

The Great War in the Literature of Destruction

David G. Roskies

1. The Literature of Destruction is a definable, coherent and continuous Jewish literary tradition with its own history, poetics and genres. Forged not in the nexus of land or language but in the clash of historical experience and religious faith, it is a tradition that itself shaped the response to catastrophe of successive generations as much as it was shaped by them.

Memory, as Paul Fussell has shown in his magisterial study of the Great War, is culture-bound. "One notices and remembers what one has been 'coded' - usually by literature or its popular equivalent - to notice and remember" (447, 247). In Jewish tradition, what is remembered and recorded is the travesty, the desecration of that which we hold most sacred. The mass martyrdom of the Jews of Mainz in 1096 is the more memorable for its having occurred on Shavuoth. Here, the chroniclers tell us, Torah scrolls were desecrated on the anniversary of Sinai; the community, as saintly as Jerusalem, committed ritual slaughter upon itself in an Akedah without divine intercession. By the same token, two different chroniclers of the Galician pogroms some eight centuries later, recalled how the Cossacks left unharmed the Gentile houses in which icons and crucifixes were strategically placed. It is the Passover story in reverse (27, II, 131; 217, 130).

Travesty is the mnemonic of destruction; memory is then further transformed by commemoration. Judaism has never viewed the individual victim as worthy of perpetuity. Jews mourn communally and mourn entire communities. Mainz is to the Crusades as Nemirov is to the Khmelnitsky massacres, as Kishinev is to the pogroms, as the Warsaw Ghetto is to the Holocaust. Jews have a shorthand of destruction whereby two-and-a-half thousand years of suffering can be invoked in a few phrases. The effect of this instant retrieval is that the greater the disaster, the more it recalls historical precedent. On seeing the total ruin of Husiatin in 1915, Gershon Levin (217) was reminded of the reading of Eicha on Tisha B'av, and in 1941, 14 year-old Yitskhok Rudashevsky (307) recalled the medieval chronicles as he and his family were rounded up for incarceration in the Vilna Ghetto. Both mechanisms of travesty and commemoration are preserved in the Literature of Destruction which was equally accessible to east European Jews of every age and ideological persuasion.

2. The Great War occupies a unique place in the Literature of Destruction. It is the first catastrophe which Jews in vast numbers experienced as soldiers and civilians and as enemies to each other. They suffered both the "sentimental" violence of pogroms, expulsions and forced labor, and the impersonal, mechanized violence of the trenches. This dual perspective on the war can be gauged by the extent and pace of translations of European war fiction into Yiddish. Andreas Latzko's Men in War, one of the first important anti-war narratives, appeared in Yiddish a year after its original publication in German (367). Then followed Henri Barbusse's Under Fire in 1924 (337), Jaroslav Hašek's The Good Soldier Schweik in 1928 (347), Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front in 1929 and 1930 (39, 39a7), and Ludwig Renn's War in 1930/1 (407). In earlier crises, translations appeared only if they were sympathetic to Jews, related directly to the Jewish plight or were written by Jews in European languages (357, 377 38, 38a7).

The tension between the universal and the particular, the individual and the collective is, in my opinion, the central feature of the Great War in the Literature of Destruction. The memoirs of army medics, officers and ordinary soldiers fulfill a dual function: they provide an insider's view of army life with its slang and sub-culture, its cruelty and corruption, but this horizontal narrative is always punctuated by revelations of antisemitism and of the uniquely tragic fate of the Jews. ([11], [15], [17], [18], [20], [21], [25], [26]). S. Anski's Khurbm Galitsye ([27]) is the quintessential Jewish war memoir because the author submerges his personal experience so as to highlight the broad panorama of Jewish suffering.

Seen from this perspective, the Revolution and the ensuing Civil War do not constitute an autonomous unit. The narrator of Yisroel Rabon's Di gas ([29]), a Jew demobilized from the Polish army, fought the Germans first and the Bolsheviks second. And Itsik Kipnises brilliant pogrom anatomy Khadoshim un teg ([28]), which documents the events of the Civil War, can be read alongside Lamed Shapiro's earlier pogrom stories Di yidishe melukhe ([31]). To define the revolutionary narratives as an independent genre, as Nurit Govrin has recently attempted ([43]), is to ignore the larger tradition of which they form a part.

