

the book reporter

REMNANTS—THE LAST JEWS OF POLAND, written by Małgorzata Niezabitowska, translated from the Polish by William Brand and Hanna Dubusiewicz. Photographs by Tomasz Tomaszewski. Friendly Press, N.Y. 1986. 272 pages, \$35.

THE MIRACLE OF INTER-VALE AVENUE: The Story of a Jewish Congregation in the South Bronx, by Jack Kugelmass. Shocken, N.Y. 1986. 231 pages, \$17.95.

Reviewed by ISIDORE HAIBLUM

These are the remnants, the last Jews of Poland. They stare out at you from the many photographs in this book — selected from over 7,000 taken by Tomasz Tomaszewski — and few look very happy. Mostly they are old folks who have seen their world collapse around them. At one time, before the Second World War, there were 3.5 million Jews living in Poland. Today there are less than 5,000. Tomorrow there will, no doubt, be only a handful. If there is one thing the Polish Jews who were interviewed for this volume agree upon, it is that Jews have no future in Poland.

Szymon Datner, a professor of history, born in 1902, was a witness to and chronicler of the rise and fall of modern Jewish life in his country. "The world of the Polish Jews was extraordinarily varied, rich, and colorful," he tells us in *Remnants*. He speaks of the "enormous number of publications in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish, 30 Jewish newspapers and 130 of the most varied magazines were being published just before the war. . . . Dozens of political parties of all

colorations were active. . . . The Talmud blossomed within the Orthodox community. . . . Poland of those times was the world center of Jewish culture."

Datner continues: "The history of the Jews in Poland covers a thousand years—exactly the same as the history of the country itself. . . . Jews generally fared well in Poland. For long centuries, they lived significantly better here than in any other part of Europe or the world. That is also why the Jewish immigration to Poland was so large."

But anti-Semitism was always present in one form or another, and Professor Datner points out, in the 1920's "the forces of friction and hatred were great. . . . There is no doubt that great economic competition, in which Jews often prevailed, existed between Jews and Poles."

Mass Exodus

Post-war Poland was not a hospitable place for Jews. In 1968, the government initiated a full-fledged anti-Semitic campaign which drove tens of thousands from its borders, among them many Jewish communists, true believers, whose lifelong dream had been a Poland devoted to social justice. This mass exodus included the most knowledgeable and committed Jews. They must be deemed the lucky ones, for they went on to build new lives in the free world.

In the wake of the Solidarity struggle in the early 80's, a handful of patriotic, assimilated young people, exposed yet again to anti-Semitism, sought to return to Jewishness. They were totally ignorant of their own traditions. It was as if a small group of Greek-Americans living in Queens had suddenly become enamored of Ancient Greece and was determined to revive its culture and language—against the wishes of most of the Queens community. Rostek Gebert, one of these young people, reports in *Remnants*, "Once . . . I dressed like a Jew, in a long white shirt, a *yarmluka* . . . and went out onto the



Photo Courtesy, Friendly Press; Credit: Tomasz Tomaszewski
IN THEIR HOUSE IN WŁODOWA, a small town on the Soviet border, Sara and Rafel Ader, a former "shochet," spend their remaining days.

street. I got onto a streetcar and at once felt that people were staring at me strangely. They began making comments. Not so much aggressively as in astonishment, with a shade of contempt! "Look — they didn't get them all! . . . Someone immediately said, 'You can't talk that way because he hears everything!' And an old man said, 'What do you mean? He's from America. There are no young Jews in Poland anymore.'"

Archeological Expedition

Poland is 90% Roman Catholic. Małgorzata Niezabitowska, a journalist, and her husband, photographer Tomasz Tomaszewski, are

by these theatre-goers. Szymon Szurmiej, the director of the troupe says, "The actors always look carefully to see if there is someone without headphones. If there is, they point him out to each other and they are happy that there is at least one person who understands."

You will meet the last Jew in town. The first boy to be *bar-mitzvahed* in Warsaw in 30 years. The only kosher butcher left in Poland. A *minyan* which is not sure what prayers to say, or what the words in their prayers mean.

One Holocaust survivor tells us, "I couldn't go away from here and desert these people who saved me." He is referring to his Catholic neighbors. Another reports, "I am alone. I have nowhere to go." Statistically, of course, someone had to be last. And here they are. The stories these old folks tell of pre-war life and the horrors of the Holocaust are identical to those told by Jewish survivors everywhere. But the telling is made doubly sad because of the twilight world they now inhabit. They stayed on for various reasons: some were simply victims of circumstances, others acted out of noble inclinations, and a few—like Szymon Szurmiej, the head of the Yiddish State Theatre who became director by default, profited by their decision. But only the latter group seem truly delighted by their choice.

Luckily, these are not the last Jews in the world—as one sometimes feels when reading this book—but only the last in Poland. The photographs that illustrate *Remnants* are gorgeous. The book itself, for the most part, is quite disheartening.

