iron Curtain available to Western audiences, which he did with the publication of his source collection.

31 Stach, “The Prospects and Perils of Holocaust Research,” 146.

32 A. Nirensytein, “Vegn viner leybreri byuletin,” *Bleter far gesichte* 5, no. 4 (1952): 169–175.

33 “Criticism from the East,” *Wiener Library Bulletin* 7, no. 3–4 (May–August 1953), 16; “The *Wiener Library Bulletin* under Fire: Strictures in a Warsaw Learned Journal,” *Wiener Library Bulletin* 7, no. 3–4 (May–August 1953), 27.

34 AŽIH, signature 310/296, Letter of Alfred Wiener to B. Mark, May 5, 1953; Letter of B. Mark to Alfred Wiener, May 21, 1953.

Early Publications in Italian

Upon his return from Poland, Nirenstein published several articles in the Florentine leftist journal *Il ponte: rivista mensile di politica e letteratura fondata da Piero Calamandrei*. Piero Calamandrei was one of the founders of the *Partito d'Azione*, an anti-fascist leftist party founded by members of the *Giustizia e Libertà* resistance group to which Wanda Lattes, Nirenstein's wife, had also belonged. Nirenstein wrote about Polish politics as well as book reviews, including a review of the autobiography of Hjalmar Schacht, the former Reichsbank president and defendant before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. In 1954 he published a short essay on the Holocaust, titled, "Appunti sul grande sterminio," (Notes on the great extermination). The article provides an overview of Nazi plans to exterminate European Jews, setting the genocide within the context of World War II. Nirenstein highlights, as in his earlier work, the role of the *Judenrat*, blaming it for "becoming a tool that the Nazis used so comfortably in the implementation of their horrible policy towards the Jewish masses."³⁵ His analysis of the relations within the camps also here emphasizes class, distinguishing between the elite (*Judenrat*) and the Jewish masses.

At the beginning of the essay, Nirenstein highlights the role of the German *Wehrmacht* in the extermination of Polish Jews. In a review of the article, the Italian Jewish scholar Dante Lattes, likewise, emphasizes the links between the war and the genocidal persecution. We can see this emphasis on the *Wehrmacht*'s role in the murder of European Jews within the contemporary debate around West German rearmament, which Nirenstein, as many other European Jews, vehemently opposed. In a letter to Ber Mark from December 1954, Nirenstein writes that he had been glad to have read that Mark would be among the participants of a Jewish conference protesting German rearmament and indicates that he would have liked to join the protest in Paris, though his lack of citizenship and difficulty in obtaining a visa made travel difficult.

Nirenstein's opposition to German rearmament needs little explanation, though his reasons for highlighting his position in the letter to Mark appear to go beyond simple solidarity. At the time of writing this letter, Nirenstein had begun work on his book and secured a contract with the Italian publishing house Einaudi. He wanted Mark to send him a specific photograph that he intended to use in the book but had not received any response to his previous requests. Nirenstein writes,

35 Alberto Nirenstajn, "Appunti sul grande sterminio," *Il Ponte: Rivista di politica, economia e cultura fondata da Piero Calamandrei* (Florence, 1954), no. 6, 887–898.

you may not realize that the book [. . .] serves the same purpose in terms of Germany's rearmament as the conference I read about today. Why don't you want to contribute to this area as well? Italy has a population of about 50 million, isn't that enough to make it important enough to show them in photographs (in Italy, photographs mean more than text) what German militarism did to the Jews."³⁶

Mark responds somewhat coolly that he does not know which particular photographs Nirenstein hopes to receive and that he published all the most important photographs in his book, inviting Nirenstein to take the photographs he needed from there. While Nirenstein may not have received these particular photographs, four years later his book – *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, a collection of sources dedicated to the Holocaust in Poland – primarily included diaries and documents that Nirenstein had gathered at the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland.

Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek (1958)

With over 400 pages in length, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek* is a substantial book containing a variety of sources, most of which focus on the Jewish resistance in the ghettos and camps. Nirenstein provides an introduction to the volume as well as shorter introductions to the various texts. The "Jewish Resistance" is the book's dominant topic, and indeed its working title was "History of the Jewish Resistance." The editors at Einaudi, one of Italy's most prestigious publishers, received Nirenstein's book proposal favorably. While they suggested that the book "does not add much to what has already been said in synthesis by Poliakov," it was of "extreme interest. The interest comes above all from the immediate contact of the reader with the documents."³⁷ The editors considered the sources on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as particularly important. In Italy, the memory of the *Resistenza*, the Italian resistance against Nazi Germans and the Fascist Republicans, formed a cornerstone of postwar reconstruction and memory. Nirenstein's book, while not focusing on the *Resistenza*, provided its readership with a different story of resistance against Nazism which the publisher assumed would be of great interest.

The documents that Nirenstein had compiled for his book had mostly appeared in previous document editions and scholarly journals in Poland in Polish

³⁶ Nirenstein to Mark, Florence, December 10, 1954, AŽIH, signature 310/311, f. 34, 35.

