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THE PEOPLE OF THE BOOK(S): ON JEWISH READING HABITS IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

Review of: Nathan Cohen, *Yiddish Transformed: Reading Habits in the Russian Empire, 1860–1914*, trans. Rebecca Wolpe, New York–Oxford, 2023, Berghahn Books, 431 pp.; Dan Tsahor, *The Book of the People: The Hebrew Encyclopedic Project and the National Self*, Berlin–Boston, 2023, de Gruyter, 228 pp. (Studia Judaica, 117); Marat Grinberg, *Soviet Jewish Bookshelf: Jewish Culture and Identity Between the Lines*, Waltham, 2023, Brandeis University Press, 284 pp. (The Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry)

The year 2023 saw the publication of three new contributions to the field of Jewish studies, namely three books devoted to various aspects of reading in Jewish society, its various functions and its influence on shaping the community of readers. While the concept of close ties between Jews and reading is an old one, and the phenomenon itself has been researched in various ways, to mention just Zeev Gries's seminal work *Book in the Jewish World 1700–1900* (Oxford, 2007), all three authors have adopted a different approach to their research subject. Each of their works contributes to a different part of the bigger puzzle being the general picture of the Jewish community in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eastern Europe. Therefore, it is worth presenting each of them briefly before reflecting on their commonalities and differences.

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Nathan Cohen's important work, *Yiddish Transformed: Reading Habits in the Russian Empire, 1860–1914*,[1] is a testimony to many years of research on the subject. Cohen, an Associate Professor at the Bar Ilan University (Israel) and Associate Editor of the *Yad Vashem Studies*, known for important publications in the field of Jewish history as well as Yiddish language and culture, has treated his subject on a large scale. Having drawn on published and unpublished sources in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian, held in the archives of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, New York, and St Petersburg, he drew a broad picture of the Jewish reading experience as such, although performed in multiple ways and places. The introduction to the book defines the basic terms used throughout, namely readers, reading and library (the latter as a literary and cultural agent in both Jewish and non-Jewish surroundings). Next, trying to answer the key questions of "who read, what did they read, where did they read, when did they read, how did they read, and in what language?" (p. 19), Cohen proceeds from explaining the traditional religious context of Jewish literacy to its significant changes at the turn of the twentieth century (Chapter 1). The following four chapters are devoted to detailed discussions of such topics as the emergence of a mass-circulation Yiddish daily press and its influence on the readers and the book market as such (Chapter 2), the appearance of crime and detective stories in Yiddish (Chapter 3), reading experience as portrayed in Yiddish autobiographies (Chapter 4) and the role of libraries (Chapter 5). It is not merely a book on Jewish reading habits; it is instead a book on the transformation of the whole cultural landscape of Eastern European Jewry when Yiddish, the common vernacular used by the Jewish masses, considered previously too vulgar and/or not developed enough to serve as a literary language, began to be accepted as a language of political and cultural life as well as a gate to secular knowledge. "A good *zhargon* [i.e., Yiddish] book and a properly organized library – these are our lectures, courses, and our people's university", said publisher Avrom Kotik (p. 85), to whom Cohen devotes a subchapter. As Cohen notices, various activities on behalf of the Yiddish language and culture, such as founding new press titles, libraries or associations, "came to constitute an aim

[1] This review is based on the English translation published by Berghahn Books. For the Hebrew original, see *Yidish be-siman kriyah: me-lashon dibur le-sfat tarbut* (Jerusalem, 2020).

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in itself rather than merely a means" (p. 372). His book convincingly shows that already before 1914, publications in Yiddish could satisfy a whole range of literary tastes and interests (except for children's literature), also in terms of purely scientific interests. Hence the important role of so-called *bibliotekn*, a series of (often) educational books published on a subscription basis or added as a premium to a newspaper's subscription, frequently serving as a cheap way to broaden one's knowledge.

It might surprise a reader who is less familiar with the history of the development of Yiddish reading practices that Cohen devotes such a prominent place to the development of Yiddish newspapers. It is perhaps less surprising for the Polish academic reader because there is already some Polish research on this topic. Still, it is worth remembering that the Yiddish daily press, more accessible to the simple reader and considerably inexpensive, was a necessary – even if despised by the Yiddish authors – bridge between highbrow Hebrew culture and a modern Yiddish literary culture of the later interwar period. Allowed by the Tsarist authorities in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution, "newspapers succeeded in transcending the borders of the big cities and bringing news of the current reality to provincial towns" (p. 9) and quickly gained immense popularity (pp. 146–8). The generation that got into the habit of reading the daily Yiddish press usually continued to do so at least until 1939, unless they switched to the Jewish press in another vernacular (say, Polish) over the years. This network of readers and publishers, the latter often switching between various titles and types of publication, depending on money and demand – expanded all over the European part of the Russian Empire. Cohen discusses all of its important centres, from Warsaw through Vilna, Kiev, and Odessa up to St Petersburg (pp. 178–92) – each of them with their literary personalities, milieus and specific local conditions (the latter are often mentioned in contemporary memoirs, e.g., in Tsevi Pryłucki's memoirs who deliberated on the cultural differences between Warsaw and St Petersburg).

