

REPORT OF THE
OXFORD CENTRE FOR
HEBREW AND
JEWISH STUDIES

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OXFORD CENTRE FOR
HEBREW AND JEWISH STUDIES

YARNTON

*Yarnton Manor, Yarnton
Oxford OX5 1PY, England*
telephone: Oxford (01865) 377946
fax: Oxford (01865) 375079
email: enquiries@ochjs.ac.uk
website: <http://associnst.ox.ac.uk/ochjs/>

HEBREW AND JEWISH STUDIES UNIT

*The Oriental Institute
Pusey Lane, Oxford OX1 2LE, England*
telephone: Oxford (01865) 278200
fax: Oxford (01865) 278190

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The Yizkor Book Collection *

MAŁGORZATA SOCHAŃSKA

BOOKS COMMEMORATING a world that no longer exists are not a new phenomenon in Jewish culture. The custom of preserving the names of the dead and of recording acts of martyrdom goes back to the early Middle Ages. The *Memorbücher* of Ashkenazi Jewry, found in Germany, Switzerland and Alsace until as late as the eighteenth century, record names of important religious and community leaders and martyrs who died during anti-Jewish pogroms. The lists of such names were read out in synagogues during memorial services.

The first modern Memorial Books, often referred to as Yizkor books – *Yisker bikher* in Yiddish, *Sifrei-yizkor* or *Sifrei-zikaron* in Hebrew – emerged as a response to the First World War and the pogroms that followed it. One such early Memorial Book is the volume on Proskurov, a *shtetl* in Eastern Galicia, published in New York in 1924 (*Khurbn Proskurov; tsum ondenken fun di heylige neshomes...*; NY, 1924). In February 1919 Proskurov suffered a vicious pogrom during which some 1500 Jews were murdered and thousands more injured. The book contains the names of all the victims as well as a chronicle of this pogrom, printed in parallel columns of Hebrew and Yiddish, recalling the format of traditional Jewish Bibles, in which the original Hebrew appears together with an Aramaic translation.

Memorial Books as a Response to the Shoah

A large number of Memorial Books were published in response to the Nazi Holocaust. Producing them became a cultural focus for Holocaust survivors striving to preserve the memory of a prewar world.

* Thanks to the ongoing support of the Catherine Lewis Foundation and the 2004 Lewis Grandchildren's Trust, the Centre's Library currently holds over 850 *Yizkor* Books, on which the above article is based. The collection, the largest of this literature in Europe, is housed in the Catherine Lewis Room of the Library, which offers readers a quiet working space, with internet facilities for searching the 'JewishGen Yizkor Book Project' and the 'ShtetlSeeker' for locating required sites. The online catalogue of the collection is accessible on the website homepage of the Library.

Recording the existence of Jewish *shtetlekh* and giving shape to memories of destroyed communities gave testimony of a vanished world and commemorated those who had once been part of it.

Memorial Books are a valuable source of information on the traditions that marked everyday life in a *shtetl*. They devote attention to important community members: rabbis, scholars, writers and political activists; contain descriptions of synagogues, public libraries, clubs and self-aid and communal organizations; and record events such as demonstrations, pogroms and important fairs. They give an account of the economic life of a *shtetl*, discussing different Jewish trades and occupations, as well as Jewish business and commerce. Some also give us an insight into the relationship between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbours. They describe factors major and minor: the rise of the *Haskalah*, the emergence of Zionism, the Jewish labour movement, political parties, youth movements, trade unions, revolutionary activities, Modern Hebrew and Yiddish language schools, and the background to the great migration, to name a only a few themes.

A large proportion were written by Polish Jews and deal with places that lay within Poland's interwar borders and which, although practically unknown in Polish cultural history, are significant in Jewish history. This is not to say that Polish Jews showed more interest in their native towns than Russian Jews, but merely that Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust were more likely to reach the West and to be in a position to publish memorial volumes concerning their hometowns. This was less likely to be the case for Jews from places within the Soviet Union, for instance.