³⁷ Tommaso Munari, *I verbali del mercoledì: Riunioni editoriali Einaudi 1953–1963* (Turin: Einaudi, 2013), 104, 182.

or Yiddish. These mainly included publications of the JHI, but also the Bulletin of the Chief Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes against the Polish Nation and others. While most of these publications had been accessible outside Poland and the Eastern Bloc and had reached a readership in the Eastern European Jewish diaspora, primarily in the United States, France, and Israel, they remained inaccessible to those who did not have the necessary language skills. Through translation, Nirenstein made them accessible first to an Italian and later to an English-speaking readership.

The Italian edition focused on documents that explicitly reflected Jewish perspectives. These included excerpts of numerous materials from Emanuel Ringelblum's underground archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, both parts of which were discovered in 1946 and 1950 and have been held in the JHI archive to this day. Nirenstein's selection includes, among others, Jehoshua Perle's "Khurbn Varshe," a disturbing account of the large-scale deportation actions from the Warsaw Ghetto in the summer of 1942.³⁸ Perle accuses the *Judenrat* and the Jewish police of assisting the Germans in the murder of their own people and blames the victims for failing to resist their extermination. Its first publication in *Bleter far geshichte* had caused outrage in the American Yiddish-language press and led to speculations that it was a forgery by the "Yevsek historians" of the JHI.³⁹ Also included were excerpts from Ringelblum's notes from the Warsaw Ghetto,⁴⁰ which were published by the JHI in 1952.⁴¹ As in the other documents from the Ringelblum Archive published during the Stalinist period, the institute's editors "removed passages which they found 'controversial,' 'shameful,' or ideologically unsound."⁴² The Yiddish edition from 1952 published by Idisz Buch served as the

38 Jehoshua Perle was a Yiddish writer born in Poland in 1888. During the war, he was involved in the Warsaw ghetto underground cultural organization Yizkor. He was deported to Auschwitz and murdered in 1943.

39 See Alberto Nirenstajn, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, 58–95; first published as: *** [Jehoshua Perle], "Khurbn Varshe," *Bleter far geshikhte* 4, no. 3 (1951): 101–140. At the time of its first publication, the author was not yet identified, which further fueled speculation as to whether it was a forgery, see: Sven-Erik Rose, "The Oyneg Shabes Archive and the Cold War: The Case of Yehoshue Perle's Khurbn Varshe," *New German Critique* 38, no. 1 (2011): 181–215; Stach, "The Spirit of the Time," 193–194.

40 See Nirenstajn, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, 26–57.

41 Emanuel Ringelblum, *Notitsn fun varshever geto*, (Varshe: Idisz Buch, 1952). The Yiddish edition of Ringelblum's notes was positively received, although Joseph Kermish and Nachman Blumental pointed out numerous distortions. See Stach, "The Prospects and Perils of Holocaust Research," 144–146.

42 Katarzyna Person and Agnieszka Żółkiewska, "Edition of Documents from the Ringelblum Archive (the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto) in Stalinist Poland," in *Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism: Remembering the Holocaust in State-Socialist Eastern Europe*, ed. Kata

basis for the translated fragments included in Nirenstein's book as well as for Jacob Sloan's unlicensed English translation of 1958.⁴³

The section on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising contains, among other texts, excerpts from the diary of Ludwik Landau, a Polish-Jewish economist who observed the uprising outside the ghetto from the so-called Aryan side.⁴⁴ It also contains perpetrator sources, such as excerpts from SS General Jürgen Stroop's report on the suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising,⁴⁵ as well as excerpts from the minutes of the 1951 Warsaw trial against Stroop and Franz Konrad.⁴⁶ Nirenstein also included material on the resistance in other ghettos and camps, as for instance excerpts from Gusta Draeger's memoirs, written before her execution by the Germans in November 1943. The text had been originally published by the Krakow branch of the Central Jewish Historical Commission under the title "Justyna's Diary" in 1946.⁴⁷ Nirenstein also included Alexander Pechersky's account of the uprising in Sobibór extermination camp.⁴⁸ Pechersky had been a Jewish Red Army soldier and leader of the uprising. Published originally in Russian in 1945, the initial version omitted that it was almost exclusively Jews who had been murdered in Sobibór,⁴⁹ in contrast to the 1946 Yiddish version, published by the Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee's publishing house *Der Emes*.⁵⁰ Nirenstein's translation was either based on this Yiddish version or its Polish translation published

Bohus, Peter Hallama, and Stephan Stach (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022), 21–37, quote 37.

43 Emmanuel [sic] Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel [sic] Ringelblum*, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1958).

44 Nirenstajn, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, 181–188. Ber Mark had published these excerpts in a collection of Yiddish sources on the tenth anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising: Tsum tsehtn yortog fun oyfshtand in varshever geto. Dokumentn un materialn. Gezaml't un mit a forvort un bamerkungen fun B. Mark (Warsaw: Idish buch, 1953), 251–266.

45 See Nirenstajn, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, 173–210. Probably taken from: Stanisław Piotrowski, ed., *Sprawozdanie Juergena Stroopa o zniszczeniu getta warszawskiego* (Warsaw: Książka, 1948).

46 See Nirenstajn, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, 267–271. Probably taken from: "Stenogram fun protses kegn jirgen stroop un frants konrad," *Bleter far geszichte* 6, no. 1–2 (1953): passim.

