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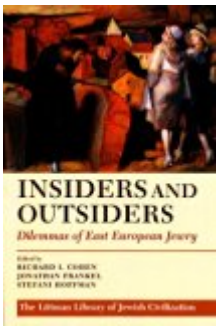

Richard L. Cohen, Jonathan Frankel, Stefani Hoffman, eds.. *Insiders and Outsiders: Dilemmas of East European Jewry.* Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010. Illustrations. 248 pp. $29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-906764-00-5.

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

As an attendee at the stimulating conference in Jerusalem that gave birth to the present volume, I was delighted to see its publication, especially in the eye-catching physical format that has become a standard for Littmann Library books. I was, however, a bit thrown by the title. Despite a perceptive introduction by Steven Aschheim on some of the conceptual uses (and challenges) of insider and outsider-ness (-dom? -hood?), at times the volume seems to resist being strapped into this straitjacket. At the very outset, Aschheim himself gestures toward the limited usefulness of the conceit: "One could, conceivably, write not just the whole of Jewish, but perhaps even human, history in terms of the putative insider/outsider binary" (p. 1).

Even so, the contents speak for themselves, far more loudly than could any title, and provide a worthy tribute to the scholar of the politics and culture of East European Jewry whom the conference was organized to honor, Ezra Mendelsohn. Indeed, the first essay, by Richard I. Cohen, is a typically insightful, sophisticated, and honest meditation on the inner dynamics of Mendelsohn's oeuvre and his gift of allowing the study of culture to complicate and enrich his mastery of Jewish history. This is followed by a little gem of an essay by Zvi Jagendorf on the ambivalence of homecoming--and even of that putative home par excellence, the Land of Israel--in the works of Itzik Manger and Avot Yeshurun, anchored by a wonderfully evocative phrase used by both poets: *Gott fun Avrohom* (God of Abraham). Amitai Mendelsohn's earnest, if somewhat mechanical, analysis of Reuben Rubin's Jesus-themed paintings continues the cultural theme, setting Rubin and his work in all the necessary historical and cultural contexts and guiding us from the artist's early, "suffering" Christ to his later Jesus as symbol of Zionist resurrection--in both cases, images with which Rubin identified personally, uniquely, and idiosyncratically for his day. The essay is enhanced by the full-color plates that accompany it. A chapter by Leon Volovici on what might seem like an obscure topic, the tortured relationship between the Romanian-Jewish writer Mihail Sebas-

tian and his mentor, the virulently antisemitic Nae Ionescu, becomes by virtue of its piercing analysis and rigorous scholarship a window into the souls of many intellectuals of Jewish ancestry in interwar Europe who struggled with the hostility of a world to which they longed so painfully fully to belong. Another virtuoso performance follows: a deeply intelligent consideration by Karen Auerbach and Antony Polonsky of a half-dozen works of Polish-Jewish literature published since 2000. Three of these works of autobiography or "family memoir" (some of them semi-fictionalized) trace the complex process of polonization as it began before World War I, or in some cases even early in the nineteenth century, and then into the Second World War, while the other three fall into the genre of wartime memoir. Auerbach and Polonsky astutely note that, despite their attempt to write sweeping (and ostensibly comprehensive) family sagas, two of these writers--Joanna Olczak-Ronikier and Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz--say little about their own experiences as Poles of Jewish ancestry in postwar Poland, thus creating what are in effect "incomplete portraits of their families' paths to assimilation in Polish society" (p. 89). Even in a world when a search for "Holocaust memoir" on amazon.com brings up over a thousand results, one is grateful for the unique perspectives of such writers as Arnold Mostowicz and Antoni Maranowicz, and hopeful that these works will soon be translated into English and Hebrew.

In a lucid analytical essay that draws on established scholarship as well as more recent studies in the fields of Czechoslovak Jewry, Hillel J. Kieval argues that--contrary to received notions--Czechoslovak Jewry largely continued its tradition of ***Staatsvolk*** from the Habsburg context. Rather than seeing the newly created state as a multinational haven, Jewish nationalists accepted it as a nation-state ("an ethnic-national structure" [p. 111]) and adapted their nationalist strategies to its demands. Indeed, they used the admittedly somewhat artificial borders of the new Czechoslovakia to build an equally artificial Jewish "nation" by arguing that all the Jews within those boundaries--divided though they were by language, religious practice, political loyalties, and other characteristics--were nonetheless a distinct ethnic community. Paradoxically, perhaps, Kieval's thesis is thus that Jewish national strategies in the interwar period are evidence of a nascent "Czechoslovak political culture among Jews" (p. 119). The roots of a Jewish political culture in Galicia, and another paradox as well (we who work on Eastern Europe are used to these), are the subjects of Rahel Manekin's succinct piece (perhaps too succinct, when one considers the complexity of the subject matter?), "The Debate over Assimilation in Lwòw." Manekin explores a brief but pregnant series of interactions in Habsburg "Leopolis" among maskilim, assimilationists, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Polish Christian nationalists, at a critical moment (1883) of transition for at least some members of the Jewish intellectual elite from a German cultural orientation toward a new polonizing stance. Manekin manages to elucidate this multifaceted conversation, with its seemingly innumerable possibilities for combinations of language, identity (religious, political, and/or national), choice of political alliance, and definition of assimilation. The paradox is that Agudat Ahim, an organization founded to promote Jewish assimilation into ***Polish*** Galicia, ended up serving as a catalyst for the emergence of Jewish nationalism in that region.