* * *

There is still a synagogue in the South Bronx. Herman Wouk, the novelist, helped lay the cornerstone. This was in 1922. Founded five years earlier by the Minsker Congregation, 500 ultimately prayed inside its walls. In those days, 250,000 to 500,000 Jews called the South and Central Bronx home.

(Continued on page 18, col. 3)

Two Powerful Sagas of the Human Soul

ANATOLY AND AVITAL SCHARANSKY: The Journey Home, by The Jerusalem Post. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, N.Y. 1986. 317 pp., \$15.95.

ALONE TOGETHER, by Elena Bonner. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., N.Y. 1986. 264 pp., \$17.95.

Reviewed by
BARBARA TRAININ-BLANK

On February 11, 1986, in one of the great moments of contemporary Jewish history, Soviet *refusenik* Anatoly Shcharansky crossed the snow-covered Glienicke Bridge connecting East and West Berlin. He was a free man, on his way to being reunited with his beloved wife Avital and his ancient homeland, Israel. Shcharansky had served nine years of a projected 13-year sentence on trumped-up charges—accord

ing not only to himself but President Jimmy Carter—of spying for the CIA.

Some ten months later, another great Russian hero, Andrei Sakharov—who, though not Jewish, had allied himself, as a member of the Helsinki Watch, with the *refuseniks*—was released from internal exile in the Soviet Union. Sakharov was not free exactly, but he was permitted to return to his home in Moscow, with his beloved wife, Elena. The world-renowned scientist and winner (in *absentia*) of the Nobel Peace Prize had been sentenced, along with his wife, to a drab existence in the "restricted area" of Gorky—some 700 miles from the Russian capital — for "anti-Soviet slander."

In the cruel and Orwellian world of the Soviet Union many dramatic

events have occurred since then—among them the release of Yuri Orlov, another Soviet dissident, and in February 1987 of the much-admired *refusenik*, Yosef Begun. On the other side of the "ledger"—and one cannot help feeling, hoping, that somewhere, if not on earth, the Soviet Union and other dictatorships are being called to justice for their violations of human rights—dissident Anatoly Marchenko died recently in prison from a neglected heart condition; and Naum Meiman, a *refusenik*, was denied permission to attend his wife's funeral in the West, where she had gone for cancer treatment.

Thousands of *refuseniks* and other political prisoners (in all senses of the word) remain trapped, and the doors remain shut. The Soviet Union

(Continued on page 18, col. 1)



the book reporter

(Continued from page 17)

ion continues its policy of systematic, arbitrary dehumanization, and sometimes terror, against those who oppose, criticize or even question its mechanisms, and practices an anti-Semitism less physically endangering (on a collective level) than that of Hitler, but nonetheless threatening to Jewish survival.

"Well-Written, Thoughtful"

The lives of four of the most famous victims of Soviet repression are chronicled in these two well-written and thoughtful books: The Shcharansky book is a journalistic treatment by seven staff members and correspondents of *The Jerusalem Post*. The final draft was edited by the Jerusalem-based Louis Rapoport, who also wrote both the preface and, after a visit to Moscow during which he met with other *refuseniks*, the epilogue.

Much more thoroughly researched than one might expect from a "quick-history book," and more admirably constructed than what often emerges from the joint efforts of several people working together, *Journey Home* chronicles the behind-the-scenes negotiations, on three continents, to win the release of Shcharansky. With overall sensitivity and candor, the authors explore the differences of opinion between the various American Jewish organizations laboring on behalf of Soviet Jewry; the Israeli Government; Washington, and to a lesser (and more harmonious) extent, the Soviet Jews themselves, on such issues as publicity versus quiet diplomacy, and the linking of the *refusenik* and emigration question with that of the dissidents' attempts to change the Soviet system from within. (It is interesting to read not only of the friendship of the Shcharanskys and Sakharovs — in both books — but of their congruence on vital issues.)

The book has one major flaw, however, especially for those who hope it will be true to its title: its treatment of Avital is insufficient, certainly unbalanced in comparison with that of her husband. Moreover, it smacks a little of negativism. The writers seem a bit discomfited by Avital's transforma-

tion—once in Israel she became Orthodox—and see it less as a matter of choice than of the influence over her by people in the Merkaz Harav Yeshiva in Jerusalem who were helpful to her not only personally, but on behalf of her crusade for Anatoly.

Shcharansky's increased interest in Judaism, in contrast, is seen in a favorable light—as a demonstration of the man's brilliance, Jewish commitment, and refusal to bend even in prison or the Gulag.

Perhaps even more seriously, Anatoly's courage and strong will are seen—as well they should be—as only a source of admiration. Yet, Avital is considered, according to one unnamed official in Washington, to have been a "pain," always "pressuring" and needling. (Yet, in fairness to the authors, they do also quote another "unnamed" source, who says that in spite of any criticism levelled against her, if he were in a Soviet prison, he "would want a wife like Avital.")

In another context, the writers insert a paragraph about why the Israeli public has been, on the whole, less activist on behalf of Soviet Jewry than have American Jews. Basically, they say that Israelis are "too busy" making a living, what with reserve duty, and the like, to be concerned with larger issues. They add that Asian-African Jews—who now constitute the majority of Israelis—are "less concerned" with Ashkenazi Jews. Especially when thrown out so casually and without explanation, this statement—especially the latter half is gratuitously nasty and oversimplified.