47 See Nirenstajn, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, 278–292. First published as: G. Draenger, *Pamiętnik Justyny* (Kraków: Wojewódzka Żydowska Komisja Historyczna, 1946).

48 See Nirenstajn, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, 364–402. "Justyna" had been her code name in the Krakow Jewish resistance, where she was active as a member of Akiba.

49 Alexander Pechersky, *Vosstanye v Sobiburovskom lagere* (Rostov: Rostizdat, 1945).

50 A. Petshorski, *Der oyfshtand in sobibur* (Moskve: Der emes, 1946).

in the Bulletin of the JHI in 1952.⁵¹ Nirenstein's book does not contain bibliographical information and does not indicate that the majority of the printed documents had already been published in Communist Poland.

Nirenstein's proposal for *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek* came at a time of renewed interest in publications on the murder of European Jews in Italy. In the immediate aftermath of the war, several memoirs of survivors had been published, but after these initial publications the topic had garnered little interest for about a decade. Einaudi started to acquire books on Nazi camps in the mid-1950s, beginning with the translation of Anne Frank's diary, Robert Antelme's *The Human Race*, and Léon Poliakov's history of anti-Jewish persecution, *Bréviaire de la haine: Le IIIe Reich et les juifs*. Einaudi also published a new edition of Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* in 1958 after it had initially rejected the book in 1947. *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek* fit neatly within this trajectory.⁵²

The book begins with a preface in which Nirenstein introduces the Polish-Jewish world of his origin to his Italian audience and emphasizes the extent of its destruction. He highlights the rich culture and the central role Jews had played in prewar Poland, stressing that 3.5 million Jews had lived there before the Nazi occupation,

and all of them perished in the great extermination. They formed one of the most flourishing, authentic, and important groups among the world's Jewish population. Moreover, they were the custodians of its oldest traditions, and the heirs of its distinctive culture.⁵³

Pride in past achievements, as well as pain and grief for a lost world, are reflected in these pages:

The *sofer*, the mothers who lit the candles on the Sabbath eve for family prayers, the fathers who blessed their sons with the 4,000-year-old rite of the Patriarch Isaac, the rabbis who every Sabbath from the pulpits of countless synagogues, interpreted the books of the Old Testament – all were destroyed by the enemy. The pulpits were desecrated, the synagogues burned, the cemeteries ploughed up, the tombstones used to pave the roads to the luxurious villas of the new rulers.⁵⁴

51 A. Peczkowski, "Powstanie w Sobiborze," *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego*, no. 3 (1952): 3–45. On the history of the different versions of Pechersky's account, see Ingrid Damerow, "Einführung," in *Bericht über den Aufstand in Sobibor*, ed. Aleksandr Petscherski (Berlin: Metropol, 2018), 9–26, esp. 17–20.

52 Anna Baldini, "Primo Levi and the Italian Memory of the Shoah," *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC*, no. 7 (July 2014): 156–177.

53 Albert Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy: Contributions to a History of Jewish Resistance in Poland* (New York: Orion, 1959), vii. Quotations stem from the English version unless the English edition differs from the original Italian version.

54 Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, vii.

Nirenstein, writing not even two decades after the end of the war, grapples with the immense loss, repeating over and over again the totality of the destruction: “Nothing remains of all that. In three years, the enemy destroyed a millennial culture, the moral and material creation of hundreds of generations.”⁵⁵

In his preface, Nirenstein stresses his wish to bring this destroyed world closer to his Italian audience, writing, “this book aims to make Italian men and women, so rightly proud of their nation, of their traditions and national and social sentiments, aware of the experiences of another ancient and proud people.”⁵⁶ Nothing in his writing points to Italy’s past as a Fascist country, in sync with the dominant Italian postwar narrative, which largely obfuscated the country’s Fascist past and depicted Italians as essentially good and honorable people, who had opposed both Fascism and the persecution of Jews.⁵⁷ At the end of the war, leading Christian Democrats as well as Communists and Socialists aimed at spreading the narrative of an Italy unified in a patriotic war of liberation in order to boost their legitimacy, improve Italy’s position in the postwar order, and define themselves in opposition to the Fascist regime.⁵⁸ Italian Jewish postwar discourse

⁵⁵ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, vii.

⁵⁶ Nirenstajn, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, viii.

⁵⁷ The image of the “good Italian” emerged toward the end of the war. After the war, Italy’s postwar government and political elites more broadly, including both the Communist Party and the Christian Democrats, aimed to portray Italians as rescuers of Jews, while obfuscating war crimes to strengthen Italy’s position in the peace negotiations. The Italian press widely propagated the myth of the Italian people as innocent victims who had been horrified by antisemitic persecution, and most Italians across the political spectrum embraced this version of the past. As historians such as Filippo Focardi and Angelo Del Boca have shown, the myth of the good Italian played a crucial role in forming the Italian postwar national identity. There is substantial literature on the myth of the good Italian. See for instance Filippo Focardi, *L’immagine del cattivo tedesco e il mito del bravo italiano* (Padua: Rinoceronte, 2005); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *A Lesser Evil? Italian Fascism in/and the Totalitarian Equation* (London: Routledge, 2005); Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Beat, 2021); David Bidussa, *Il mito del bravo italiano* (Milan: Saggiatore, 1994); Filippo Focardi and Lutz Klinkhammer, “The Question of Fascist Italy’s War Crimes: The Construction of a Self-Acquitting Myth (1943–1948),” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 9, no. 3 (2007): 330–348; Claudio Fogu, “Italiani brava gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian Politics of Memory,” in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu (New York: Duke University Press, 2006), 147–176.