3. Secular literary responses to catastrophe are a relatively late phenomenon in east European Jewish culture. The Odessa pogrom of 1871 seems to have inspired the first such response in prose: Yekutiel Ber^{man}'s Hebrew novel Hashodedim batsohorayim ([8]). But it is Abramovitch's satire and linguistic travesty; Peretz's examination of the individual psyche in extremis and his symbolic dramatizations of messianism vs. mediocrity; Sholem Aleichem's use of monologue, myth and irony; and above all the image of the shtetl as a metaphor of decay and destruction in the work of all three writers that constitute the first modern legacy in the Literature of Destruction. The second generation of primary artists, Lamed Shapiro, I.M. Weissenberg and Dovid Bergelson, introduced an impressionistic technique, analytically dispassionate; a hero prone to violence, and the added dimension of the non-Jewish perspective. Most of the third generation writers who came of age in the Great War and Russian Revolution pay homage to one or another of these formative influences.

4. The shtetl narrative and the pogrom poem are the two main literary genres of the Great War. Building on the earlier traditions of shtetl fiction, such writers as Oyzer Varshavski ([12]), Fishl Bimko ([6]), Leyb Olitsky ([1, k1]), the Brothers Widans ([13]) and Itsik Kipnis chronicle the war and revolution as the rape of the shtetl. The adversary proceedings which Fussell sees as central to all Great War fiction assume various forms in these narratives: generational (Olitzky), sexual (Varshavski), social (Bimko), national (Kipnis) and ideological. The real casualty of the war, however, is the shtetl, with its concomitant values of intimacy, solidarity and religiosity. The attempt to create a surrogate shtetl on the ruins of the old way of life is likewise doomed to failure, as in I.J. Singer's war novel Shtol un ayzn ([16]).

Whereas the prose legacy proved a continuing vehicle for conveying the terrifying break with the past brought on by the war, the poets found themselves burdened by a surfeit of traditional values and poetics which they strove to subvert. As early as 1904, Bialik set the pogrom free of its ideological foundations ([5, k5]), allowing Moyshe-Leyb Halpern ([9]) and Peretz Markish ([23]) a decade later to internalize the pogrom, to render it in its psychological and sensual impact, and H. Leivick ([19]) and A. Leyeles ([22]) to abstract the pogrom into an exalted, metaphysical event. This was a modernist revolt that all but refined the pogrom poem out of existence ([45]).

Vicarious works of prose and poetry, written at a geographical but never emotional distance from the events in eastern Europe, are the most consistently imbued with Jewish content and symbolism, making them an especially useful guide to accepted and innovative modes of response. The war stories of Opatoshu and Asch ([3], [4]), the latter interspersed with tales of medieval martyrdom, are clearly indebted to earlier traditions, as are the elegies to the pogrom victims of Hofstein and Kvitko ([10], [27]). But new perspectives, such as the study of a limited consciousness within an expanding landscape of violence, appear in the fiction of Bergelson ([7]), Miller ([24]) and Shapiro ([31]).

5. The Great War was a watershed in the Literature of Destruction. The earlier prose and poetic traditions were revived and reviled; the catastrophe was viewed from multiple perspectives -- universal and particular, individual and collective, actual and vicarious. But the persistent claim of the Literature of Destruction both pre and postdating the Great War prevents us from viewing this body of writing as sui generis. It is not simply a matter of literary continuities, say of Sholem Aleichem's impact on Bimko and Kipnis, as on Jurek Becker and Julian Strykowski ([41], [42]), but of an historical continuum. For Jews view each disaster as a replay of one before, while history actually has a way of conspiring with literature to repeat the old paradigms over and over again. A Cossack bent on plunder and rape is the same whether he swears allegiance to Khmel'nitsky, Nicholas II or Petlyura. And Jews crowded into a ghetto, with no legal means of support, but with a council of elders to plead their case before the oppressive bureaucracy, can easily be confused with their counterparts in Venice and Frankfurt, Kaptansk and Kasrilevke. This is the stuff that literary traditions are made of.

What remains to be explored is the common ground between Yiddish and Hebrew literatures; the internal coherence of the Literature of Destruction inclusive of Jewish writers in European languages, and the contrasts and continuities between the Great War, the Holocaust and beyond.

