



Eddy Portnoy. *Bad Rabbi: And Other Strange but True Stories from the Yiddish Press.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. 280 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-0411-7.

Reviewed by Jessica Kirzane

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Commissioned by Katja Vehlow (University of South Carolina)

Bad Rabbi and Other Strange but True Stories from the Yiddish Press, Eddy Portnoy's account of early twentieth-century Jewish life in Warsaw and New York as portrayed in the popular press, originated in dissertation research using microfilms of newspapers: "On one particular roll I let go of the dial a bit early and wound up on a page from a Thursday instead of a Friday.... I sat there in front of the microfilm reader wearing a dumb smile. I was amazed" (p. 241). What Portnoy discovered over years of meticulous and mind-numbing reading of blurry images of old newspapers is a rich treasure trove that portrays the vibrancy of prewar Jewish life in Warsaw and New York and the unabashed, giddy sensationalism of the Yiddish press that recorded life on the streets for the entertainment of the masses.

Portnoy's overarching assertion is that a thick description of what he calls the "urban Jewish subterranean enterprise" (p. 18) has been lacking in Jewish historical scholarship. He explains that there are many reasons for this: historians tend to focus on prominent figures who were famous in their own time and/or who left behind significant documentation of their lives. In addition, he explains, "nostalgia dictates that we remember only certain things" (p. 22). Popular conceptions of Jewish history have been colored by sepia-toned sentimentalism, the rags-to-riches narrative of

American Jewish assimilative success, and reverent longing for an exalted past brutally destroyed by Nazi atrocities. Portnoy intervenes by sharing the untold stories that were the everyday fare of newspaper-reading Jews before World War II. He argues that the crime, scandal, and violence contained in the newspaper reveal something to us about the worldview of the Yiddish readership as well as the day-to-day life of "the people who don't make history but are crushed by it" (p. 24).

In his brief introduction, Portnoy helpfully situates readers within the history of Yiddish newspapers and print culture, explaining that censorship laws shielded Yiddish readers from modernity until the turn of the twentieth century. As he describes it, the newspaper "transformed Jewish life, hooking readers like fish and reeling them in the direction of the modern world" (p. 8). Through the newspaper, small-town Jews were introduced to world events, immigrants were guided into their new surroundings, and city-dwellers got the skinny on the latest in the Jewish quarter. Portnoy rightly argues for the centrality of Yiddish newspapers to modern Yiddish life and steers readers' focus away from more exalted segments of the newspaper such as the literary supplement or political coverage and toward the crime blotter.

Many of the chapters in the book first appeared as articles in *Tablet Magazine* or are the result of previous publications in *Guilt and Pleasure* and Portnoy's erstwhile column "Forward Looking Back" in the *Forward*. As a result, the book reads as a collection of self-contained anecdotes, connected together not with an overarching argument that builds to a cumulative conclusion but with a loose, oft-reiterated justification that these captivating stories were once read with great interest by the masses and have now vanished from historical memory. Images from Yiddish and other newspapers accompany the chapters, giving them the eye-catching texture of the newspaper coverage that Portnoy discusses. Many of the chapters include extensive translations from the original newspapers. Portnoy does them justice, explaining, "they have been translated as closely as possible to match the Yiddish originals; grammatical errors, run-on sentences, scare quotes, and the like have mostly been left intact" (p. 219). Through his translations, Portnoy brings to those who do not read Yiddish, or who do not spend their days poring over historic newspapers, not only the content but the flavor of popular newspaper coverage. In doing so, he provides a window into a past that is at once strange and shocking, and also startlingly familiar in our own, sometimes sensationalizing media landscape.

The eclectic assortment of newspaper stories in the book includes a lurid tale of a beautiful young victim of a botched abortion whose body was found stuffed in a suitcase; a murder trial that resulted in the first Jew to be sentenced to hang in America; Hebrew poet and scholar Naftali Herz Imber's lesser-known drunkenness and public appearances as a prophet; battles between atheists and religious practitioners on Yom Kippur; the Yiddish press's love affair with the emotional excess of suicide stories; the literary efforts of Urke Nachalnik, a master criminal turned playwright; novelist Israel Joshua Singer's juicy coverage of the Warsaw street under the pseudonym Gimel Kuper; a description of the street-level tac-

tics of gangs of enforcers seeking to ensure Sabbath observance among Jews; a tale of a rebbe blackmailed and brought to court on bigamy charges (the title story); and stories from Warsaw's Yiddish crime blotter. In each chapter, Portnoy explains that the historical episodes discussed in this book captivated the attention of a wide readership. The Yiddish world was abuzz with talk of figures whose names would have vanished from historical memory had they not been preserved in cellulose and translated out of obscurity by a skilled, audacious, thrill-seeking researcher. The stories shed light on how non-Jews encountered Jewish crime as mediated through their own news outlets and how Jews reacted to Jewish crime in the intimate confines of the Yiddish-language press. They reveal in new ways the relationship between popular and literary culture, religious observance and secularity, the petty, the personal, and the political.