⁵⁸ There is vast literature on the narrative of an Italy unified in its resistance against the German occupier. See for example Jonathan Dunnage, “Making Better Italians: Issues of National Identity in the Italian Social Republic and the Resistance,” in *The Politics of Italian National Identity: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Gino Bedani and B. A. Haddock (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 191–212; Paolo Pezzino, “The Italian Resistance between History and Memory,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10, no. 4 (2006): 396–412; Filippo Focardi, *La guerra della*

aimed at merging the persecution of Jews with this narrative of Italian resistance against the German occupiers.⁵⁹ Nirenstein's book aligned closely with the dominant Italian Jewish postwar discourse, which framed Jewish war experiences within a narrative of a unified anti-fascist resistance. The concluding sentence of the preface, for instance, highlights anti-fascist unity against Nazism:

"The Avengers of the Ghetto," the partisan brigade formed by the survivors of the struggle who escaped through the sewers of the Warsaw Ghetto, formed the link which wedded the cause of the Polish Jews to the struggle for freedom of all the peoples oppressed by Nazism.⁶⁰

While Nirenstein does not reflect on Italy's history of Fascism and perpetration, he engages with the question of German guilt, if briefly. As suggested in his letter to Mark, Nirenstein raises the question of German rearmament, but his stated intentions for the book go beyond this particular issue. He writes,

The fact that thousands of truckloads of children were torn from their parents by force to be brutally slaughtered or asphyxiated by Zyklon B poses not merely the problem of Germany or German rearmament, but the problem of the limits of a people's humanity [. . .]. On reading these pages, written by men, women and children confronting certain death, the sensitive reader cannot fail to ask himself: How was it possible?⁶¹

Yet Nirenstein never tries to provide a definite answer to the question.

The book's preface, the other introductory texts, and the chosen sources largely do not concern themselves with why the Nazis committed the genocide. He discusses the camps as a way to understand human nature, but the actions of the Nazi perpetrators play a marginal role – perhaps, in his view, they lie beyond what can be understood. His focus remains on the conduct of the Jewish victims. The records he publishes, Nirenstein argues, "allow us to present an accurate and comprehensive study of the behaviour of millions of people faced with imminent death."⁶² While in the past decades, Holocaust scholars have highlighted the vic-

memoria: La Resistenza nel dibattito politico italiano dal 1945 a oggi (Bari: Laterza, 2020); Illara Poggiolini and Jan-Werner Müller, "Translating Memories of War and Co-Belligerency into Politics: The Italian Post-War Experience," in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 223–243.

⁵⁹ Guri Schwarz, "On Myth Making and Nation Building: The Genesis of the 'Myth of the Good Italian,' 1943–1947," *Yad Vashem Studies* 36, no.1 (2008), 112. See also Anna Koch, *Home after Fascism: Italian and German Jews after the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023).

⁶⁰ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, ix.

⁶¹ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, viii.

⁶² Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, viii.

tims' "choiceless choices" and limitations of agency,⁶³ Nirenstein, as many of his contemporaries, did not refrain from judging what he considered a "weakness of human nature." He scrutinizes those Jews who, in his view, betrayed other Jews: "Where in their actions does the typical behaviour inspired by the instinct of self-preservation end, and where does the phenomenon of degeneration and brutalization to which the weak and egotistical abandon themselves in critical situations begin?"⁶⁴

Nirenstein, as in his earlier articles, divides Jews into two groups: the victimized Jewish masses and a Jewish elite, comprised of the *Judenrat* and the Jewish police who collaborated with the Nazi perpetrators:

What can we say of the limits of human solidarity, of national unity and human compassion, when we think of the luxurious life led by the leaders, the opportunists, the wealthy black marketeers and Gestapo agents, among the heaps of corpses of children and beggars, among thousands of starving, typhoid-ridden, barefooted human beings?⁶⁵

He returns to condemning those he perceives as collaborators and profiteers at different points within the volume, while at the same time making clear that the actions of this "privileged elite" did not reflect the conduct of Jews more broadly. He writes for instance in his introduction to the Warsaw Ghetto diary by Joshua Perle,

the collaboration of the Judenrat and the treason of the Jewish Police at the service of the Germans do not in any way involve the people nor the Ghetto as such. Elsewhere, these people of the Ghetto have shown us examples of the greatest heroism and spirit of sacrifice.⁶⁶

It is on this sacrifice – namely that of the resistance – that Nirenstein's book primarily focuses, and it is his depiction of the Jewish resistance that reveals his political views most clearly. The book centers on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (April 19, 1943 – May 16, 1943), which, as the first and the largest mass uprising of Jews against the Nazis, held and still holds a central place in Jewish memory. Emphasizing Jewish resistance rather than Jewish victimhood played a crucial role in the early commemoration of the Holocaust in Italy as elsewhere in Europe, as

⁶³ Lawrence L. Langer, "The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps," *Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 4, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 53–58. See also Primo Levi's discussion of the "grey zone," in *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, 1988), 22–51; Christopher Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 297. On the Jewish police, see Person, *Warsaw Ghetto Police*.

