



Nathaniel Deutsch. *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 374 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-04728-0.

Reviewed by Elissa Bemporad (Queens College, The City University of New York)

Published on H-Judaic (April, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman

The Genizah of the Pale of Settlement: Recording the Oral Torah of Eastern European Jews

In his memoirs *Kniga zhizni* (The Book of Life, 1935)—one of the most remarkable sources on the multifaceted intellectual and political journeys undertaken by many Russian Jews between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Simon M. Dubnov, the dean of Russian Jewish historians, remembered Sh. An-sky, the writer, revolutionary, and ethnographer, as he learned about his death in November 1920. Writing about his political adversary, his colleague in many cultural endeavors, and his partner in the search for a secular Jewish national identity, Dubnov captured a relationship made of intimacy and rivalry, familiarity and contention, as he noted in his memoirs: “The first encounter with An-sky in a gloomy November day, in 1905 ... a heated discussion about everything that preoccupied us, and then a friendly farewell. The following spring he entered into polemics with me.... Then, in 1909, we became very close.... [But] his nature of *perpetuum mobile* [lit., perpetual motion] and leaps in the realm of ideas generated, in the past years, a growing distance between us.... With pain I watched as this eternal wanderer extinguished himself.”[1]

Dubnov and An-sky shared a very similar journey—indeed archetypal for so many members of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia at the time—one made of different degrees and stages of rejection of the Jewish *narod* (people), followed by an outburst of uncompromising love for it. They were both born in Belorussian shtetls, in the Pale of Settlement, which together with thousands of other shtetls, towns, and cities housed the largest Jewish population in the world (five million at the beginning of the twentieth century). They both left the Pale, or as Dubnov contemptibly labeled it the “Dark Continent,” and moved to larger Russian metropolises, where they explored different cultural, political, and literary options for their personal enhancement as well as for that of Russia, or that of Russian Jews. In the midst of dramatic

events, such as the pogroms of 1881-82 and the Revolution of 1905, and in combination with the flourishing of diverse political, literary, and cultural Jewish movements and groups, both Dubnov and An-sky turned to the Pale and its inhabitants as the foundation for a future national Jewish identity. But unlike Dubnov’s return, An-sky’s was more unexpected, sweeping, and perhaps even more passionate.

In his compelling book *The Jewish Dark Continent*, Nathaniel Deutsch narrates the different journeys undertaken by an extraordinary personage in Russian Jewish history, Shloyme Zanvil Rapoport, better known by his pseudonym An-sky. The first part of the book explores the personal journey of the Pale’s prodigal son, as he took flight from the “Dark Continent,” came upon the spirit of reform of the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah), and eventually encountered the spirit of radicalism in the form of the Socialist Revolutionary Party and *narodnichestvo* (populism). Influenced by the latter, he went to the Russian people and chose to idealize the Russian peasant and his agrarian lifestyle, but also his stories, songs, and customs, which, he argued, should be collected, treasured, and safeguarded as a redeeming force for Russia. The surprising culmination of this journey, which lasted more than a decade, interspersed with arrests by the tsarist police, and the intensifying contact with modern Jewish political parties (including the Bund and Zionist groups), was An-sky’s return to the Pale. He suddenly realized that Jews were indeed a normal and legitimate people, with a rich culture, literature, and political aspirations. An-sky’s overwhelming populist impulse guided him back to study, celebrate, and salvage the folk treasures of the “barbaric” Pale, now elevated to a cornerstone of a modern, renewed, secular Jewish identity and culture. If Dubnov chose history to return to the Jewish *narod*, and Y. L. Peretz chose Yiddish literature, An-sky chose ethnography as the chief vehicle to bridge the

painful gap between assimilation and tradition, radicalism and Hasidism. “Send me around Russia,” he wrote, “to gather folk songs, sayings, stories, spells ... in short folklore” (p. 10).

So to salvage the very culture he had abandoned, An-sky embarked on a real physical journey, an ethnographic expedition to document the lives of the masses of the Pale, from 1912 to 1914. With a team of musicologists, photographers and field-workers, he traveled to more than sixty towns to uncover the shtetl, its people, cemeteries, artifacts, folktales, legends, proverbs, superstitions, incantations, and melodies. Why? The folk traditions of the Pale would help forge authentic Jewish cultural creations, museums, theatrical performances, art, and literature; in short, they would lead to the renaissance of Jewish culture. As Deutsch points out, An-sky wanted the ethnographic equivalent of a Genizah—the room or attic where “observant Jews traditionally place damaged holy books and folios with the name of God written on them, until they can be properly buried in a cemetery”—of the Pale of Settlement, the “Oral Torah,” passed down from generation to generation by the common folk, and not by the rabbinic elite, nor by God (pp. 12, 34).