The somewhat arbitrary nature of the section divisions in this volume is pointed out by the inclusion of Joanna B. Michlic's essay on Julian Tuwim and Samuel Jacob Imber under "Acculturation, Assimilation, and Identity"; it could just as easily, and perhaps more justifiably, have been placed in the previous section, titled "Insider/Outsider: The Cultural Conundrum." Indeed, the heated criticism leveled at the assimilated Tuwim by the Jewish nationalist Imber (who, perhaps surprisingly, at other times saw fit to defend Tuwim against the often vicious barbs of ethno-national-

ists of the Endek variety) is a classic case of outsider and insider--though who is out and who is in depends on where one is standing. In the end, though, neither poet was fully out or fully in; Michlic shows the great poignancy of Tuwim's passionate desire to be counted as a ***Polish*** writer, in every sense of the word, while he continued to be haunted by "an essentialist notion of Jewish identity" (p. 136). For his part, Imber, while passionately dedicated to Yiddish poetry, continually strove for an inclusive form of Polish identity and citizenship.

Moving back in time, Scott Ury's essay on turn-of-the-century Warsaw helpfully encapsulates many of the central ideas of his doctoral thesis (forthcoming in a revised monograph version to be published by Stanford University Press), framed within the concept of the "Jewish public sphere." The Jewish press, the Yiddish theater, and Jewish electoral politics all came together to form "a public sphere that not only represented but also embodied the Jewish body politic," and ended up transforming the very nature of Jewish communal existence (p. 164).

The next two pieces are the volume's most controversial inclusions, because each of them strays outside the customary borders of "detached scholarship" to venture into questions of political and national responsibility. In what would be his last published work, Jonathan Frankel meditates on Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's accusations against the Jewish people in *Two Hundred Years Together* (2001-2002) and the question of whether it might be appropriate for the Jewish nation to confess to a sense of "national shame" for the many Jews who played leading roles in the Bolshevik regime's many crimes against humanity. Although the idea is intriguing, it rests on an essentialist definition of "Jewishness" that requires one to regard as Jewish anyone of Jewish ancestry. Frankel asks, "How far removed, in reality, from their Jewish roots were those non-Jewish Jews who participated in making the October Revolution[?]" (p. 186), and answers that many Bolsheviks came from homes where Yiddish was spoken to some degree, and where some Jewish customs may have been practiced. Not compelling evidence, I would argue; and the fact remains that most of these revolutionaries disavowed their Jewish background entirely. Yes, it is of historical and sociological interest that so disproportionate a percentage of Russian Jews became Bolsheviks, but certainly not grounds for "national shame" on the part of Israel, any other body claiming to represent world Jewry, or any individual Jew, for that matter.

Ruth Wisse's delightful exploration of the *moser* as trope in Yiddish jokes prefaces her more serious analysis of the *moser* in works by Mendele Moykher Seforim, David Bergelson, Haim Hazaz, and Moshe Kulbak. Wisse eloquently parses the paradoxical logic of a Soviet system that encouraged Jews to inform on other Jews in what Wisse calls "institutionalized betrayal," all the while insisting that it had the best interests of Jews at heart. Wisse concludes her piece by revealing to the reader that it is not Soviet Jewish informers as such that constitute her primary interest, but rather the practice of informing in Jewish history and especially in the contemporary Jewish world. In a none too subtle hint that some of Israel's worst enemies may be Jewish "informers" and defectors in its very midst, Wisse denounces those within the Israeli system who have been conscripted as allies by external enemies. Because "political action is judged by its effects rather than by its declared intentions" (p. 204), Israel must be on guard for internal debates that could be taken advantage of by its enemies. What Wisse does not make clear is the kind of political culture she would wish for--presumably one that would not yield quite so many "tale-bearers" as does the present one, but how that system would work is left an open question.

The volume concludes with two satisfying little pieces on two fascinating cities with more than

half a dozen names to share between them (Czernowitz, Cernăuţi, Chernivtsi; Wilno, Vilne, Vilnius; and the lists go on). In investigating Habsburg Czernowitz and its Jewish community, David Rechter compares "the myth of a Jewish El Dorado" with the historical evidence, and finds no contradiction between the image of a large, dynamic Jewry with a strong sense of its own identity and a powerful role to play in local politics, and the reality of rancorous division and infighting. In what is not so much a work of historical writing as a thought piece on identity and belonging, Mordechai Zalkin charts the special connection that members of each ethnic group felt with ***their*** city: Wilno, Vilnius, or Vilne. Zalkin says something quite profound about interethnic relations in Eastern Europe when he explains how the Yiddish actor Joseph Buloff viewed his city: "Buloff was acutely aware of the existence of his ... neighbors, but they served merely as background ... to the ***real*** world--the Jewish one" (p. 226).

I cannot pass over the curious fact--especially in a volume on Eastern Europe--that the note on transliteration speaks only of Hebrew and not of Yiddish; at the very least, it would have been helpful to have been informed of the approach to transliterating ***loshn-koydesh*** words and phrases appearing in Yiddish-language contexts. Notwithstanding this and other very minor annoyances, this volume, thanks to the high quality and diversity of its offerings, is clearly a major contribution to East European Jewish studies and to the larger fields of Jewish history and cultural studies.