Department of Jewish Literature
The Jewish Theological Seminary
of America

References

A. SOURCES. Original.

- .1 אַליצקי, לייב. אין אן אַקופירט שטעטל. הארשע, 1924.
- .1א. אין שײן פֿון פֿלאמען. ווילנע, 1927.
- .2 אַנסקי, ש. 'חורבן גאליציע. דער יודישער חורבן פֿון פּוילען, גאליציע און בוקאַרעשט פֿון טאָג-בוך 1914-1917' [געזאַמלטע שריפֿטן, ד-ו]. ווילנע-הארשע-נ"י, 1921.
- .3 אַפּאַטשעו, יוסף. 'ארום די חורבנות' [געזאַמלטע שריפֿטן, ח]. ווילנע, 1925.
- .4 אַש, שלום. 'דאָס בוך פֿון צער' [געזאַמלטע שריפֿטן, ו]. נ"י, 1923.
- .5 ביאליק, חיים נחמן. "בעיר ההרבה." 'משירי הזעם' אָדעס, תרסו [1906].
- .5א. "אין שחיטה-שטאָט." פֿון צער און צאָרן. אָדעס, תרסו.
- .6 בימקא, פֿייל. 'קעלעך' [געקליבענע ווערק, ט-י]. נ"י, 1947.
- .7 בערגעלסאָן, דוד. 'שטורעמטעג' [געקליבענע ווערק, ח]. ווילנע, 1928².
- .7א. 'מידה-הדין'. ווילנע, 1929.
- .7ב. 'צוגוינטן' [געקליבענע ווערק, ח]. ווילנע, 1930.
- .8 בער-מאַן, יקותיאל. 'השודדים בצהרים'. חוּן, תרל"ז [1877].
- .9 האלפערן, משה-לייב. "א נאכט." אין ניו-יאָרק. נ"י, 1919.
- .10 האַפּשטיין, דוד. טרויער. קינעו, 1922.
- .11 הייעריק, קלמן-חיים. 'אין פֿיער און בלוט. סעמוארן פֿון דער וועלט-מלחמה.' 4 טיילן. הארשע, 1926-1928.
- .12 הארשאוסקי, עוזר. 'שמוגלארס. א ראָמאַן אין דריי טיילן.' הארשע, 1920.
- .13 חידאַנס, עמיל און דניאל. גרויזאַמע יאָרן. הארשע, 1933.
- .14 הייסענבערג, י.מ. "א שטעטל." געקליבענע ווערק, א. שיקאַגאָ, 1959 (1906¹).
- .15 זאַק, אברהם. 'אונטער די פֿליגעל פֿון טויט'. הארשע, 1921.
- .16 זינגער, י.י. 'שטאַל און אייזן, ראָמאַן'. ווילנע, 1927.
- .17 טענענבוים, יוסף. 'אין פֿיער. ערצעהלונגען פֿונ'ם שלאכטפֿעלד פֿון א דאָקטאָר אין דער אלטער עסטרייכיש-אונגאַרישער ארמיי'. נ"י, 1926.
- .18 פּהן, ש. 'אויף בלוטיגע וועגען. זכרונות פֿון א אידישען סאָלדאַט'. נ"י, 1923.
- .19 לייחיק, ח. "די שטאַל." אלע ווערק פֿון ח. לייחיק, א', 189-212. נ"י, 1940 (1920¹).
- .20 לייפּונער, י. 'פֿיער יאָהר אין דער וועלט-מלחמה 1914-1918: מעמואַרען.' הארשע, 1923.
- .21 לעווין, גרשון. 'אין וועלט קריג'. הארשע, 1923.
- .22 לעיעלעס, א. 'די מאיטע פֿון די הונדערט'. נ"י, 1921.
- .23 מאַרקיש, פרץ. 'די קופּע' קינעו, 1922².
- .24 מילער, ל. "אבא." 'שריפֿטען' (נ"י), ווינטער-פֿרילינג, 1920.
- .25 מעסטעל, יעקב. 'מלחמה-נאָטיצן פֿון א יודישן אָפֿיציר' 2 בענד. הארשע, 1924.
- .26 פֿרידמאַן, יצחק. 'א יאָר צווישן לעבן און טויט'. נ"י, 1932.
- .27 קוויטקא, לייב. 1919. בערלין, 1923.
- .28 קיפּניס, איציק. 'חדשים און מעג און אנדערע דערציילונגען' [געקליבענע ווערק, ג]. ת"א, 1973 (1926¹).
- .29 ראבאָן, ישראל. 'די גאַס'. הארשע, 1928.
- .30 רודאַשעווסקי, יצחק. "טאָגבוך פֿון ווילנער געטאָ." 'די גאָלדענע קייט', 15 (1953), 56-18.
- .31 שאפּיראָ, ל. 'די יודישע מלוכה'. נ"י, 1929.
- .31א. "וויסע חלה." אין [31], (1916¹).
- .32 שלום-עליכט. "מעשיות פֿון טויערנט און אין נאכט." 'מעשיות און פֿאַנטאַזיעס' [אלע ווערק, ג], זז' 137-232. נ"י, פֿאַלקספֿאַנד, 1917-1925 (1915¹).