It is important to emphasise that, contrary to some studies on Eastern European experience which are based on Yiddish and/or Hebrew primary sources and do not consider the influence of surrounding ethnicities, languages and cultures, Cohen's book is firmly rooted in the acclaimed scholarship on Eastern Europe. Not only does he use Russian sources in his research, but he also refers to Polish

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secondary sources (e.g., Janusz Dunin's classical works on Polish penny books). It is not only a fair gesture towards Eastern European scholars, not always as visible in the public as the Western ones, but it also does justice to the historical, multilingual Jewish community.[2] The book's bibliography runs 23 pages, including several dozen historical press titles and a very broad selection of both primary and secondary sources – indeed, a great testimony to the author's impeccable research as a historian.

In contrast to Cohen's magisterial work, Dan Tsahor's study devoted to the history of Hebrew encyclopedias is distinctly more modest, based partially on his PhD dissertation defended at New York University. Tsahor, currently an employee of the Yad Vashem Institute, proposes the interpretation of Hebrew encyclopedias as "a distinctive national project" and "a neglected field of study in the historiography of Zionism" (p. 9). Not all analysed encyclopedias were written and/or published in Hebrew, the author also included some that appeared in English, Russian and Yiddish, so it looks like the term "Hebrew" in the book title refers to a broader concept of the Jewish nation as such.

The book consists of five chapters, each one devoted to another approach to the idea of a national encyclopedia in the Zionist milieu, starting with a general encyclopedia conceived in 1888 in Warsaw (Chapter 1) through various other initiatives in the Diaspora (Chapter 2 and 3) up to initiatives carried out in Palestine in the 1930s (Chapter 4) and in the State of Israel, as part of the national Israeli canon (Chapter 5). As Tsahor notes, the very notion of a Hebrew encyclopedia was supposed to be "a modern link in a chain of Jewish literary tradition that was encyclopedic in its conceptual impulse" (p. 2), and it would become "the center of the intellectual discourse and […] would serve as a departing point in any discussion about Jewish ethics and politics" (p. 79). As a result, regardless of language, most encyclopedia editors expected the users "to read the entire encyclopedia as if it was a modern Talmud" (p. 149). This was, however, hardly the case. Many of these ambitious, multi-volume projects did

[2] It is worth mentioning that Cohen's previous book, *Sefer, sofer ve'iton: merkaz ha-tarbut ha-yehudit be-Varsha, 1918–1942* (Jerusalem, 2003) was translated into Polish and his research is also widely quoted among the scholars of Jewish studies in Poland.

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not come to completion because of lack of money and/or suitable contributors. Also, until the global center of Hebrew book production moved to Palestine, there were simply not enough potential readers who would need such encyclopedias on a daily basis. The author's claim, with regard to the very first encyclopedia from the 1890s, is that "for a few months, the small office on 22 Muranowska Street [in Warsaw] was a global center for Jewish knowledge production" (p. 46). This sounds impressive but one must remember that this "global center" was at that time a republic of letters exchanged between a few Eastern/Central European intellectuals.

A scholar of Jewish history in the Russian Empire still refers on a daily basis to at least one of the encyclopedias discussed by Tsahor, namely the *Evreiskaia entsiklopedia* [The Jewish Encyclopedia], also known as the Brockhaus-Efron encyclopedia, from 1908–1913. Although Tsahor claims that the *Evreiskaia entsiklopedia* was eventually "an encyclopedia of predominantly utopian knowledge" because it diverted the gaze "from the current reality of Jewish life in Russia to both the past (Jewish history) and the future (Palestine) as the future national territory" (p. 134), it is still a useful tool for research.