Writers of Memorial Books were not constrained by the size of the Jewish community in their town. The community of Chorostków, a *shtetl* in Eastern Galicia with 350 Jewish families, was as likely to have a memorial book as Łódź, with its 200,000 Jews. Indeed, the majority of Memorial Books are devoted to *shtetlekh* rather than major cities and cannot be taken to reflect accurately the actual settlement pattern of prewar Polish Jewry, over one-third of whom lived in Poland's three largest cities, i.e. Warsaw, Łódź and Lwów.

Since their main readership was the community of survivors and émigrés from the *shtetl* itself, and since many readers would know the authors or editors personally, Memorial Books were almost always printed in editions of less than 1000 copies. Without the financial sup-

port of a government or any other agency, the books were produced by independent *Landsmanshaft* societies, the mutual-aid and fraternal societies which were the key social organizations of Jewish emigrants from East European *shtetls* now living in the United States, Argentina, Israel and elsewhere.

While most *Yizkor* books were written by survivors who had moved to the West, some were composed in Displaced Persons' camps, where survivors were already working to reassemble the remnants of their destroyed communities. A notable example of such an effort is the volume on the destruction of Częstochowa (*Churban Czenstochow*; Germany 1948). What makes it particularly interesting is that it is one of very few Memorial Books to be published in Yiddish written in Latin characters, in perfect Polish orthography. (Plate 1) Since the frontispiece of the book features its title in Hebrew characters the reason for the Latin transcription of the Yiddish is unlikely to have been the lack of a Hebrew font. It is more likely that the editors and contributors to the volume spoke Yiddish fluently but, having been educated in Polish schools, never learnt to read or write in Hebrew characters.

Languages

As the *Yizkor* book of Częstochowa illustrates, *shtetl* inhabitants often knew the local vernacular, such as Polish, Ukrainian or Lithuanian, but spoke Yiddish among themselves. Hebrew was the language of the book, traditionally known to men and later on to proponents of Zionist ideology. *Yizkor* books were published in a variety of languages, and occasionally entirely in Yiddish. They were mostly published in Argentina, a community closely tied to the Yiddish language, or in the United States in the immediate postwar years. In Israel some were published wholly in Hebrew. Exceptionally, books published in the Diaspora are entirely in English. The majority of Memorial Books are published in both Hebrew and Yiddish, sometimes with an introduction or summary in English. The material in bilingual books varies – some articles are published in both languages, some in one only. The material in the Yiddish section is usually popular, while that in the Hebrew section tends to be more scholarly.

DOS KULTURELE LEBEN.

A ongezeen ort hot farnumen dos szul-wezn in Czenstochow. Ale politisze parteyen hobn zich bamit cu hobn ejgene szuln. Fun di wichtikste dercijungs-ansztalten ken men ojsrechenen folgnde:

Kinder-hejm, ojf der Krotke 22, gegrindet durch der amerikaner arbeterszaft ojfn nomen fun farsztorbenem bundiszn tuer Wladimir Medem. Mit der kinder-hejm hot ongefirt froj Brener Jadzia. Kinder-hejm ojf der Przemyslowa 6, organizirt durch der gezelszaft „Dobroczynosc“. Folks-szule ojfn nomen fun I. L. Perec ojf der Krotka 28 mit jidiszer unterrichts-szprach. In der szule hobn bakumen bildung un dercijung di kinder, wos hobn zich rekrutirt fun di arbeter un folks szichtn. Di szule iz geworn gelejtet durch der partej fun „Bund“ unter der onfirung fun Refoel Federman un L. Brener. Algemejne szule, in welche es iz a grojse ojfmerkzamkejt gewidmet geworn far der hebrejiszer szprach. Zi iz gewen ajngedndt in najem hojz, wos di Kehile-Farwattung hot ojffgebojt far a 3-ter jidiszer gimnazje ojf ek Jasnogorska un ek Waly Dwernickiego



Bilo Nr. 3. Folks-szule Nr. 13. Ojf der rechter zajt sztejt di szul-farwalterin frl. Szacher. Zi iz, in der erszter akcje fun likwidirn dos grojse geto, awekgeszikt geworn kejn Treblinke un dort umgekumen.