⁶⁴ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, viii.

⁶⁵ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, ix.

⁶⁶ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, 7.

Jews responded to an emerging hierarchy that placed fighters against Nazism above its victims.

While Nirenstein's book primarily relates the history of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and other uprisings via primary sources, his various introductory texts provide the reader with his interpretation. Nirenstein suggests that the uprising began once people in the ghetto became aware of the Germans' true intentions and consequently stopped obeying the *Judenrat*. While resistance in many forms existed before the uprising, the armed resistance indeed started when the plans for the Nazi genocide of the Jews were fully realized.⁶⁷ Nirenstein gives a central role to the leftist Zionists as well as the Communists in initiating and organizing a united struggle. Above all, he praises the *Chalutzim*, the Zionist youth pioneers, to whom he had been close before leaving Poland:

The *Chalutzim* soon became responsible for the fate of the Jewish community in the widest sense of the word. They became the repository of the conscience of the Jewish people. An understanding of this phenomenon makes it evident why the *Chalutzim* were the principal organizers of the struggle in the most difficult and desperate period in the history of the Jews.⁶⁸

Indeed, Zionist youth leaders played a crucial role in organizing armed resistance, and Nirenstein is also correct in maintaining that the Bund initially rejected a proposal by He-Halutz, the umbrella organization of Zionist youth groups, to create a united front, though there is less grounds for his judgmental suggestion that the Bund,

suffered from a complex of exasperated class hatred. Its leaders could not assess the specific situation in the ghettos nor the prospect of extermination. For a considerable time the Bund continued to uphold the absurd theory that Jewish resistance should depend strictly on that of the Poles and excluded the possibility of common action with the Jewish bourgeoisie.⁶⁹

Next to the left Zionists, Nirenstein depicts the Communists as "among the principal organizers of the revolt" and he argues that the impetus for fighting came with a "general awakening of the European resistance in the spring of 1942."⁷⁰ He writes further that the Jewish Communists within the ghetto formed an anti-fascist front with the left Zionists, referring to the Anti-Fascist Bloc, which was formed by the Left Poalei Zion in alliance with the Polish Workers' Party (PPR), and joined by

⁶⁷ Patt, "Jewish Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto," 409.

⁶⁸ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, 82.

⁶⁹ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, 83. According to Patt, the Bund "felt it was premature to organize a unified fighting organization," Patt, "Jewish Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto," 409.

⁷⁰ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, 85.

Hashomer Hatzair. This Anti-Fascist Bloc was, however, short-lived. Nirenstein refers to political infighting between the groups, but writes that “the divergences and the political hues of the various factions disappeared almost completely a little later when the great deportations to the gas ovens of 85 per cent of the population of the Warsaw Ghetto took place in the summer of 1942.” Indeed once the news of the liquidation of the ghetto became known, the left-wing and centrist Zionist youth movements, the Communists as well as the Bund, formed the Jewish National Committee and thus joined forces to fight against the deportation actions. Nirenstein’s account highlights the unifying spirit of the resistance: “these heroic fighters opened their minds and their hearts to all the forces of resistance outside the walls of the Ghetto, in Poland and in the whole of Europe.”⁷¹

The one group Nirenstein depicts as remaining outside this united Jewish front were the “bourgeois parties and circles in the Ghetto, Zionist and non-Zionist,” whom he depicts as “to a large extent opportunist and pusillanimous.”⁷² Indeed, the Revisionist Zionists and Betar did not join the Jewish National Committee, however, Nirenstein mentions merely in passing that they formed a separate armed organization. Yet he does acknowledge, if only in a footnote, that the Revisionists took the “lead in the fight against all oppressors of the Jewish people and they fought side by side with the other fighters in the ghettos.”⁷³

Briefly, Nirenstein evaluates the role of the Polish population, concluding that they “did very little to help the uprising.” He does not exclude the Communist left from this critique and is overall slightly more critical toward the Communists than in his earlier articles: “The left wing of course sympathized with the combatants of the Ghetto, declared its solidarity with them in its clandestine newspaper, helped the couriers and emissaries of the Ghetto who stole into the Aryan districts in search of arms.” But “without doubt the help given to the Ghetto in its struggle could have been much greater.” He condemns the “behavior of right-wing circles and the nationalist Poles [as] frankly abominable,”⁷⁴ perceiving these circles as antisemitic and unwilling to provide any help. Nirenstein’s depiction of the role of the various political factions inside and outside the ghetto would later anger some of his readers, though his initial Italian readership found little to object to in his account.

Nirenstein’s Italian and Italian Jewish readership was mostly not familiar with the conflicts between the different political factions among Polish Jews and would have little to take issue with his favoring of the left Zionists, since among

⁷¹ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, 85–86.

⁷² Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, 84.

⁷³ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, 2.

⁷⁴ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, 105–106.

