

## Yiddish Lessons

BY DAVID G. ROSKIES

### From That Time and Place: A Memoir 1938-1947 by Lucy S. Dawidowicz

(Norton, 333 pp., \$21.95)

This was the recommended itinerary for Jewish travelers who had only one day to spend in the Polish city of Vilna in the year 1939: (1) Ostra Brama Street, with its famous shrine to the Virgin Mary built into the gateway; (2) Marshal Pilsudski's mausoleum in the Christian cemetery at Rossa; (3) City Hall; (4) Broad Street, with its memorial plaques to the sculptor Mark Antokolski and the poet Adam Mickiewicz; (5) the historic Jewish Quarter, Synagogue Courtyard, and the Strashun Library; (6) the University; (7) Napoleon Square; (8) Castle Hill; (9) the Cathedral; (10) the old Jewish cemetery; (11) the YIVO Institute; and (12) the Ansky Ethnographic Museum. Optimally, said their Yiddish guidebook, four days were needed to take in all the major sites, to savor the city's diverse ethnic makeup of Jews, Poles, White Russians, Lithuanians, Karaites, and Tatars. The book's title proclaimed *1000 Years of Vilna*, and you couldn't squeeze a mil-

lennium into a day.

In any other time and place, Zalmen Szyk's lavishly illustrated and thoroughly professional guidebook would have been taken for granted. Poland, after all, had its Society for Land Study that promoted tourism and hiking. But those were the days of a semi-fascist state, and the Society severely limited Jewish membership, and relegated no status whatsoever to Jewish historical landmarks. The overcoming of the deep ethnic, religious, and political barriers required not a historical guide to the city, but a utopian vision of the future. Only in Szyk's dreambook could a Jew move effortlessly from one ethnic enclave to another, and smoothly across religious boundaries, to enjoy the incalculable treasures of Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania.

Fifty years after her own extended visit to Vilna, Lucy Dawidowicz vividly recalls the enforced ghettoization of the Polish Jews on the eve of their final destruction. Even when armed with an American passport and a fellowship to study at Vil-

na's world-renowned Yiddish Scientific Institute (better known by its acronym, the YIVO), the 23-year-old Dawidowicz (née Schildkret) discovered a city divided between "rich and poor, right and left," "them and us." Though it was indeed possible, as Szyk's guide to the millennium implicitly argued, to negotiate the city entirely in Yiddish, the language could not compensate for the economic and political strangulation of the Jews. Yet Dawidowicz had come there believing that language and culture could emancipate the Jews from their third-class status, if not from history itself.

Vilna was the ideological capital of Yiddish, and the YIVO was its shrine. To appreciate the power of that utopian dream, one must remember that on the eve of the Second World War, more Jews (11 million) spoke Yiddish than had ever spoken a Jewish language before—or, it is safe to predict, will probably do so again. In the brave new worlds of America and the Soviet Union, Yiddish was harnessed to the great proletarian struggle, and so, presumably, the workers of the world had united behind it. Just a stone's throw from Vilna, in the Soviet city of Minsk, one could argue a court case in Yiddish, attend a university in Yiddish, become a commissar in Yiddish. Farther east, on the border of Manchuria, there was a Jewish Soviet Republic of Birobidjan, where Yiddish was the official language.

Vilna, then, was only one of many possible pilgrimage sites on the world map of Yiddish. Yet for someone of Dawidowicz's background, the choice of Vilna was almost preordained. A red diaper baby who precociously lost her faith in Stalin, the young Dawidowicz was trying to reclaim what little was left of American Yiddish culture once its radical politics had been stripped away. If she couldn't believe in the Yiddish revolutionary paradise, the only thing left was the dream of forging a new, Jewish-language culture on the foundations of the old. It was a similar dream that propelled her Zionist counterparts to Jerusalem. The YIVO was established in Vilna only a week before the Hebrew University was called into being on Mount Scopus: between March 24 and April 1, 1925, the battle lines were drawn between the two "Jerusalems," over which would attract the brightest and the best.

Vilna had already become the magnet for a new brand of Jewish intellectuals and political activists—despite the revolutionary upheaval of 1905-06, the German occupation of World War I, the fierce battles between the Red Army

and the Polish Legion, the rise of virulent anti-Semitism under the Polish Republic. The list of these "naturalized" Vilna Jews reads like a Who's Who of the modern Yiddish intelligentsia: the pedagogue Abraham Golomb; the publisher Boris Kletskin; the poets Moyshe Kulbak and Abraham Sutzkever; the playwright A. Vayter; the Bundist leaders Arkady Kramer, Anna Rosental, and Boruch Virgili-Cahan; the Territorialist leader Yosef Chernikhov; the literary critics Naftoli Vaynig and Shmuel Niger; the scholars Max Erik, Zelig Kalmanovich, Zalmen Reisen, and Max Weinreich.

