

Modern confrontations explored in new books

By
DAVID BIRKAN

Several facets of modern Jewish history are strikingly presented in two new books.

Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish History (Harvard University Press, U.S.\$20) by David Roskies is a well written and researched study of Jewish artistic reaction to the unprecedented anti-semitic depredations of recent times.

Hasidism and the Jewish Enlightenment: Their Confrontation in Galicia and Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century (Jewish Publication Society, U.S.\$30), by the late Raphael Mahler, examines the nascent Haskalah (westernizing) movement's little publicized campaign of persecution against its chief competitor for the hearts and minds of East European Jewry.

Roskies' study is more inclusive than its title suggests, beginning by way of background with an examination of Lamentations, written after the destruction of the First Temple, and related "liturgy of destruction," the Tisha B'Av observances. These he relates to what is expressed in the writings and visual arts of Jewish authors and artists since the Russian pogroms. In the process, he illuminates many contributing events and situations.

Included in Roskies' focus are significant works by: S. Y. Abramovitch (better known under the pen name Mendele Mocher Seforim); Yekutiel Berman, who wrote the first

pogrom novel; poets S. Frug, Chaim Nachman Bialik, H. Leivik, A. Lejeles; Sholom Aleichem, Abraham Sutzkever — the witness to the destruction of Vilna — and Uri Zvi Greenberg; artists Issacher Ber Ryback, Marc Chagall, Marcell Janco, Nathan Rapoport, Naftali Bezem, and Samuel Bak.

For readers interested in categories, Roskies' study also becomes a work of art criticism, in the positive sense of the phrase.

Revels in Jewish roots

Roskies is a relatively young Montreal-born intellectual who has revelled in and embraced his Jewish roots. As a youngster in "a city of survivors," he and many other children took full part in their parents' community memorial services. "We were called upon to recite poetry, sing ghetto songs, and light candles," he recounts in a moving introduction entitled **Ruined Cities of the Mind**.

Roskies' work has earned much praise, in the Jewish and non-Jewish press. When it first came out, in hardcover, it won the 1984 Ralph Waldo Emerson Award.

Mahler's study sets out to document the attempted suppression of the chassidic movement by the maskilim (westernizers), a sorry chapter in Jewish history.

One maskil, Jacob Samuel Byk, berated his own movement for their "boundless hatred" of the chassidim, pointing out that it preached tolerance and love of one's fellow man towards everybody but them.

Writes Mahler: "In all fields and in every respect, the Haskalah was the opposite of chassidism, an antithesis that reflected the conflicting interests and philosophies of the Jewish people." The chassidim represented the impoverished, suffering masses; the maskilim, the rising Jewish bourgeoisie and its associated intelligentsia. The chassidim viewed the Diaspora as the central tragedy of the Jewish people, yearning for a messianic redemption and return to Zion. The maskilim pressed for secular education and linguistic assimilation.

The chassidim were completely attached to Jewish tradition and the Yiddish language; the maskilim and their followers aimed to merge with the dominant nationality in language, dress, and external bearing. They despised Yiddish, preferring German or any other Western language and in some cases Hebrew.

The maskilim pressed for secular education; shunned miracles and the supernatural in religion; despised economically unproductive Jewish occupations, particularly in the rabbinate and religious schools; and opposed tzedakah, as encouraging idleness. They were also embarrassed by the "benighted" appearance of the chassidim and by their indifference or opposition to maskilim efforts for political emancipation.

Throughout the first half of the 19th century, the maskilim collaborated with secular governments in trying to suppress chassidim and banning or censoring their religious writings.

The maskilim and the Austrian authorities collaborated intensively in the arch-reactionary reign of Prince Metternich after the defeat of Napoleon. Chassidic leaders' injunctions earlier to refrain from aiding or even sympathizing with the French invaders despite their host governments' long record of anti-semitic excesses were totally disregarded.

The career of collaborator Joseph Perl, a government school director decorated by both despots of Eastern Europe, Russia's Czar Alexander I and Austria's Emperor Francis I, is explored at length.

Mahler's book was originally published before his death in 1977. This edition, the first in English, represents some very good translation work, from the Yiddish by Eugene Orenstein, and from the Hebrew by Aaron Klein and Jenny Machlowitz.

Reading his and Roskies' books, and then juxtaposing the two, can provide useful insights into the state of contemporary Judaism.