B. SOURCES. Translations.

33. בארביס, אנרי. 'דאָס פֿײַער! ייִדיש: בינאם וואַרשאַווסקיי. וואַרשע, 1924 (1916).
34. האַשעק, יאַרזאַמלאַוו. 'דער בראַוער סאַלדאַט שוויק אין דער וועלט-מלחמה.
ייִדיש: זעליג קלמנאַוויטש. 2 בענד. ריגע, 1928 (1921-1923).
35. סאַלסטאַי, לעוו. "דרייַ מעשיות (געשריבען ספּעציעל פֿאַר דעם זאַמעל-בוך 'הילף')."
ייִדיש: שלום-עליכאָם. 'הילף. א זאַמעל-בוך פֿיר ליטעראַטור און קונסט. וואַרשע, 1903, ז' 19-33.
36. לאַצקאַ, אַנדראַעאָם. 'אין די נעגעל פֿון קריגע. ייִדיש: ד. קאַפּלאַן. נ"י, 1919 (1918).
37. מינאָסקי, נ. די בעלאַגערונג פֿון טולטשין. א היסטאָרישע דראַמע פֿון באַגדאָן חמעלניצקייט צייטען. ייִדיש: א. רייזען. מינאָסק, 1905 (1889).
38. קאַנאַפּניאַקא, מאַריאַ. "מענדל דאַנציקער." ייִדיש: י. ל. אַרענשטיין. די יודישע ביבליאטעק. א זשורנאַל פֿיר ליטעראַטור, געזעלשאַפֿט און עקאָנאָמיע, רעדאַגירט און אַרויסגעגעבן דורך י. ל. פּרז' ג (וואַרשע, 1895).
- א38. ייִדיש: ד. קאַפּנער. וואַרשע, תרס"ו.
39. רעמאַרק, עריך מאַריאַ. 'אויפֿן מערבֿ-פֿאַראַנט איז רואיק. ייִדיש: מאַרק ראַזומני. ריגע, 1929 (1928).
- א39. 'אויפֿן מערבֿ-פֿאַראַנט קיין נײַעס. ייִדיש: י. באַשעוויס; רעד' מיכל וויבערט. ווילנע, 1930.
40. רען, לודוויג. 'מלחמה. ייִדיש: עליס באַרנשטיין. 2 בענד. וואַרשע, 1930/1 (1928).
41. Becker, Jurek. Jacob the Liar. Trans. from German: Melvin Kornfeld. New York, 1975 (1969).
42. Strykowski, Julian. The Inn. Trans. from Polish: Celina Wieniewska. New York, 1972 (1966).

C. STUDIES.

43. גוֹבֶרֶין, נוֹרִיחַ. "סיפורי-המחכה כסוג ספרותי." מאָפּף יא מוקדש ליציירה חיים הוֹז. ערך רב סדן ורן לאור. ירושלים, חשל"ח, עמ' 256-236.
44. Fussell, Paul. The Great War and Modern Memory. New York & London, 1975.
45. Roskies, David G. "The Pogrom Poem and the Literature of Destruction." Notre Dame English Journal, XI:2 (April, 1979), 89-113.