Italian Jews, and in particular within the Italian Jewish intellectual and political elite, a Zionist perspective became dominant after the war.⁷⁵ *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek* was well received in Italy.⁷⁶ As one of the first books on the Holocaust, it had significant influence in the 1950s and '60s. It served, for instance, alongside visits to Auschwitz and Warsaw, as inspiration for Luigi Nono's electronic composition *Ricorda cosa ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz* (Remember what they did to you in Auschwitz) (1966), as the title indicates. Nono read *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, marked and annotated his copy, proving his careful engagement with the text.⁷⁷

Shortly after its publication, Giorgio Romano reviewed Nirenstein's book for *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, one of the most prestigious Italian Jewish cultural journals. Romano suggests that the book "has been greeted by critics with respect and consideration [. . .] which is owed to the truthful testimony [. . .] of a survivor who collects documents of a tragedy that has no equal in the history of civilized peoples."⁷⁸ He highlights that the heart-breaking accounts of suffering and resistance leave an enormous impression on the reader, and praises Nirenstein for including multiple voices, which allow the reader to gain "a full picture of the lives of Polish Jews during the time of German occupation." In his view, Nirenstein succeeds in his aim to provide Italians with a sense of Polish Jewish life before the war, which is depicted with "an efficacy and a very delicate sense of poetry; I had never read anything so clear and vibrant on this subject." Nirenstein, Romano writes, allows the reader to gain an understanding of Polish Jewish history, which Western scholars had frequently ignored, and he in particular valued the inclusion of accounts of Jewish resistance.

While later others depicted the book as politically biased, Romano commends it for its objectivity: "And here we should say something about the extreme care and intelligence with which the material has been chosen and divided and about the author's noble effort to preserve – despite his suffering that vibrates [. . .] on every page – an objective tone and a certain detachment." He concludes:

An admirable book because it tries to tell without rancour, which must be read even if the heart is almost always tightened in such a way as to make us take our breath away; a book

⁷⁵ Guri Schwarz, *Ritrovare se stessi: gli ebrei nell'Italia postfascista* (Rome: Laterza, 2004); Koch, *Home after Fascism*, 172–177.

⁷⁶ Robert Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944–2010* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 174–175.

⁷⁷ Carola Nielinger-Vakil, Luigi Nono, *A Composer in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 101–102.

⁷⁸ Giorgio Romano, review of *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, by Alberto Nirenstein, *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 4, no. 11/12 (November–December 1958): 472.

to keep clearly visible in front of our eyes to always remember what Amalek did to us, even if we are unharmed and unscathed.⁷⁹

As an Italian Jew, Romano evaluates the book within a discursive framework that valued stories of Jewish resistance, and he perceived Nirenstein primarily as a Polish Jew whose origin provided authority to share the history of the Jews in Poland, which he sees as related to but also distinct from the Italian Jewish experience.

A Tower from the Enemy

Soon after its publication, the book was translated into English. It was published with Orion Press in a shortened version adapted to the American market in 1959. The English version received a new title: *A Tower from the Enemy: Contributions to a History of Jewish Resistance in Poland*, and the epigraph, a quote from Deuteronomy 25:17–19 that commands the Jewish people to remember what Amalek did, was not included. The reference to German rearmament was likewise omitted and the specific reference to Italians as an ancient people was universalized to “men and women all over the world, who are justly proud of their own nations, societies and traditions.”⁸⁰ Likewise not included were the excerpts of Ringelblum’s notes⁸¹ – most probably since Jacob Sloan’s English translation of the JHI’s 1952 Yiddish edition had appeared a year earlier.

One of the first reviews of the book published in *The Jewish Post and Opinion* on June 5, 1959, praises the book and, similarly to Romano, highlights its emotional impact: “If the reader has shed tears over the murder of Polish Jewry [. . .] he will weep once more when reviewing Dr Nirenstein’s [sic] contributions to a history of Jewish resistance in Poland.”⁸² But Nirenstein’s book was soon picked up by Polish-Jewish emigrants, who scrutinized it much more closely and found it lacking. While Romano perceived Nirenstein primarily as a representative of Polish Jews, and a survivor of the Holocaust with close personal ties to the events, these Polish Jewish emigrants who had left Poland after World War II saw in him – because he had worked for the Jewish Historical Institute in the early 1950s – a representative of Polish Jewish Communists. As Nirenstein’s text indi-

⁷⁹ Giorgio Romano, review of *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*, 472.

⁸⁰ Nirenstein, *A Tower from the Enemy*, viii.

⁸¹ This concerns two of his texts, namely: Dagli “Appunti” di Emanuele Ringelblum (pp. 26–57) and L’Archivo di Ringelblum (pp. 107–118) in Nirenstajn, *Ricorda cosa ti ha fatto Amalek*.

⁸² “Nazi Reports, Photos Authenticate Stories Told by Victims in ‘Tower from the Enemy,’” *The National Jewish Post and Opinion* 14, no. 41, June 5, 1959, 7.

cates, different political groups had been involved in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and after the war each group was eager to claim ownership over the Jewish resistance. Political divisions along Cold War frontlines exacerbated existing differences as each camp aimed to claim the uprising as its own.

