There Once Was a World: A 900-Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok
By Yaffa Eliach
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By DAVID G. ROSKIES

In Jewish collective memory, the name Eishyshok signifies a provincial backwater akin to Oshkosh. The folk saying "*farshlofn in Eishyshok*" means that just being there is enough to put you to sleep. Scholar Daniel Chwolson put it more pointedly when he justified the price of admission to Russian high society. "I would rather be a professor in St. Petersburg," he quipped, "than a melamed in Eishyshok."

Mr. Roskies teaches literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary. His latest book, "The Jewish Search for a Usable Past," will be published by Indiana University Press in the spring.

Both bon mots are quoted by historian Yaffa Eliach in "There Once Was a World," a massive, lavishly illustrated volume on her hometown of Eishyshok, Lithuania. In its layout, size and scope, the book, which represents her life's work, resembles the hundreds of *yizker-bikher*, or memorial books, that have been lovingly assembled by the former inhabitants of these towns that were once home to the Yiddish-speaking majority of European Jews. But "There Once Was a World" is a yizkor book with a difference: It is the work of a single, and single-minded, individual; the work of a woman, and the work of someone battling multiple ghosts. For there are two competing sets of memories that animate her narrative — one collective, the other personal.

To set the record straight, Ms. Eliach rebuts the stigma of *farshlofn* with countless examples of the *shtetl*'s "vitality," continuing the work that she undertook at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where a towering roomful of photographs of life in Eishyshok are on permanent display. In particular, she labors long and hard in "There Once Was a World" to prove that Eishyshok was in fact a mecca of rabbinic and Hebraic learning, a jewel in the crown of Jewish Lithuania.

The second ghost that bedevils her narrative is the personal trauma of 7½-year-old Sheinele Sonenson, whose mother and baby brother were murdered in cold blood before her very eyes by members of the ragtag Armia Krajowa, the ultra-nationalist Polish liberation forces, after her hometown had already been "liberated" from the Nazis, in October 1944. Sheinele Sonenson is now known as Yaffa Eliach, and, as the bereaved daughter and sister, she implicates all Christians — Germans, Poles and Lithuanians — in the murder of her family.

Because Eishyshok (also known as Ejszeszki or Eisiskes) did not write its own history or preserve a complete set of its own records — not even, Ms. Eliach notes with some bitterness, by its former citizens in the safe haven of New York City — a historian has to negotiate among disparate and often warring perspectives. Ms. Eliach, however, relies mainly on legends and rosy recollections.

As far back as the 11th century, her story goes, the founding Jewish fathers of Eishyshok were farmers, fiercely tied to the land, and the gentiles were tolerant Lithuanian pagans. There followed many centuries of intolerant Christian rule during which the original Jewish settlers were stripped of their property rights. Only with the rise of political Zionism in the 1890s did the off-

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spring of those founding families (since linked by marriage to all the best families in town) seize their chance to return to the Promised Land.

Zionism, alone among the competing ideologies on the *shtetl* streets, answered the deep-felt longing of authentic Eishyshokians. The sons and daughters of the rabbinic elite founded the Rak Ivrit fellowship, dedicated to speaking, writing and reading "only Hebrew." The capstone of their efforts was the building of Eishyshok's first modern Jewish school. Originally affiliated with the secular-Zionist Tarbut movement, the school was forced to become more religious in orientation because of an infusion of money from Orthodox philanthropists in America. In any event, Eishyshok became "a virtual showplace of Hebrew learning" and a well-known source of future pioneers, especially women.