The Yizkor Book Collection

Titles

Much about the origins and intent of a Memorial volume is revealed by its title. Sometimes the name of the *shtetl* alone suffices – as in the case of the book devoted to Jews from Aleksandrów (*Aleksander*; Tel Aviv, 1968) or the book of Lithuania (*Lite*; Tel Aviv, 1951–65). Usually, however, the name of a *shtetl* is preceded by words such as *Yizker-bukh* in Yiddish or *Sefer yizkor* or *Sefer zikaron* in Hebrew, terms suggesting a link with the medieval Ashkenazi tradition of *Memorbücher*, as in the case of volumes devoted to the Jews of Rzeszów (*Kehilat Raysha; sefer zikaron*; Tel Aviv, 1967), Włodawa (*Sefer zikaron Vlodava ve-ha-sevivah*; Tel Aviv, 1974), (Plate 2) Puławy (*Yisker – bukh Pulawy*; New York, 1964) or Tomaszów Lubelski (*Sefer zikaron shel Tomaszow-Lubelski*; Jerusalem, 1972). Use of the word *sefer*, ‘book’, in the title may even suggest that the volume is to be regarded as a holy text bearing rabbinical approval, a ritual object through which the holy memory of the martyrs and their community will be preserved. The designation of the word *pinkas* in the title, on the other hand, suggests a replacement of a lost town chronicle – as in the case of volumes devoted to the communities of Będzin in the Zagłębie region in Upper Silesia (*Pinkas Bendin*; Tel Aviv, 1959), or the volume dedicated to the whole region, *Pinkas Zagłębie* (Tel Aviv, 1972).

Title pages

Title pages of Memorial Books often feature symbols of mourning and of life destroyed. The most typical image is perhaps that of a burning *shtetl*, as depicted on the title page of the Cieszanów volume (*Sefer zikaron le-kehila kedosha Cieszanow*; Tel Aviv, 1970), with the inscription in both Hebrew and Yiddish which reads: ‘My *shtetl* is burning’. (Plate 3) Another characteristic motif is a mournful, ghostly figure rising from a grave, wrapped in a prayer shawl, covering his eyes with his hands, as seen on the frontispiece of *Sefer Kosow* (Tel Aviv, 1964). The title page of *Sefer zikaron le-kehillat Tomaszow Mazowiecki* (Tel Aviv, 1969) features further characteristic motifs: an overturned menorah, gravestones, gallows, a crowd of people with yellow stars on their sleeves at the ramp of a concentration camp, the letters of the word *yizkor* forming a face with tears dripping down the page. (Plate 4) On

ספר זכרון

ולודאבה והסביבה

סוגנו

בהשתתפות

אירגוני

יוצאי

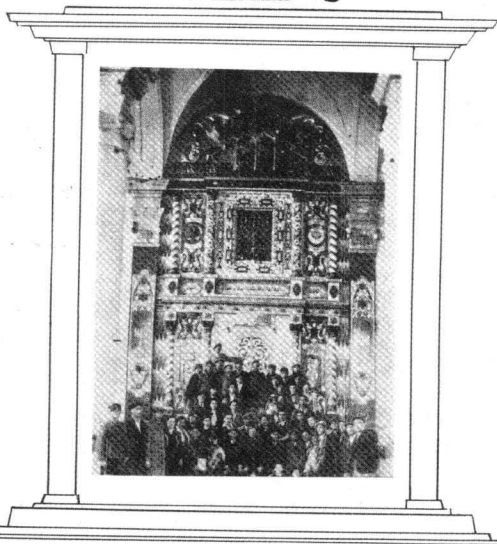
ולודאבה

בצפון-

ודרום-

אמריקה

1974



הוצא לאור

ע"י אירגון

יוצאי

ולודאבה

והסביבה

בישראל

תל-אביב

תשל"ד

Plate 2 The title page of the volume on Włodawa and vicinity, illustrating the use of the Hebrew term for 'Memorial Book'.



עבודת'יד ומתנת הציר סר יעקב גרבל והעיתו שושנה לבית שמוקלר

Plate 3 The title page of the volume on Cieszanów, with its characteristic flame motif.