After resigning from the Central Jewish Historical Commission, Philip Friedman spent two years in Munich, Germany, before immigrating to the United States in 1948. He became a lecturer at Columbia University in 1951. In 1954, five years before the English translation of Nirenstein's book, Friedman published a book on the Jewish resistance. In his review of *A Tower from the Enemy*, Friedman highlights the large number of works on Jews under Nazism that had appeared in the last two decades and argues that these could be divided into two camps: one that focuses on victimhood and another that emphasizes resistance. The latter, so Friedman argues,

comprises several sub-tendencies. The various Zionist groups and the Jewish Socialist Bund stress the unity of the Jewish organizations and the Jewish people in the struggle against the Nazis. Communists and their sympathizers, on the other hand, concentrate on the class conflicts within the Jewish community. In their view, the ghetto bourgeoisie, as represented in the Nazi-appointed *Judenrat*, betrayed the Jewish masses and collaborated in their extermination, while Jewish resistance was part of the broad anti-fascist uprising of the European proletariat, initiated and led by the Communists. Mr. Nirenstein's collection of documents reflects this latter viewpoint.⁸³

Friedman's assessment, which sees Nirenstein's book as a classic Marxist-Leninist interpretation (i.e., as a class struggle in the ghettos), however, does not do justice to Nirenstein's account which falls between the Communist and Zionist camps, if we can divide these groups as clearly as Friedman claims. On the one hand, Nirenstein highlights the contribution of both Zionists and Communists and at times emphasizes Jewish unity, while on the other he stresses the exploitation of the Jewish masses by what he perceives as the Jewish elite.

Friedman also takes issue with the inclusion of the diary of Joshua Perle, which he depicts as a bitter account of a

man who had lost his balance under the strain of the first forty days of the extermination; his diary, written in a mood of utter despair, is full of contradictions, and of outbursts of hatred and invective against his fellow Jews. To present this warped view as a basic text on the behavior of the ghetto population is to do Polish Jewry a grave injustice.⁸⁴

⁸³ Philip Friedman, review of *A Tower from the Enemy*, by Albert Nirenstein, *Commentary*, August 1959, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/philip-friedman/a-tower-from-the-enemy-by-albert-nirenstein/>, accessed March 19, 2024.

⁸⁴ Friedman, review of *A Tower from the Enemy*.

Friedman criticizes Nirenstein's condemnation and critical perception of Jewish collaboration and accuses him of "promot[ing] a slander much favored by anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi publications: namely, that the Nazis were not as responsible for the extermination of the Jews as were the various Jewish groups and institutions which engaged in fratricidal conflict."⁸⁵ Indeed, Nirenstein dedicates more room to condemning collaborators for their betrayal than to pointing to the perpetrators' guilt. While Friedman reads the emphasis on Jewish betrayal as further proof of Nirenstein's ideologically tinted interpretation, other early historians shared this interest in Jewish collaboration. The influential works by Raul Hilberg and Hannah Arendt, published not long after *A Tower from the Enemy*, also grappled with the question of Jewish responsibility. Discussions around the question of the *Judenrat*'s guilt went beyond Cold War alignments.⁸⁶

Jacob Sloan, who reviewed the book for the *New York Times* in a piece titled "The Ghetto Catastrophe," published in November 1959, likewise chastises Nirenstein for overemphasizing the role of the Communists in the uprising: "the book is weak on organization and ideas, and strong on Communist-line attitudes (one is amazed to learn that it was the Stalinists who organized the Warsaw ghetto uprising!)." ⁸⁷ Sloan, who had just a year earlier published his translation of Emanuel Ringelblum's ghetto diaries, claims that Nirenstein's book had little to add to the mass of publications that already existed on the subject.

A few years after the book's publication, in 1963, David Wdowinski, who had served as the head of the political committee of the Jewish Military Union (*Żydowski Związek Wojskowy*, ŻZW), the Zionist Revisionist organization in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, wrote a review of *A Tower from the Enemy*.⁸⁸ In the same year, Wdowinski also published his account of the uprising, *And We Are Not Saved*, in which he aims to rectify the historical record, which he claims obfuscated the role of the ŻZW for political reasons.⁸⁹ Unsurprisingly, Wdowinski finds Nirenstein's

⁸⁵ Friedman, review of *A Tower from the Enemy*.

⁸⁶ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963). Roughly ten years later Isaiah Trunk's book *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (New York: Macmillan, 1972) was the first differentiated examination of the Jewish Councils, which avoided generalizing judgements and examined its members' actions against the background of the German occupation. For a discussion of Western intellectual approaches to this issue, see: Adam Brown, *Judging "Privileged" Jews: Holocaust Ethics, Representation, and the "Grey Zone,"* 1st ed. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

⁸⁷ Jacob Sloan, "The Ghetto Catastrophe: A Tower from the Enemy: Contribution to a History of Jewish Resistance in Poland," *New York Times*, November 22, 1959.

⁸⁸ David Wdowinski, review of "A Tower from the Enemy," *Jewish Social Studies* (1963): 76–77.