For such an ambitious study of the history of the Zionist project, some flaws come across as a surprise to the reader. The book's bibliography is divided into only two sections, "Archives" (which lists three Israeli archives and the New York Public Library) and "Published Documents", which, surprisingly, contains both primary and secondary sources (e.g., the minutes of the Fifth Zionist Congress are listed under "Zionisten, Kongress"). It is very inconvenient that the bibliography does not list all the encyclopedias as a separate category (they are dispersed among other titles in the "Published Documents"). There are hardly any references to any other scholarly works than Israeli, American and (sometimes) German ones. There is also a handful of irritable spelling mistakes – Rudolf Okręt, one of the main protagonists of the first chapter, is constantly referred to as "H. Akrent" (p. 19 and others) or even "Arkant" (p. 34). I also regret that Tsahor did not pay more attention to presenting a broader portrait of Bracha Peli, possibly the most important woman of the Palestinian/Israeli book market (pp. 157ff). In a book that is not really a study of reading habits as much as a study of the "Zionist self-image" (p. 12), of (great) men and their ideas who decided to create a "textual homeland" (p. 205) in lieu of a physical one,

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a more detailed presentation of the only female protagonist would surely be interesting to the reader.

One of the definitions of a Hebrew encyclopedia as an "idea of a common 'Jewish bookshelf'" (p. 17) connects Tsahor's book to Marat Grinberg's *Soviet Jewish Bookshelf: Jewish Culture and Identity Between the Lines*, an interesting if perhaps controversial contribution to the growing field of Soviet Jewish history.[3] Grinberg, a Professor of Russian and Humanities at Reed College in Portland (Oregon), analyses Jewish reading practices but his approach is different than Cohen's. His goal is the "reconstruction of a culturological portrait of the post-Holocaust Soviet Jew with the help of both testimonial (biographical and oral) evidence and critical and archival sources" (p. 6) because, as he claims, "[i]n an atmosphere where Judaism was all but destroyed and the very public presence of the Jew delegitimized, Jewish memory and identity continued to exist and develop through subversive and implicit reading practices, underpinned by fractured memories and half-whispered conversations" (p. 4).

Grinberg's book consists of five chapters, each of them discussing a different title, author or genre, which the scholar considers important for rediscovering and/or maintaining the Jewish identity in the USSR and whose reading gave "a sense of intimacy and a shared experience" (p. 5). Chapter 1 presents Russian translations of Lion Feuchtwanger's historical novels, which Grinberg considers to be the "Soviet Jewish Scripture". Chapter 2 discusses various traces of Jewish experience in Russian-language works by more or less known authors ("Soviet Jewish canon of the Thaw", p. 9), starting from the nineteenth-century classics through children's literature to the works published in the 1960s. The range of analysed authors is quite extensive, and it includes, among others, Isaac Babel, Ilya Ehrenburg, Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, Osip Mandelstam, Samuil Marshak, Evgeny Evtushenko, and Anatoly Kuznetsov; it is worth mentioning that Grinberg does not limit himself to discussing Jewish topics in works of a given author but also explains the entanglements between the choice of these topics

[3] As an example, let me just mention the important several-volume *Jews in the Soviet Union: A History* under preparation by a group of scholars led by Gennady Estraikh. So far two volumes have appeared: vol. 3 devoted to the 1939–1945 period (New York, 2022) and vol. 5 covering the years 1953–1967 (New York, 2022).

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and the said author's biography. Chapter 3 is dedicated to Russian translations of Yiddish and Hebrew literature. Chapter 4 analyses anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist Soviet scholarly literature, which might come across as a surprise, but reading these publications "between the lines" (a phrase that comes back often in the book) could have allowed a potential Jewish reader to get the hidden information. Finally, Chapter 5 is dedicated to Soviet popular authors Yuri Trifonov and the Strugatsky brothers – again, dare I say, somewhat surprisingly because I am not convinced about the "Jewishness" of some motifs from their works as analysed by Grinberg (but perhaps, not being a literary scholar myself, I am wrong here).[4]

As a result, this broad picture, spanning most of Soviet history (from the 1930s till the late 1980s), makes an impression of being a very personal one, and this is for a number of reasons. First, Grinberg does not hide that this book has grown from his personal experience as a (former) Soviet Jew. Often, when discussing the importance of a given author/book, he reinforces his opinion with statements like "my grandfather would read this passage out loud to me" (p. 34) or "I recall how in the summer of 1991 […] my friend and I, teenagers at that time, would spend hours debating Josephus's [a protagonist of Feuchtwanger] choices" (p. 192). Perhaps the most striking passage of this kind concerns him tearing apart an anti-Zionist book lent to him by a Jewish classmate (pp. 153–4).

Secondly, Grinberg does not sufficiently justify his choice of topics to be analysed.[5] The Soviet Jewish canon he seeks to reconstruct seems to be based almost uniquely on books that were read in his own family milieu or his Jewish friends' milieu. As a reader, I find it confusing whether I read a personal memoir written by a literary scholar who discusses books that he had found important for his self-identification – or a scholarly book that aims to present a more

[4] Interestingly enough, among the titles and genres discussed by Grinberg as being constitutive to maintaining Jewish identity in the USSR, we will not find the *Evreiskaia entsiklopedia*, even though Tsahor claims (p. 129 ft. 99) that after 1917 it "served as a single source of Zionist knowledge" (or any other encyclopedia, for that matter).