Shtetl life was a system balanced on three intersecting axes. One axis preserved the bond between Jews and their God, another joined Jews with other Jews and a third allowed the safe interaction of Jews and gentiles. Located along the first axis in Eishyshok were the magnificent synagogue, study houses, Hebrew schools and yeshiva. They are deservedly given pride of place, because Eishyshok was one of the "college towns" that Jewish Lithuania was so famous for. Its origins shrouded in legend, Eishyshok's *kibbutz ha-prushim*, or commune of yeshiva students preparing for ordination, graduated an outstanding roster of rabbis and scholars, among them the world-renowned halachist the Haffetz Hayyim. Eishyshok, according to Ms. Eliach, was a stronghold of Litvak culture, and these were its defining characteristics: "sharpness of intellect, pungency of wit, a deep dedication to scholarship, intense religiosity, stubborn self-sufficiency, and unceasing industriousness." Eishyshok's religiosity, however, was somewhat different from that of your typical Polish or Ukrainian *shtetl* because no chasidim ever lived there, and no *tsadik* even dared to visit. Their absence made Eishyshok a model of sobriety. If her description of Purim is anemic, it is because Purim in Eishyshok was a contradiction in

Shtetls belonged to the Polish magnates, never to the Jews.

terms, a necessary evil.

The bathhouse, the network of mutual aid societies, the old and new cemeteries — these fostered the interaction of Jews with other Jews, from cradle to grave, and beyond. Jews and gentiles, finally, coexisted in the marketplace, the tavern and, in some instances, in the home. All this was kept in perfect balance, as "the people of the shtetl shuttled back and forth between the angels and the marketplace." "Market day," she writes in a later chapter, "was the one day of the week when the profane voices of the marketplace overpowered the melodious chants of the beth midrash learners."

This is a *shtetl* that Jewish dreams are made of, but there's a price that Ms. Eliach must pay to preserve her claim of absolute sanctity. Her emphasis on interactions among Jews and with God comes at the expense of relations with non-Jewish neighbors. Ms. Eliach's chronicle of Eishyshok is virtually *goyimrein*, even though non-Jews made up 35% of the total pre-war population. Except for the rare "righteous gentiles" — most of whom apparently lived in the outlying villages — the local Christian inhabitants are remembered for their gratuitous cruelty and implacable hatred: the Catholic doctor Bernitsky, who organized the first circle of Polish-Catholic anti-Semites; the "fanatical Catholic" woman, who married the lazy, good-for-nothing Jew next door; the Alvokove family that sicced their dogs on Jewish children. Nothing a gentile has ever written or spoken about the *shtetl* has any bearing whatsoever.

Ms. Eliach seems to enumerate all the instances of Jew-hatred going back to the very beginning of *shtetl* time, and not for a single chapter in 700 pages of text does she let the reader forget the horrible fate that awaits those Jews who remained in Eishyshok until the bitter end. Whatever her subject may be — the celebration of Simchat Torah, women in the ritual bath, the slaughter of chickens, the Golden Book of the Eishyshok Free Loan Association — the spectre of the Holocaust hangs over them all.

These "flash forwards" to the tragic end of the Eishyshok are the book's major flaw. They rob Ms. Eliach's subjects of the fullness of their lives by turning even the most innocent, fun-loving *shtetl* Jew into a potential victim. They also imply that the ultimate significance of Jewish Eishyshok — and of *shtetl* life as a whole — lies in its mass martyrdom.

Ms. Eliach consistently rejects perspectives and sources critical of the *shtetl*. Before quoting Israel Isser Goldbloom, who was expelled from the Eishyshok yeshiva for promoting Westernizing ideas, Ms. Eliach describes his writings about the *shtetl* as "vivid dyspepsia." No such disclaimer is ever made about her favorite *shtetl* storyteller, the Zionist pioneer Meir Wilkanski, who employs the same baroque style as Goldbloom.

Most credible and innovative is Ms. Eliach's portrayal of *shtetl* women. The loving portrait of Rebbetzin Hutner — selfless, tireless and fearless — one of the more memorable in Ms. Eliach's huge portrait gallery. The key to the remembered past is vitality, and those who ensure its transmission from one generation to the next are the grandmothers, mothers and daughters. The latter often double as the vanguard of the new. Ms. Eliach greatly admires these modern women, who manage to make their voices heard while still working within the system. She cites her own bat mitzvah as an adult as a case in point.

Missing from this vital and seamless progression, however, are the *proste yidn*; the artisan class, the teamsters and the toughs. Positioned at the very bottom of the *shtetl*'s rigid hierarchy, they learn to accept their fate. Lacking in idealism, learning and intense loyalty to the land, most