

the book reporter

FROM A RUINED GARDEN: THE MEMORIAL BOOKS OF POLISH JEWRY. Edited and translated by Jack Kugelmass & Jonathan Boyarin. Schocken, N.Y. 1983. 275 pp. \$18.95.

THE LAST JEWS OF RADAUTI. Text by Ayse Gürson-Salzman, photographs by Laurence Salzman. The Dial Press, N.Y. 1983. 196 pp. \$24.95.

THE PRECIOUS LEGACY: JUDAIC TREASURES FROM THE CZECHOSLOVAK STATE COLLECTIONS. Edited by David Altshuler. Summit Books, N.Y. 1983. 286 pp. \$17.50 paper, \$40 cloth.

SCENARIO: VISIONS FROM THE END OF TIME, by Palle Nielsen. Pantheon, N.Y. 1983. Unnumbered. \$17.95.

Reviewed by ISIDORE HAIBLUM

They are gone now, but once they comprised a hectic and tumultuous community, these European Jews. They wrote novels, produced plays, built factories, ran part of the international banking business, and in every way made enormous contributions to their respective communities. They were far richer and more varied than is generally sup-



Photo: Mark Gulezian/Quicksilver Photographers, Washington, D.C.
PRAGUE, FOR CENTURIES A THRIVING CENTER OF JEWISH LIFE until decimated by the Nazis, today has only 1,500 Jews. Above, a view of its Jewish Quarter, with the Altneuschul (center foreground), Europe's oldest active synagogue, which dates from 1270.

posed. A thriving middle class existed. And the workers' movement swept across national borders, sporting a multiplicity of divergent—and contending—ideological viewpoints; their only common ground was a

desire to improve humanity, although it rarely seemed to work out that way.

The European Jews lived out their lives as Jews—both believers and non-believers—nationalists and internationalists all at the same time. They aimed high, and often their endeavors knew no bounds. Who can tell what they might have achieved in time. But they were not granted time. And the whole community of European Jews was swept away by the Nazi Holocaust. Only memories, artifacts, and small pockets of survivors remained. Three newly published books celebrate what once was and help us remember.

Polish Jews

From a Ruined Garden tells the story of the Polish Jews. It is a tale of beauty, courage, creativity, and ultimate devastation, and it is told with love, humor, and poignancy.

The volume, edited and translated from the Yiddish by Jack Kugelmass and Jonathan Boyarin, offers an extraordinary selection from over 100 *Yizker Bikher* (memorial books), and nothing quite like it has ever appeared before in English. Here, in their own words, people from all walks of society report on their life and times. In all, there are seven sections, beginning with "Our Towns," where, among many wonders, the reader is given a grand tour of a Jewish town market, one aboil with activity; a girls' "kheyder" (grade schools): "True, girls were not taught to read the Bible in the original Hebrew in Horodets, but every Sabbath they used to read the *Tsenen-rene*, the Yiddish adaptation of the Bible"; a group of ardent, activist Jewish anarchists who tried to turn the world on its ear; an explanation of "What is a *pinkes*?" "A *pinkes*, *Leybele*, is a book in which all of the unusual events and occurrences that take place in a town are recorded, both good things and, God forbid, not such good things."

In "Town People"—section two—the reader is introduced to such picturesque yet typical characters as Tall Libe, Crazy Sora, the town *meshugena* (every town was said to have one): "She was always barefoot and in tatters," Allter, the village peddler, Shloyme-Akive, the town fool. These are lively folks, not to be missed.

In "Lifeways" we meet the healer of Bilgoray, join a strike for justice in the *kheyder*: "With my child's vocabulary, I called on them [his fellow students] to refuse to be beaten anymore, and to strike in protest," and share in the excitement of acquiring the first Yiddish library.