"Nightmarish Existence"

But that is a minor point in an otherwise well-put-together and moving book, which shows us that heroes like the Shcharanskys are also human. Yet, they raise our standards for being human above what they were before, even as they inspire us.

No less ennobling a vision of the world is held by the Sakharovs, who lived in perhaps, a slightly more "pleasant" (and this is a relative term in a totalitarian regime) world but a nonetheless restricted and

paranoia-inducing one. As Bonner describes it, their every move was not only watched, but recorded, by the KGB. They received no mail, and no telephone calls, were surrounded 24 hours a day by a guard, and followed by KGB agents. In a nightmarish existence, their belongings kept disappearing and then reappearing — most notably the manuscript for a book Andrei was working on.

In a book that she calls a "chronicle"—explaining that she was unable to keep up with the consistency of a "diary"—Bonner not only describes the isolating and painful life she and her husband were forced to lead, but her own sharp powers of observation and deep humanity. Never afraid to speak her mind, even when her pain has shifted from emotional to actual physical distress, she fearlessly calls frequent press conferences to publicize her case to the world. But never self-centered, despite a strong sense of self, she also worked closely with Ida Milgrom, Anatoly Shcharansky's mother, on his be-

half. In fact, despite deteriorating health, in three years of exile she made as many as 100 trips between Moscow and Gorky to plead either the cause of her husband or other political prisoners.

This book had almost a miraculous genesis, not surprising in a woman of Bonner's courage and determination. Had she not pressured the authorities so relentlessly to permit her to seek medical treatment in the United States—she had suffered a myocardial infarction some time previously but had not received proper diagnosis, let alone treatment—the experiences she chronicles here would have remained inside her gifted brain.

But Bonner's efforts do bear fruit, and she is permitted three months (later extended to six) for treatment in the West. When in the United States she visits the White House and Disney World, meets on behalf of Sakharov with officials, observes and records the distressing contrasts between the freedom and innocence of America and the dark repression of her homeland. She also prepared this manuscript, which she was later unable to edit.

But perhaps the most important statement Bonner makes — among

many touching and acute observations—is that "the only real defense for us and for everyone fighting for us is publicity."

Both the Shcharanskys and Sakharovs have always believed that opening the window to the world in a closed country—through the media, demonstrations, expressing the truth—is the only way to eventually push open the doors. These two books produce ample evidence that there is much justification to their case.

But regardless of one's position on how best to free Soviet Jewry, to encourage the dissidents, or combat Soviet anti-Semitism, one cannot fail to be touched deeply by the power of these books. As great personalities in history have always known—from Moses to the Shcharanskys and Sakharovs—no regime, no matter how powerful and how punitive, can truly deprive humanity of freedom. For the desire for freedom is, as these four heroic people have shown, too deep in the human soul to be bound. □□

BARBARA TRAININ BLANK
is a freelance writer whose articles appear in a variety of publications.

"Uplifting, Fascinating, Lively and Spirited"

(Continued from page 17)

The area was a hot-house of Jewish culture.

All that is gone now. In the late 1950's Blacks and Hispanics began to invade the neighborhood. Jews took to their heels. Arson, muggings, and dope became one of the area's principal activities as legitimate businesses folded. The local police precinct went on to become famous. Books were written about it, and a movie was made starring Paul Newman. The precinct is called "Fort Apache."

But for some Jews, this place was still home; they would not leave. One of these, Moishe Sacks, now in his 80's, is the guiding spirit behind the synagogue. The crime rate has dwindled, but fewer than a hundred elderly Jews remain in the community. From among these Sachs struggles each Sabbath to in-

sure a *minyan*. The Miracle of Intervale Avenue is that a synagogue exists on it at all.

Six years ago, Jack Kugelmass, a young, Yiddish-speaking anthropologist, began to study this congregation. These spunky people who fought the odds appealed to him. Many of them were hardly compelled to dwell in the South Bronx. They had grown children living in the suburbs who would gladly have taken them in and cared for them. But these oldsters cherished their independence; they refused to be taken care of. And here in the South Bronx, they felt needed by, strange as it may seem, their Black and Hispanic neighbors.

Fascinating Tales

The oldsters have fascinating tales to tell, experiences to relate, observations to make, and the young

anthropologist is always there to lend an ear. He records their daily lives, conflicts and joys. And spiced his book with shrewd and erudite observations of his own. By the end, these folks have become part of our lives, too, as have their stories. "What the miracle of Intervale Avenue teaches us," Jack Kugelmass writes, "is the importance of stories as a regenerative force in the lives of people. Without them, we are left to our own wits to derive purpose and a higher order of meaning from experience."

This volume about the elderly turns out, somehow, to be uplifting and life-affirming. It is devoid of bitterness, possibly because these people felt free to take a crack at fashioning their own destinies. Kugelmass has written a lively and spirited book about them which deserves to be widely read. □□

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