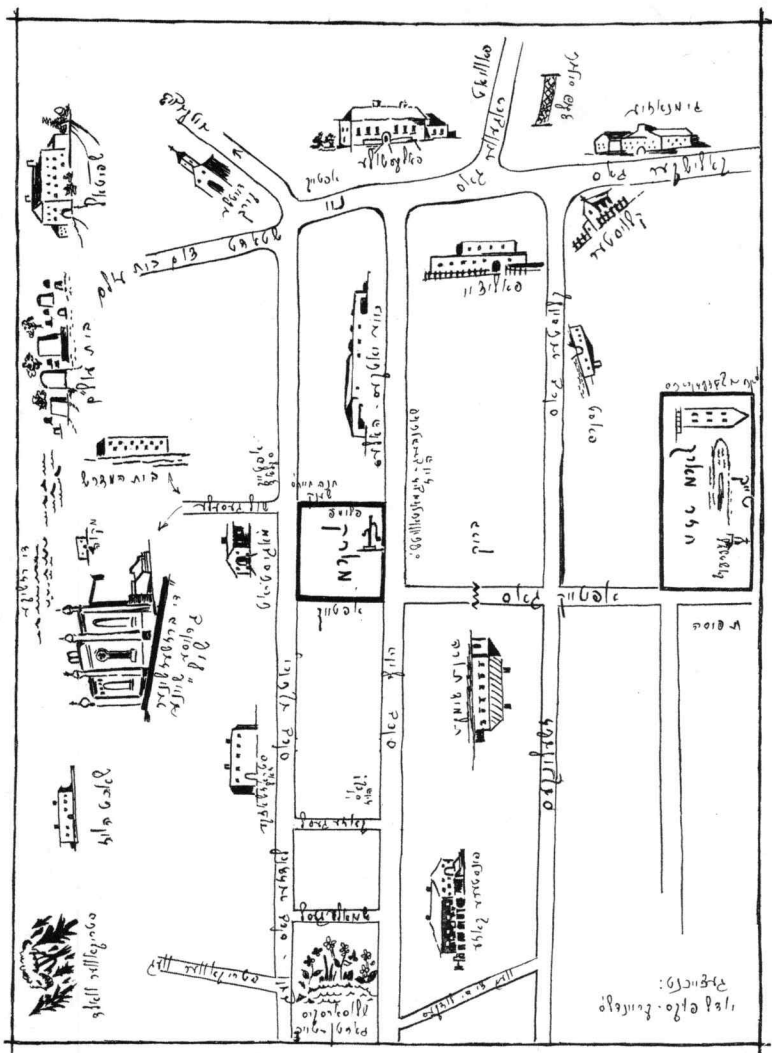


אלוהים את נשמותיהם
 הקדושות והטהורות של-
 15000 יהודי

טומשוב-מזוביץק

שנהרגו ושנשחטו ושנשרפו
 ושנהקו ושנקברו חיים בידי
 הצוררים הגרמנים ועוזריהם
 אוץ אל תנסי דמם!

Plate 4 The title page of the Tomaszów Mazowiecki volume, which includes a number of motifs illustrating destruction.



תמונת העיר בברזנין

Plate 5 The hand-drawn map of Brzeziny included in the volume on the town.

the title page of *Pinkas Zyrardow* (Buenos Aires, 1961) one can see again a burnt *shtetl* behind barbed wire, with the inscription in Yiddish: *nit fargesn, nit fargebn*, ‘do not forget, do not forgive’. The title page of the Chelm volume, *Sefer ha-zikaron le-kehillat Chelm* (Tel Aviv, [1980–1]) features more gravestones and candles, and a mournful figure of a pious Jew reading a holy text, his arms stretched out to the sky from the flames, and the inscription *le-zekher kedoshei Chelm*, ‘to the holy martyrs of Chelm’. Yet another important image that sometimes recurs on *Yizkor* books’ title pages is that of a severed tree, with a small shoot growing from its stump, as portrayed on the title page of *Ayaratenu Visotsk; sefer zikaron* (Haifa, 1963). The small shoot indicates the community of survivors from Wysock, the contributors to the volume.