"Events" touches on such diverse matters as a murder in the forest, a ruined wedding, the pogrom of 1936—and leads into the engrossing "Legends and Folklore." The Holocaust follows, a heart-wrenching portrait of the Nazi terror, and a testament to Jewish resistance.

The final section, "Return," focuses on the Holocaust's aftermath: "Everything was a void, and in mid-day there was no living soul to be seen. . . . The streets were paved with gravestones bearing Jewish inscriptions. . . . This was my town of Bilgoray after the great catastrophe. With tears in my eyes I departed. Always in my ears I hear the echo of the mourners' prayers: *Yisgadal veyiskadash*. . . ."

The Yiddish librarian, Zachary Baker, at the close of this volume, has assembled a first-rate bibliography of memorial books written in Yiddish.

Splendid Introduction

A splendid introduction by the compilers puts these memoirs in their proper perspective; both scholars are connected with the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. It was material gleaned from the YIVO archives and library that made this book possible, demonstrating again the truly invaluable service YIVO renders the Jewish community.

While six million Jews perished in the Holocaust, there were some who survived. And *The Last Jews of Radauti* by Ayse Gürson-Salzman and Laurence Salzman relates—in word and picture—the experience of one such group.

Some 8,000 Jews resided in Radauti, a small town in the Bukovina region of Romania in the late 1930's. They were a productive lot with deep roots in their community. At war's end, 6,000 were dead. A few returned home. By 1974-76, when the photographs for this book were taken, there were only 240 Jews left among the entire population. Most of them were old people; many of those who were younger were preparing to leave for Israel.

The tiny Jewish community welcome to learn their story. They took them into their homes, told them of their lives, their struggles to begin again. The Salzmanns visited them in their shops, their *shul*; went to their *bar mitzvahs*, weddings, and funerals; saw the departure of their young. It is all here in this book—one of the most moving I have encountered.

The photographs, simply, are stunning. They achieve a rare depth and spiritual beauty. The words accompanying them are heartfelt. This is a book to be treasured.

The people may be gone, but their great achievements still stand. In 1938 there were 300,000 Czech Jews, 95% of whom perished in the Holocaust. In an effort to pay tribute to them and the eight Jewish curators responsible for organizing some 145,000 objects despite Nazi duress, *The Precious Legacy*, edited by David Altshuler, bears witness. It brings to American audiences their first view of an astonishing collection of Judaica, including some of the oldest in existence.

A companion to the Exhibition that opened at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington in November, starting a two-year tour of seven museums in the United States, (New York, Miami, San Diego, New Orleans, Detroit, and Hartford), the volume is beautifully printed and designed, and spotlights gorgeous textiles, oil paintings, glassware, porcelain, precious metals, printed books and illuminated manuscripts. There are 75 full-color and 150 black-and-white illustrations. And each bears the stamp of history. The text is utterly fascinating. If ever a book could be deemed a work of art in its own right, it is this one.

Ironically, it was the Nazis who helped preserve these priceless treasures, intending to establish a "museum of an extinct race," a pathological "research" and propaganda "institute" that would justify to the world the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question." Methodically they collected this material and stored it away—thus saving it for our generation and generations to come.

All three volumes speak to us with an astonishing immediacy. And there is reason for pride here. True, they tell us of our loss. But they tell also of the great achievements of our people, for in large measure, out of these achievements the present generation of worldwide Jewry has grown and flourished. The story goes on. And the old promises may yet be kept.

* * *

Scenario, Visions from the End of Time, by Palle Nielsen, has no specific Jewish content. But it belongs in this essay, and it is a fitting conclusion to it. For this is a volume of drawings by a sensitive artist depicting the future Holocaust that must be avoided for the sake of all humanity. A searing and moving book that, particularly in the context of Jewish history, is unforgettable. □□

ISIDORE HAIBLUM is a novelist who is currently completing his eleventh book. His essays have appeared in such publications as the *Village Voice*, *Pioneer Women*, and *Moment Magazine*. He lives and works in New York.

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