One of the great contributions of this book lies in Deutsch’s ability to take the reader on a virtual tour of the Pale, with An-sky as the expert guide. By relying on memoirs by different members of the ethnographic team, Deutsch recreates the actual encounter between the inhabitants of the “Dark Continent” and the field-workers (themselves former inhabitants of the Pale), an encounter made of disguise, dissimulation, and crossing of ethical boundaries on the part of the nation builders. In setting up the recording equipment in the *besmedresh* (study house); paying people to tell a story; secretly recording women singing (Jewish religious tradition discouraged women from singing in front of men); pretending to be ill; and calling a healer or exorcist to record their incantations and folk remedies, An-sky and his team demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice nearly everything to collect the “Oral Torah” of eastern European Jewry “before it disappeared forever” (p. 57). Deutsch explores the delicate balance between ethics and research in chapter 2, entitled “The Rebbe as Ethnographer/The Ethnographer as Rebbe,” where An-sky engages in faking piety, concealing his ignorance of traditional customs, and even dressing up as a Hasidic rebbe in order to gain the trust of the bearers of Hasidic culture. Whereas previous works on An-sky have offered a detailed portrait of “who” he was and “what” he did, Deutsch’s study expands our knowledge by explaining “how” he did it.

The second part of the book focuses on one specific aspect of An-sky’s ethnographic endeavor, namely, the literary craft “Dos yidishe etnografishe program” (The Jewish Ethnographic Program), a monumental work consisting of 2,087 questions intended for distribution to the communities of the Pale. While it never received any responses due to the outbreak of World War I, the two-hundred-page questionnaire, published in 1914, remains perhaps “the most comprehensive portrait of life and death in the Pale” (pp. 13-14). Following the Jewish life cycle, the open-ended questions illustrate daily rituals, rites of passage, and beliefs, revealing the intersections between the culture of life and the culture of death in the “Dark Continent,” and confirming, once again, that not everything was about Torah, revolution, and Palestine for Russian Jewry at the turn of the century. A substantial number of questions concern the lives of girls and women. Ranging from upbringing, formal education, marriage customs, adultery, and abuse, these questions complicate our understanding of the role and status of women in Jewish traditional society: “Is there a minhag (custom) that when a midwife dies, all of the children whom she brought into the world accompany her funeral procession with candles in their hands?” (p. 119); “Do people order the woman in labor to scream at, curse, or scold the husband? (p. 123); “Was there a special female teacher, an old Jewess, who would remain with the children the first night in order to teach them?” (p. 196); and “Is there a belief that if the bride steps on the groom’s foot while standing under the wedding canopy, she will dominate him?” (p. 224).

In his splendid translation, Deutsch carefully annotates the questionnaire as he traces the differences, but also the striking commonalities, between Russian and Jewish folk cultures. He also contextualizes the Jewish Ethnographic Program, exploring the ethnographic questionnaires formulated by Russian ethnographers in the mid-nineteenth century, and exposing the extent to which An-sky’s work was embedded in the broader Russian ethnographic tradition. What seems to be missing from Deutsch’s erudite discussion, however, is the explanation of how exactly this treasure of more than two thousand questions came into being. How did An-sky and his collaborators come up with such an all-encompassing list of customs, beliefs, and rites? The questionnaire reflects an acute knowledge and keen familiarity with customs that An-sky—like most Russian Jewish intellectuals of his generation—could not have preserved. Nor could the collaboration of only ten students from the Jewish academy in St. Petersburg have been sufficient to produce such an encyclopedic questionnaire.

Were the questions assembled through the indispensable assistance of a network of informers?

This book has a lot to do with preserving memory in the context of a modernizing world. In his search for Jewish cultural renewal, An-sky attempted to reverse the process of loss entailed by modernity: “Our past soaked with so much holy blood and so many tears shed by martyrs and innocent victims, sanctified by so much self-sacrifice is being forgotten and disappearing,” he wrote (p. 55). But this book is as much about An-sky’s journey to stall the process of loss, as it is about Deutsch’s own unfeasible effort. So that when the author records An-sky’s desperate cry (reiterated so many times through-

out the book)–“We are rapidly forgetting the most beautiful expressions of traditional life, the customs, and beliefs, the old songs and melodies”–the reader also hears Deutsch’s cry. Just like An-sky, but perhaps even more than him because of the events of the Holocaust, the author attempts to cope with the reality of a vanished world that actually “disappeared forever.”

Note

[1]. Simon M. Dubnov, *Kniga zhizni: Materialy dlia istorii moego vremeni: Vospominaniia i razmyshleniia* [The book of life: Memories and reflections: Materials for the history of my time] (Saint Petersburg: Peterburgskoe vostokovedenie, 1998), 451.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Elissa Bemporad. Review of Deutsch, Nathaniel, *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34585>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.