Maps

The inside covers of many books bear maps. Some of these are regional, showing the relation of the *shtetl* to neighbouring locations. Others are schematic representations of the *shtetl*’s layout, often drawn from memory, as in the book of Brzeziny (*Bzhezhin yisker-bukh*; New York, 1961), which features a hand-drawn map with most important buildings indicated on it. (Plate 5) Jewish institutions are sometimes marked with the Star of David or menorah. On the map of Rudki (in *Rudki; sefer yizkor le-yehudei Rudki ve-ha-seviva*; Tel Aviv, 1978) one can see drawings of both Catholic and Orthodox churches in a circle, probably to emphasize the separation of the two worlds. The legend beneath it states in both Polish and Hebrew that the map has been recreated from memory so is not to scale. In the map of Kalusz (in *Kalusz; hayeha ve-hurbana shel ha-kehila*; Tel Aviv, 1980) one again sees a clear division into two separate worlds: non-Jewish institutions or street-names are in Polish written in Latin characters, while Jewish ones are in Hebrew characters.

Content

Memorial Books often divide the history of a location into pre-1914, interwar, and Holocaust sections. In addition they contain sections or chapters on characteristics of a *shtetl* and on institutions such as social, political and cultural organizations. The Holocaust, given its role in shaping the survivors’ memory, understandably often determines the composition of a *Yizkor* book.

Most books begin with a substantial account of the history of the town from the time of its first Jewish settlement. These are frequently largely based on articles found in publications such as Polish encyclopedias. Others are original essays of value to contemporary scholars of the early history of Jews in Poland. *Pinkes Młave*, edited by Jacob Shatzky, a well-known historian of Polish Jewry (and of Warsaw Jewry in particular), and published in New York in 1950, features a section on the history of Jews in Mława written by Dr Judah Rosenthal, himself born in Maków, who later became Professor at the College of Jewish Studies in Chicago. The volume devoted to the Jewish community of Kołomyja (*Pinkes Kolomey*; New York, 1957), edited by the Yiddish essayist and literary critic, Shlomo Bikel, contains a chapter on the history of the town by Nathan Michael Gelber, Jewish historian and Zionist leader, originally from Galicia.

The second section, the interwar period, is usually the largest. Here one finds information about the economic, social and cultural life of the *shtetl*, the occupations of its inhabitants and its political, social and cultural organizations and institutions. This section is also devoted to recollections. The book of Stolpce (*Sefer zikaron: Steibts-Sperzhnye...*; Tel Aviv, 1964) contains an article by Shneur Zalman Shazar, third President of the State of Israel, entitled 'My Stolpce'. Shazar was born in Mir, near Minsk, but his family moved to Stolpce after a disastrous fire when Shazar was only three years old, and he spent his youth there. The book of Płońsk, *Sefer Plonsk ve-ha-sevivah* (Tel Aviv, 1963) contains a piece by David Ben-Gurion, himself born in Płońsk, entitled 'My Youth in Płońsk'.

Most of the illustrations included in Memorial Books appear in the interwar section. Volumes occasionally contain hundreds of photos, maps or sketches: pictures of rabbis and members of various Jewish institutions and organizations, photographs of synagogues and of schools, residential buildings and streets. One also finds reproductions from the local Jewish press. In short, Memorial Books are illustrations of interwar Jewish life.

The interwar section includes linguistic and folkloric material as well, such as customs relating to particular holidays, characteristic sayings and even lists of individuals' nicknames and explanations of how they had acquired them. The aforementioned *Pinkas Bendin*, for instance, describes chronological strata of Yiddish phonology used in different parts of the town. The book of Chełm, mentioned above, a town

known in Jewish folklore for its fools, contains a section on Chelm in Yiddish folklore. Among literary works published in Memorial Books one finds writings by established authors. For example, in the previously mentioned *Pinkes Mlawe* there are a number of literary items by the Yiddish writer Yosef Opatoshu, a native of this town, as well as writings by less-well-known other local literati.

The third section, on the Holocaust period, contains dates and descriptions of the setting up and liquidation of ghettos, as well as lists of restrictions imposed by Nazis. It includes detailed accounts of how certain individuals escaped, where they hid, who helped them and so forth. Descriptions of events that took place during the Holocaust may be especially harrowing, untrained writers expressing pure emotion without employing literary devices. Some uniquely preserved photographs from the Holocaust period are reproduced, as well as documents or private letters. The Holocaust section often concludes with lists of names of people from the *shtetl* who perished, as was the custom in traditional *Memorbücher* of Ashkenazi Jewry.