The secular Jewish elite, in turn, threw its enormous energy into creating a cradle-to-grave network of Yiddish institutions—everything from a sanatorium for tubercular patients to a Yiddish marionette theater; from hiking to (naturally) Esperanto clubs. Vilna could also boast the youngest and most diverse group of Yiddish poets anywhere in the world. The scope of "Young Vilna," as it was called, ranged from Chaim Grade's epic struggle with the ascetic world of Talmudic learning to Abraham Sutzkever's exuberant embrace of Nature in all her thousand colors.

But from its spotless new quarters in the fancy part of town, it was the YIVO that towered above all these modern institutions, because it alone laid claim to the entire east European Jewish experience: past, present, and especially future. To guarantee that future, it sponsored an *aspirantur*, or research fellowship program, for the training of young scholars. And so Dawidowicz's arrival in the summer of 1938 to join the other 15 *aspirantn* was not nearly as anomalous as it might seem in retrospect, even if her timing was perilously off.

Besides the rise of fascism outside of Poland's borders and within, Vilna's Yiddishist utopia had already been disrupted by death, defections to the east, and immigration westward. All thoughts of Dawidowicz extending her own stay for another term were cut short by a letter from the American Embassy in Warsaw warning her to get out of Poland as soon as possible. A week after Dawidowicz left Vilna, the Germans invaded.

Would Yiddishism and other forms of diaspora nationalism have flourished were it not for the Holocaust? To that inevitable question, Dawidowicz delivers this resounding verdict: "Everything I loved in Vilna rested upon a rotten crumbling foundation." Any successes in forging an autonomous Yiddish secular culture she attributes not to internal Jew-

ish resources and traditions, but rather to the total exclusion of Jews from the social, political, and cultural life of Poland. Harsh judgments are the stuff of this memoir.

They have as much to do with Dawidowicz's historical revisionism as with her undying love for two members of Vilna's Yiddish elite. For as bad as her timing was geopolitically, it was perfect personally. Just a few weeks after her arrival, Sholem Kalmanovich, the only son of Riva and Zelig Kalmanovich, left for Palestine; and so the Kalmanoviches became her surrogate parents and her spiritual mentors. Her book is not only a sober reappraisal governed by "the discipline of history," it is also a personal odyssey in which one family stands in for the fate of an entire civilization. Whether these two purposes can be reconciled is another matter.

The "discipline of history" invoked in the book's preface fuels the narrative with a good deal of animus. Part I, which recapitulates her year taking in the Christian sights and Jewish dreams of Vilna, seems to be aimed at the Evenhanded School of Polish History. To those (like Norman Davies) who argue that Polish anti-Semitism must be seen against the perennial victimization of the Poles themselves, Dawidowicz counters with an insider's view of "living from day to day" in the face of economic boycotts, religious fanaticism, and political disfranchisement. From Dawidowicz's perspective, the main expression of Poland's genius was the almost inexhaustible array of discriminatory policies it levied against the Jews and other hated minorities.

Since the facts she adduces are fairly well known (certainly to those who have seen the six-part PBS special on Poland), perspective is all. Among the Jews of Vilna, indeed among the senior faculty at the YIVO itself, opinions were deeply divided. Max Weinreich, the YIVO's guiding light, believed that self-knowledge was the key to redemption. Upon his return in 1934 from Princeton, where he had been working on a Rockefeller Foundation grant, Weinreich organized an autobiography contest among young Polish Jews, in order to study the effects of prolonged discrimination and deprivation on personality development; the most advanced methods of social psychology, he promised in the resulting study, would pave *The Road to Our Youth*. Zelig Kalmanovich, on the other hand, was busy writing jeremiads on the fate of diaspora Jewry, when he wasn't otherwise occupied editing the YIVO's scholarly journal. Here, as elsewhere in her memoir, Dawidowicz sides with

Kalmanovich.

Putting to rest any residual romanticism on the Polish and Polish-Jewish side of things, Dawidowicz then tackles the far more ambiguous question of America's role in World War II. In the next part of her book, which takes the reader through the nightmare years of the Holocaust, she is out to demolish the Mea Culpa School of American History. To those who claim that America, and particularly its Jews, could have and should have done more to save the Jews of Europe, Dawidowicz reminds them of how slow the news was in arriving, how difficult it was for most people to believe, and how few practical alternatives were actually available. She cites a petition to Roosevelt drafted in March 1943 by Weinreich and signed by 283 of America's leading professors and then comments upon it as follows:

For all of his intellectual brilliance, Weinreich was just as helpless as the rest of us when it came to practical suggestions on how to save the Jews. He could only propose "hitherto unused methods," hoping that Roosevelt's advisers would know how to implement his suggestion.

The weight of this anecdotal evidence is hardly overwhelming. Dawidowicz's assurance that the United States did all it could do for Europe's doomed Jews remains unproved by her book. Anyway, the matter is rather irrelevant to her memoir. What does stand out, more appropriately, and in memorable detail, is the way in which these hard-nosed Yiddish secularists, spared from the gas chambers by an accident of history, turn more and more to traditional forms of mourning in order to work through their collective grief. When all is said and done, they, too, stand up to recite the Kaddish.