By grouping these stories together as historical oddities, Portnoy invites his reader to gawk at events of the past, much as the contemporaneous readership engaged with these historical events through the lens of newspaper sensationalism. Readers of Portnoy's collection must bring their own critical faculties to bear on stories such as these, considering how social histories of marriage and divorce, public health, and popular religion could situate them beyond their being oddities of Jewish history. Because it is a work for general audiences, perhaps Portnoy shies away from the kind of contextualization readers might find dry or overly scholarly. Yet it may be that general audiences that do not have historical training are precisely those most in need of guidance in reading these sources critically.

Raucously irreverent, Portnoy delights in informal language and even profanities. Though initially shocking, his language has the effect of replicating the tone of the newspapers themselves. Nevertheless, this adoption of the tone and humor of the newspapers has some unfortunate

consequences. Portnoy has a tendency to reproduce the misogynistic humor of the Yiddish press without comment or critique. For instance, in one chapter he writes about Jewish immigrant mothers protesting when their children received tonsillectomies at public schools, many of which were undertaken without consent or with signatures from mothers who were illiterate and did not understand what they were agreeing to. Portnoy describes the protestors as “an enraged army of Yiddisha mamas” and “white-hot Jewish mothers” (p. 43), evoking a humorous stereotype of overbearing, overinvested mothers and thereby trivializing these women’s fears and outrage. Portnoy uncritically relates stereotypes of Jewish hysteria as an explanation for protests relating to the encroachment of modern public health science into the previously domestic, maternal sphere of children’s health.

Another troubling chapter in this regard concerns the “Miss Judea” pageant staged by Warsaw’s Polish-language Jewish daily newspaper *Nasz Przegląd* (Our Review). As Portnoy explains, the newspaper held a contest to select the most beautiful Jewish girl in Poland and crowned a winner, Zofia Oldak. The president of the Warsaw Kehila, or Jewish community council, Heshl Farbstein, praised her beauty publicly, singing the *Song of Songs* to her, which Portnoy describes as “a dialogue between a woman and a man deeply in love, expressed by way of horny poetics” (p. 137). Leaders of the ultra-Orthodox party Agudas Yisroel (Union of Israel) objected to this, saying that Farbstein had shamed the Kehila and desecrated holy texts, and railed against the Miss Judea pageant. When Farbstein spoke at the funeral of a prominent leader of the Aguda, protests against his Miss Judea incident led to a chaotic brawl at the graveside. Portnoy gleefully tells of the public controversy that graced the pages of Warsaw Jewish newspapers and reprints images of newspaper comics featuring Jewish male leaders leering at a large-breasted Miss Judea. Nowhere in the chapter does he directly address

the misogyny of the incident: the major players of his chapter, and of the newspapers he discusses, are Farbstein and the Aguda, and not Oldak herself, whose hypersexualized caricature is replicated without comment. The blame lies in part with the sources themselves—Portnoy seeks to represent the newspapers and their public airing of the Kehila’s dirty laundry and the sources are unconcerned with depicting Oldak as an object of lascivious male desire. Nevertheless, one would hope that Portnoy, who aims not only to be relating something of the texture of the newspapers but also to be representing the culture and lives of the Jewish past, would feel it part of his work to address the indignity suffered by Oldak, who was so grossly objectified by his sources.

Despite these criticisms, Portnoy’s rollicking chronicle of Jewish newspaper scandal is an entertaining plunge into unexamined corners of the Jewish past. It is a necessary intervention into Jewish historiography, reorienting the historian’s gaze to segments of the newspaper, and of history, that tend to get overlooked in the search for items significant to global politics and literary history. It is also an exemplar of scholarship aimed at lay audiences, with titillating and fast-paced storytelling that nevertheless offers historical depth and grounding.

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