Many Memorial Books refer to the period after the War, when the survivors came back to their *shtetls*, usually only for a short period of time. Reluctant to portray their communities as entirely obliterated, Memorial Books often conclude with the ongoing activities of the *Landsmanshaftn* in various corners of the world. (Plate 6) In this section one may come across descriptions of memorial services held yearly by *Landsmanshaftn*, as well as photos of monuments erected to commemorate their perished brothers and sisters.

Conclusion

It is estimated that more than a thousand East European Jewish communities have been commemorated in Memorial Books. These volumes range in size and format from the now crumbling, thin, paperbound volumes produced in displaced persons camps shortly after the Second World War (such as the previously mentioned volume *Churban Czenstochow*), to the four large-format volumes devoted to every aspect of the history and daily life of the Jews of Slonim, *Pinkas Slonim* (Tel Aviv, [1962-79]). Even at the time of writing, sixty years after the end of the War, new memorial books are being published and some of the older ones appearing in English translation.

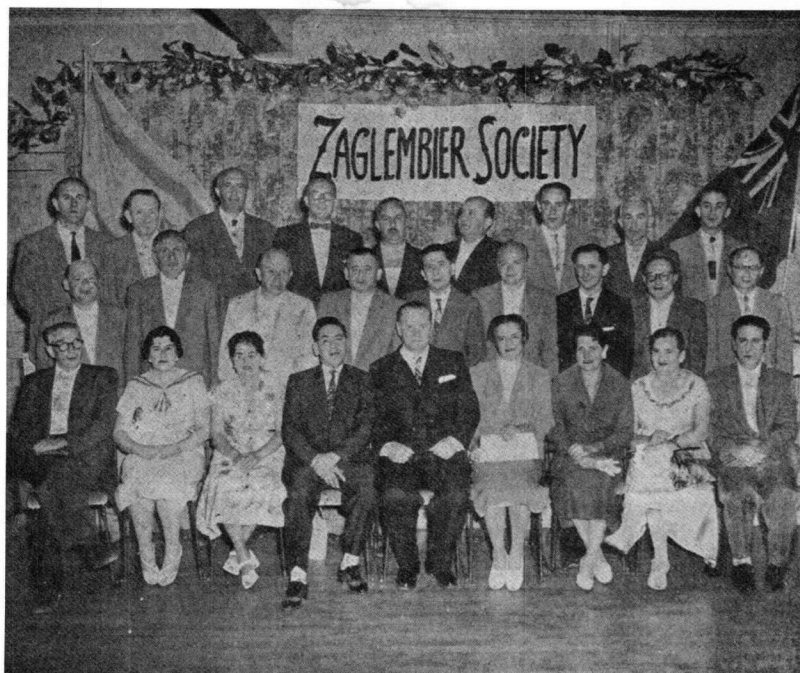


Plate 6 The *Landsmanshaft* of Zagłębie in Canada.

Memorial Books can serve as an important primary source for the study of Jewish life in Poland in the twentieth century, and are of use to scholars of local history or of the history of certain movements or periods. Their narratives provide detailed information on matters such as daily life, institutions, personalities and schools. Since most of the survivors were young adults when the War ended, Memorial Books are particularly useful for studying the culture of Jewish adolescence in Polish towns between the two wars. Recently, because of their genealogical interest, third- and fourth-generation Western European or American Jews turn to *Yizkor* books for data. The lists of names included in such books provide basic information on family history.

Memorial Books present an image of a time when life was spiritually and emotionally warm, if physically precarious. The book on Rudki (*Rudki; sefer yizkor le-yehudei Rudki ve-ha-seviva*; Tel Aviv, 1978) refers to the town as 'the Anatevke of our youth and childhood dreams',

linking it with Sholem Aleichem's fictional *shtetl*, the home of Tevye the Milkman. This evocation points towards the ironic yet affectionate image of the *shtetl* sketched by the classical writers of modern Yiddish literature.

Many historians who have used Memorial Books have been critical of their tendency to sacrifice accurate facts for mood and sentiment. But the volumes should be perceived not as inadequate academic histories, but as the records of simple people trying to preserve a glimpse of the world they knew, loved and lost. One could say that the Memorial Books represent less the Jewish community as it was, than the one that is remembered and recreated.

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