



Azriel Shohet. *The Jews of Pinsk, 1881 to 1941*. Edited by Mark Jay Mirsky and Moshe Rosman. Translated by Faigie Tropper and Moshe Rosman. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Stanford: Stanford University Press. xxxiv + 754 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-4158-3; \$75.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-8047-8502-0.

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## Jewish Pinsk on the Move, 1881-1941

The local history of Jews in eastern Europe remained poorly studied for many years. The academic study of the history of Russian Empire Jews as a whole began at the end of the nineteenth century in prerevolutionary Russia. For nearly a century, leading Jewish historians were engaged in macrohistory only. Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, scholars of Jewish history realized that urban Jewish culture also required attention. Academic works began to address this gap by examining the Jewish history of such cities and towns as Odessa, Shklov, Brzezany, Vitebsk, Turov, Pinsk, Bialystok, and Kiev.[1]

This massive and most welcome translation and revision of Azriel Shohet's book from Hebrew and Yiddish (first published in Jerusalem in 1977) continues this important initiative. *The Jews of Pinsk* consists of a preface by Mark Jay Mirsky, introduction, eleven chapters, afterword by Zvi Gitelman about Pinsk from World War II to the present, lists of abbreviations and shortened forms, notes, bibliography, and index. Shohet's study exposes the intricacies of Jewish life in Pinsk from 1881 until 1941. Using many Hebrew and Yiddish newspapers, memoirs, testimonies, and eyewitness interviews, the author paints a colorful portrait of Pinsk's Jewry. The book includes a long list of well-known figures from Pinsk, including Chaim Weizmann, Yishai Adler, Borukh Epstein, Shmuel Noah Gottlieb, and Grigory Luria. According to the census, in 1897, 21,065 Jews lived in Pinsk, approximately 75 percent of the local population. As Shohet points out,

Pinsk was second among the Jewish communities in Russia in its percentage of Jews. Only Berdichev, whose population was 78 percent Jewish, ranked higher.

The author portrays the character of the local Jewish community with attention to important communal welfare and mutual assistance projects, and acquaints readers with the diverse cultural and political movements that sprouted within the *kehillah*. One of the strongest aspects of the work is the history of the spread of Hebrew, and, related to this, the appearance of the *heder metukan* (reformed cheder) in the town. The teaching method in Pinsk, "Hebrew through Hebrew," served as a model for many cheders in Russia. The in-depth analysis of Pinsk's economic development is another major strength of this study. Shohet highlights, for example, the critical role that wooden nails, matches, and plywood factories played in the economic growth of Jewish Pinsk.

Shohet describes extensively how the struggles over national possession between Hibbat Zion, Poalei Zion, the Bund, Hassidim, and others concretely unfolded in urban space. The author covers discursive and structural changes, and though focusing mostly on institutional leadership, he provides adequate general political contextualization. Using a socioeconomic approach, his descriptions of the political struggle for the Jewish street and high political activity of local Jews are amazing. However Shohet misses a great opportunity to compare this activity with the situation in Bialystok, Brest, Minsk, or Gomel.

For three years, from 1918 until 1920, Jewish Pinsk experienced a serious fracture, marked by seven regime changes. As in the eastern part of Belorussia, the town's population most of all suffered from Polish and pro-Polish Bułak-Bałachowicz occupation. In the two decades following the Treaty of Riga, Jews in Poland experienced discrimination, as the case of Pinsk demonstrates, according to Shohet. In September 1939, the city was occupied briefly by the Red Army. Large-scale change took place in the economy. Important trade, silenced with the outbreak of war, was not renewed. Food supply was insufficient and prices rose. Within one month, the use of the Hebrew language was banned in schools, and Yiddish was designated as the language of instruction for all subjects. Different categories of Jews were exiled to Siberia during the spring and summer of 1940. These were difficult times for Jews, but worse was to come. On July 4, 1941 the Nazis occupied Pinsk.

Despite the wealth of sources used in this book, I was surprised by the almost complete absence of Russian and Polish sources, especially archival materials found in libraries and archives in Minsk, Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Brest, as well as in the Central Archive of the History of Jewish People in Jerusalem, which holds a number of copies of materials from these perhaps less accessible archives. Neglecting these sources prevented the author from researching some important questions. In particular, what was the relationship between the Jews and local government from 1881 until 1917? Did the authorities, at that time, delegate some form of self-government to the Jewish elite, and if so, to what extent? Did the Jewish population, with limited rights, benefit from this relationship? How did the dominance of Jews in Pinsk affect

their uneasy relationship with the Christian minority in different areas of urban life? Although the author hints at answers to these questions, he does not give them full attention.

The book makes an important contribution to scholarship on the history of Jewish urban culture, social movements, economy, and education, furthering the study of Jewish history in eastern Europe in its micro-historical context, without losing the lines of broader contemporary Jewish scholarship.

#### Note

[1]. Some examples include: Steven Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History, 1794-1881* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Mikhail Polishchuk, *Evrei Odessy i Novorossii: Sotsial'no-politicheskaia istoriia evreev Odessy i drugikh gorodov Novorossii, 1881-1904* (Jerusalem and Moscow: Gesharim, 2002); David Fishman, *Russia's First Modern Jews: The Jews of Shklov* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Shimon Redlich, *Together and Apart in Brzezany: Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians, 1919-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Arkadii Zeltser, *Evrei sovet-skoi provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki, 1917-1941* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2006); Leonid Smilovitsky, *Evrei v Turuve: Istoriia mestechka Mozyr'skogo Poles'i'a'* (Jerusalem: Tsur-Ot, 2008); Mordechai Nadav, *The Jews of Pinsk, 1506 to 1880*, ed. Mark Jay Mirsky and Moshe Rosman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Rebecca Kobrin, *Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); and Natan Meir, *Jewish Metropolis: A History, 1859-1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

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