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Sixty published ego-documents (memoirs) of Jews of various ages who returned to or settled in Kraków after the Holocaust form the basis of historian Monika Stępień’s book, *Miasto opowiedziane. Powojenny Kraków w świetle żydowskiej literatury dokumentu osobistego*, loosely translated into English as *Recounting a City: Postwar Kraków in Light of Jewish Autobiographical Literature*. Stępień’s aims are threefold: 1) to reconstruct the image of postwar Kraków as recounted in Jewish autobiographical sources, 2) to analyze the experiences of life in the city, of emigration from and return to it, and 3) to present factors that shaped Jewish experiences and how these are reflected in literary texts (p. 22). Stępień’s book is among the new and trailblazing research on postwar Polish Jewish history. From its focus on individuals and their histories through its spatial angle to its temporal aspects, source material, and structure, *Miasto opowiedziane* offers a fresh, multilayered, and captivating history of postwar Kraków and of Jewish individuals and families who struggled to reconstitute their lives in the first several years after World War II.

The book consists of four parts (“The Liberated City: Returns, Daily Life, Emigration, and Returns”), an introduction and conclusion, and an annex that allows the reader to follow the trajectories of the writers whose ego-documents are covered in the book. Part 1 engages with the intertwined notions of regaining freedom and of returning home. Particularly insightful is the section on the anticipation and moments of liberation, both of which are usually brushed over in scholarship, and, which, Stępień shows, shaped the survivors’ ensuing decisions. Stępień describes how the survivors who came back to their hometown were faced with a dichotomy between change and continuation: with the loss of loved ones and of their property on the one hand, and with an unchanged landscape and the continued presence of their non-Jewish Polish neighbors. These former neighbors and friends reacted in different ways to the reappearance of Jews; lesser known is the emergence of a few as postwar rescuers, who gave shelter and immediate help to Jewish returnees. Stępień gives the reader a framework for understanding the different responses and roles of non-Jews in the immediate postwar period.

Part 2 draws upon philosopher Alfred Schütz’s spheres of social reality to examine areas of the Jewish survivors’ and their families’ daily lives. This is the core of Stępień’s study, and it offers a meticulous and comprehensive investigation into the private, neighborly, and city spaces and how Jewish survivors, young and older, navigated these environments. An illuminating piece deals with the reestablishment of families, of complex parent-child relations, and of individual strategies to cope with the aftereffects of the Holocaust. Another important contribution of Stępień’s exploration concerns the various meanings of home and of the efforts to acquire, restitute, recreate, and establish a home. In addition to the private sphere, Jews struggled to define their identities in both Jewish and non-Jewish environments. The parts about how Jewish children—both survivors and those born in the immediate aftermath of the war—tried to enter the mainstream society and negotiate their standing in the Jewish community are among the most illuminating efforts to understand postwar reality. Jewish children faced immense obstacles, from having to learn the language of their peers to understanding games, presenting themselves as regular young people (for example by learning to dress in contemporary clothing), and bridging gaps in their education. For the Jews who spent part of or the entire war in Kraków, the city was dotted by spaces of suffering, persecution, and death. Stępień delves into these various roles of the city and how Jews struggled to come to terms with them.

Part 3 explores the personal, social, and political reasons for Jews’ departure from Kraków and emigration from Poland. Taking a more innovative approach, Stępień illustrates why people chose to stay. Here, as elsewhere in the text, Stępień pays
attention to the role and function of emotions, something that is rather difficult for historians to understand and capture. An in-depth reading of literary works composed by survivors and their descendants who grew up in Kraków allows Stępień to dissect the psychological factors that shaped people’s experiences, decisions, and perceptions of the city.

Part 4 surveys how the authors of the literary works, then emigrants themselves, understood, remembered, and recounted their subsequent returns to Kraków. Most of the trips occurred between 1957 and 1990, with the majority in the 1980s. Timing mattered and Stępień explains how and why. This section offers yet another pioneering perspective to interrogate the phenomenon of the survivors’ travel to places they called home and, for some, to places of their persecution. In doing so, Stępień challenges the common narrative that once outside Poland, survivors wished to dissociate themselves from their home country. Quite the contrary, Stępień shows that these returns allowed some Jewish survivors to uncover personal stories, come to terms with their identity, and reconcile with their wartime experiences. They processed these memories, assessments, and experiences in the ego-documents that they wrote.

Miasto opowiedziane offers a sweeping view of the roles and place of Kraków for the surviving remnant. That is its great strength. However, at times, the information appears too encyclopedic. Extensive notes about individuals and events distract from the larger history that the author so brilliantly presents. These may, on the other hand, be helpful for readers for whom this history is relatively new. Nearly all the writers left Kraków and Poland altogether. Therefore, the perspective is naturally skewed toward émigré writers. While it is understandable why Stępień focuses on these works, the narrative could have benefited from an explanation of the near absence of texts by writers who stayed in Poland. Similarly, while the book explores the image of Kraków among those who left the city after the war, the reader gets little sense of what happened to the Jews who remained in Kraków. Jewish émigré returnees failed to notice Jewish life in Kraków. And Stępień refrains from explaining that piece of history. Yet Jewish social, cultural, and religious life continued in Kraków, as it did elsewhere in Poland, as the research of historian Rachel Rothstein has shown.

When pieced together, the individual life stories presented in Miasto opowiedziane offer a window onto the experiences, memories, and perceptions of Jews who returned to or came to live in Kraków. In focusing on coping mechanisms, interpreting events, and relations among people, the study provides a fine-tuned analysis of daily life in times of great change. It lays bare the continuance of fear, discrimination, and othering of Jews as they made efforts to rebuild their shattered lives. A very compelling book, Miasto opowiedziane not only illuminates aspects of the post-Holocaust reality but also charts the direction of research on Polish Jewish history.
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