[5] The arbitrariness of Grinberg's attitude has already been noted by reviewers. See, for example, Sasha Senderovich, 'Review of Marat Grinberg's *The Soviet Jewish Bookshelf*', *In geveb*, Nov. 2023, https://ingeveb.org/articles/the-soviet-jewish-bookshelf [Accessed: 24 Apr. 2024].

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nuanced and generalised picture. If the latter was the author's goal, then one should ask first and foremost to which degree the reading choices and practices analysed by Grinberg result from the readers' Jewishness – or are they simply the choices and practices of the Russian-speaking Soviet intelligentsia? Grinberg evokes his grandmother, who wrote a letter to writer Konstantin Paustovsky to express her admiration, but did she do it as a Jewish reader or, simply, because she was "a teacher of Russian literature for almost forty years" (p. 41)? It is obvious that in such circumstances it is impossible to separate various layers of one's identity (or, maybe even, identities) – but this problem should have been formulated more clearly in the introduction. It is to be regretted that the author did not try to make a larger-scale survey among former Soviet Jews, focused on their reading experiences. It is already too late to conduct such a survey among the 1920s–1930s generations (like Anna Shternshis did for her earlier projects),[6] but there is still time to ask at least those born after 1945 or later. Perhaps such a survey would allow the reconstruction of a map of reading influences – which books were read and discussed because they were a part of the Soviet school curriculum (this is a relevant question, especially when it comes to the nineteenth-century classics of Russian literature) and which were circulating in a semi-official way, borrowed and lent only between those who self-identified as Soviet Jews?

The arbitrariness of Grinberg's choices is especially striking when he includes non-Jewish authors like the abovementioned Paustovsky and deliberates on whether he could have known Hebrew (pp. 42, 47) or frequently assumes what Soviet Jews felt when reading this or that ("[Kuznetsov's novel] became a testimonial source for the Jewish reader and contributed to the centrality of Babi Yar in the Soviet Jewish and wider liberal Soviet psyche", p. 75). While discussing the (mostly) absence of the Hebrew Bible in Jewish homes, he does mention the Soviet popularity of Zenon Kosidowski's *Biblical Tales*, "a Polish writer who lived and taught in the US" (pp. 142–3). But at the same time, he practically passes over reading the Hebrew Bible in the Christian spirit (which was an important spiritual experience for

[6] See Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington, 2006); and *When Sonia Met Boris: An Oral History of Jewish Life under Stalin* (Oxford, 2017).

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a part of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia[7]); although, admittedly, he does mention the phenomenon itself and its important figure, Father Alexander Men in the context of Aleksandr Galich's poetry (p. 89). It would be interesting to know whether the author does not consider those converting to Christianity to be Jewish anymore, and therefore does not include this category of readers in his analysis, or does he simply feel incompetent to analyse the specific Jewish-Christian spiritual experience.

While a reader might have expected a more explicit focus on the Soviet Yiddish literature in discussing the "Soviet Jewish bookshelf", Grinberg openly attaches more importance to the Russian-language works: "had Jewish readers en masse actually read the many volumes of Soviet Yiddish literature, we would have a very different picture of Soviet Jewishness on our hands, paradoxically much more ideologically conformist and more Jewishly educated […]. By the same token, it was not the open preponderance of the Holocaust theme in Yiddish literature that made a difference to most Jewish readers, but the few Russian Holocaust texts and fragments" (p. 109). This claim might sound surprising at first, but on second thought, perhaps Grinberg has articulated something important that is often omitted in works on Jewish history in the 20th century – namely, the scope of linguistic and cultural assimilation. Assimilation is not a topic per se in any of these three books, but coming back for a moment to Nathan Cohen's work, available data for Jewish library loans (even if scattered and incomplete) clearly show preference for reading Russian books (pp. 295–319) than Yiddish/Hebrew ones – although it should be emphasized that collections of Russian books were also usually larger, less accidental and more up-to-date which was also an important factor.

All three studies under review have shown, more or less convincingly, that reading was a crucial factor in forming and maintaining Jewish identity – but there is more than that. Analysing Jewish reading practices helps to understand the importance of multilingualism for the study of the Eastern European experience. Thinking about the topics discussed here, I became tempted to read a similar work dealing

[7] This phenomenon has been discussed by Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *Doubly Chosen: Jewish Identity, the Soviet Intelligentsia, and the Russian Orthodox Church* (Madison, 2004).

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with reading choices and practices of Polish Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I hope one does not have to wait too long for such a study.

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