Finally, Dawidowicz rebuts the Sentimental School of Holocaust History, the obsessive commemorators for whom the survivors are all seers and saints. Upon her return to Europe to work for the Joint Distribution Committee, she anticipates a fateful encounter with the few survivors from Vilna, but she discovers, instead, that the memories of Vilna cannot bridge the slaughter. The dead are unredeemable, and the living are a motley of heroes and collaborators, cynics and sycophants.

All these schools of historical thought and feeling are no doubt in need of policing, and in her other writings Dawidowicz has done a great deal to redress the wrongs of postwar memory. I wonder, though, whether a personal memoir is really the place to drive the nails into the coffin. In order to make these sweeping generalizations, Dawidowicz must devote an awful lot of space to factual exposition and historical



data. There are surely more effective ways of incorporating history into the story of one's own experience, even without adopting the extravagant techniques of fiction. In the end, Dawidowicz's book pays a price: the historicization of her personal narrative, besides being a bit patronizing, takes the place of personal portrayal and psychological depth. The one exception is the chapter titled "Death Watch," about how she and the YIVO staff in New York tried to learn the fate of Vilna Jews through the pages of the free press: here every news item carries fateful, heart-breaking weight.

At its best, *From That Time and Place* is a true memoir: an idiosyncratic account of a single life, albeit a life dwarfed by its historical backdrop. Dawidowicz's admirable refusal to fake what she did not experience lends a fine note of subjectivity to her guided tour of a world that no longer exists. It is surely no accident, for instance, that the two most positive male figures in the Vilna part of the book combined worldliness with a profound knowledge of Jewish tradition. Of the YIVO's two intellectual giants, she clearly preferred Kalmanovich to Weinreich, and of Vilna's Yiddish modernist poets, she ranked Chaim Grade, fresh from the world of the Lithuanian yeshiva, high above the aesthete Abraham Sutzkever. These choices reveal much about the author's own proclivities. If unalloyed modernity was what she was after, she could have stayed in New York and hung out with Jacob Glatstein and Mikhl Licht at the Café Royale. But for a modern Yiddish culture distilled out of the folk, its poverty, and its accumulated wisdom, there was no better laboratory than Vilna.

A book that bills itself as a memoir invites a certain kind of reading. Because Dawidowicz tells us so little about her personal and family life, we find ourselves looking for the missing links. It is easy enough to guess why the warmth and the wisdom of the Kalmanoviches would render her own parents—her distant father, her overprotective mother—superfluous. But it is much harder to imagine precisely how her involvement with the fate of the Jews could come between her and her wartime, American-born sweetheart (she had returned, after all, disabused of Vilna's utopian dreams); or why, really, she chose to marry a refugee instead. I share Dawidowicz's dislike for the "true confession," but her portrait of Jewish Vilna might have taken on more flesh if her palette had more color.

Given the central role that Zelig Kalmanovich plays in this narrative, for in-

stance, it might have been helpful to know something about the prescient and extremely controversial articles that he was writing at precisely the time of her sojourn in Vilna. In fact, Kalmanovich's analysis of how Western capitalism and Soviet-style assimilation had already done irreparable harm to a sense of Jewish cohesiveness is, in its outlines, very close to Dawidowicz's own view. And given the role that religious symbolism and historical archetypes play in the later parts of her story—she seems to feel, though she does not say so, that a catastrophe of such magnitude can only be mediated through an appeal to the sacred—it would have been relevant to mention that Kalmanovich became an observant Jew in the ghetto, that he kept his ghetto diary in Hebrew rather than Yiddish.

One episode that Dawidowicz does recount, however, in her tight-lipped and aggressively unsentimental way, has to do with the Kalmanoviches' response to the news of imminent war. Gushing with love for her adoptive parents, full of late adolescent bravado, the narrator swears that she will stay in Vilna, come what may. To this Riva Kalmanovich replies, in the book's most memorable passage:

What do you know of war? You can't begin to imagine what it'll be like. You won't be a help to us. You'll only be a burden, another mouth to feed, another person to care for. Go home to New York. Thank God you have time to go.

This dramatically reconstructed speech is the decree of the narrator's banishment from Eden, her coming of age as a woman and a Jew. Henceforth, her life will be a series of incremental losses, culminating in the loss of Eastern European Jewry itself. Like the rest of us, whether we abide by the "discipline of history" or not, Dawidowicz apprehends the meaning of her "place and time" not through newspaper reports or grand historiographic designs, but through the selfless love of another human being.

What the reader of Lucy Dawidowicz's memoir learns, then, is that the world of Eastern European Jewry was lost several times over. No secular scheme, no matter how grandiose, could restore the unity and the vigor that these Jews had once enjoyed when they were still obedient to God and his Torah. No amount of idealism and self-sacrifice could restore Vilna to its cultural pre-eminence, for the forces relentlessly pitted against it were too great. No amount of love or literary talent could restore to life the people who once channeled and challenged this young woman's faith. And no guidebook, however precise, could bridge the great gulf between the present and the past.

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