⁸⁹ David Wdowinski, *And We Are Not Saved* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1963).

book disappointing, arguing that it was ideologically biased and added nothing to the understanding of the Jewish resistance. Like Sloan and Friedman, he criticizes Nirenstein for trying to “present the whole tragedy of Polish Jewry as reflecting class differences, the struggle of rich Jews against poor Jews.” While he is correct in suggesting that Nirenstein framed the history of Polish Jews within a struggle of an oppressed Jewish mass society against Jewish elites, his depiction offers ultimately a simplified account of the book. The picking and choosing of specific quotes without their context make the text sound more politically charged than it is. Read in its entirety, Nirenstein’s book reveals the author’s positionality, though to depict him as “ideologically brainwashed”⁹⁰ reflects the reviewer’s political bias as much as Nirenstein’s and highlights the extent to which political outlooks, sharpened by the Cold War, influenced the perception of the history of the Ghetto Uprising and of the genocide more broadly.

The harsh judgment in these reviews reflects the social pressures on Jews in the United States to profess anti-Communism, as well as the authors’ political viewpoints and personal grudges. The three reviewers were certain that Nirenstein wrote as a Communist and thus overlooked his commitment to Zionism. They did not consider that at the time of writing the book, he had left Communist Poland, disillusioned with a regime that prevented him from seeing his family for almost five years. Nirenstein’s work was shaped by a Marxist-Leninist perspective, which situated the genocide within a framework of class struggle; it was also influenced by ideas of a unified anti-fascist resistance that crossed national borders, as well as by his grief over the destruction of the Polish Jewish world.

In his work on Italian Holocaust memory, Robert Gordon states that while Nirenstein’s work was important for Italian Holocaust historiography, the latter never became an integral figure within the field but remained on its periphery.⁹¹ The obituaries published after Nirenstein’s death in 2007 likewise suggest that, while highly appreciated, he remained in some ways an outsider. Stateless until his death, Nirenstein did not entirely fit among Italian Jewish intellectuals, nor did he belong with his former colleagues of the Jewish Historical Institute or among those Polish Jewish historians and scholars who had found a home in the United States. He and his work moved across the Iron Curtain, neither quite belonging on either side.

Nirenstein remained invested in telling the history of the Holocaust. He was, as one obituary notes, “convinced of the import of that imperative ‘remember,’”

⁹⁰ Wdowinski, review of “A Tower from the Enemy,” 77.

⁹¹ Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*, 175.

referring to the Italian title of his book.⁹² His daughter maintains that her father spoke little of the Holocaust, “except to communicate his very lively bewilderment, the surprise, the furious agony that found no consolation as if it had happened yesterday.”⁹³ It is this bewilderment, the “how was it possible?” that seems to have spurred Nirenstein’s writing on the Holocaust, more so than any clear ideological commitment.

In 1993 Nirenstein published a new, shortened, and revised version of his source collection under the title *E’ successo solo 50 anni fa. Lo sterminio di sei milioni di ebrei* (It happened only 50 years ago: the extermination of six million Jews). The book primarily addresses young people, hoping to introduce them to the history of the Shoah and the tone of the preface is more personal than its older version, reflecting the greater emphasis on individual stories of victimhood in the 1990s. “In the extermination camp of Sobibor,” writes Nirenstein, “a remote agricultural village in the Lublin region, in the ovens of this camp, hidden in the middle of the birches, my father died in June 1942 together with my brother Moshe, then eighteen, my stepmother and their four daughters, still little girls.”⁹⁴ He does not focus on the role of the *Judenrat*, or the presumed class conflict between the Jewish masses and the Jewish elite.

In the decades since his first publication, the discourse around the Nazi genocide had changed. Searching for those responsible among the victims played a lesser role, and the construction of a class conflict would have appeared strange to his readers. Nirenstein, however, returns to the question of “how was it possible,” considering once again the limitations of humanity, though he focuses on the perpetrators.

What the Germans have done [. . .] in the events covered in this book poses the problem of the limits of the peoples’ humanity [. . .]. With this book, we pose the problem of the absolute immorality of a people who without restraint, abandoning all moral principles, murder, torture, starve, violate, burn, and humiliate entire cities and towns.⁹⁵

⁹² Giulio Busi, “Testimone della Shoah,” *Il Sole 24 Ore*, September 9, 2007. Similar also is Nello Ajello, “Addio a Nirenstein testimone della Shoah,” *la Repubblica*, September 3, 2007, <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2007/09/03/addio-nirenstein-testimone-della-shoah.html>, accessed April 23, 2024.

⁹³ Fiamma Nirenstein, “In memoria di mio padre,” <http://www.fiammanirenstein.com/articoli/in-memoria-di-mio-padre-1777.html>, accessed April 18, 2024.

⁹⁴ Alberto Nirenstajn, *E’ successo solo 50 anni fa: Lo sterminio di sei milioni di ebrei* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1995), viii.

⁹⁵ Nirenstajn, *E’ successo solo 50 anni fa*, xi.

Considering the human capability to do horrible things leads him to ask: if it happened once, could it not happen again, in another place, to another people? In this sense, Nirenstein remains invested in a leftist tradition that places the Holocaust within a universalist perspective, highlighting the limitations of modernity in preventing atrocities.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Such a perspective was formulated by Zygmunt Baumann, among others, in his *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

