

Book Reviews

Jan Schwarz. *Survivors and Exiles: Yiddish Culture after the Holocaust*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015. 355 pp.
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The only thing more conventional among scholars of Yiddish literature and culture than denying that Yiddish culture ended in the Holocaust is producing bodies of scholarship that implicitly, though by no means ideologically, reinforce that convention. Yiddish culture, one might think from looking at the scholarly canon, particularly in English, either trails off in ghostly epilogue, revolving around Isaac Bashevis Singer and the writers gasping their last under Soviet repression, or takes a swerve into postvernacularity, where Yiddish becomes “Yiddish.” The fact that *Survivors in Exiles* is, as its author writes, “the first attempt to present a description and analysis of Yiddish culture after 1945” (5) speaks for itself. Although Schwarz’s work isn’t enough to make up for the lacuna—nor does it claim to be—the figures and institutions it studies in its pages, and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks it places them in, will assuredly be the starting point for new subfields of scholarship that will force scholarly change and reassessment.

This is hardly to suggest, of course, that the figures whose study makes up this work were unaware, or unaffected, by the destruction of European Jewish culture. The contrary: although of course much of the tone and structure of the works speak of rupture, it is the work of commemoration, of continuity with projects begun before the war, of consolidation due to the war’s depredations, that obsesses the central figures in Schwarz’s study. In some cases, they took it upon themselves to recreate their homes between the pages of books: either in the *yizker-bikher*, the memorial books; the massive publishing series of *Dos poylishe yidentum*; or the literary memory palaces of writers like Avrom Sutzkever, Chava Rosenfarb, or Leib Rochman (from Vilna, Lodz, and Minsk, respectively). Such works were circulated, read aloud, studied, critiqued, and responded to within a newly created transnational infrastructure whose central nodes included Paris, Palestine, and Manhattan’s 92nd Street Y.

The twin dynamics that characterize these writers and cultural guardians in Schwarz’s view, fragmentation and globalization, are applicable to characterizing Schwarz’s study itself. Studies, rather; the book is, largely speaking, a collection of previously published or adapted articles from the last few years, and though they gain remarkably from their collected proximity, and scholars should be grateful to have them in one place, there is a sense that somehow the subjects of the individual chapters are not speaking to one another quite so much as they did, or should.

This, however, is a minor quibble, when it comes to the merits of the studies themselves. Schwarz’s earlier work has included studies of Yiddish writers’ lives and their representations of those lives, and given a set of figures whose works, by virtue of historical extremis, are obsessed with individual, national, and communal biography and autobiography, the skills he acquired toiling in those vineyards truly come to the fore. The individual studies of Sutzkever, Rochman, and

Rosenfarb—the latter two comparatively understudied in the field of Yiddish, but of course none of them have yet to receive their scholarly due—are major advances.

Schwarz's focus on Sutzkever's "fervent . . . belief in the transcendent power of poetry to recreate and animate the world" (40), and the Yiddish word and world in particular, leads to a study of the Vilna writings as an act, not just of memorialization, but of real continuity and progression. Sutzkever's own cultural activities for Yiddish in Israel, seen in this light, are more than simple custodianship: they are artistic broadsides in a fight for reinvigorated relevance. His work on Rosenfarb, the author of "the first Holocaust novel written in Yiddish" (60), is not only a firm claim for the author's centrality in the Yiddish canon but for her efforts to sacralize the Yiddish language: the novel's title, *The Tree of Life*, has obvious liturgical resonances, rendering her Lodz and its citizens as ever fructifying. And in discussing Leib Rochman's diary, Schwarz manages the remarkable feat of putting it in conversation with the most significant Holocaust testimonies—Anne Frank's, particularly—and having it stand that test.

Schwarz is on equally firm footing when he moves from individuals to institutions, although it would be hard for anyone to create real analytic focus with the 175 (!) volumes of *Dos poylishe yidentum*, or the decades of recordings at the 92nd Street Y. Still, the work he does there provides remarkable entrée for future scholars, as well as suggesting how these central locales—whether they be on paper or before a podium—create opportunities for surprising ideological and literary bedfellows and encounters. What mattered to them, far more, was the overarching task that the participants had set for themselves: the maintenance and continuity of Yiddish culture. Schwarz has done great service in helping them, in almost every case posthumously, achieve that goal, in the most substantive and scholarly way. It's an essential book for anyone interested in the past—and, yes, the future—of Yiddish culture.

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Anita Shapira. *Yosef Haim Brenner: A Life*. Translated by Anthony Berris. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. 488 pp.
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In the pantheon of the pure challengers of God and man, in which we find Job, Jesus, and Enoch, Yosef Haim Brenner's heavy, earthbound figure can be seen one who, as Berl Katznelson wrote, "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows," on whom "God laid the tragedy of all of us." (399)

Historians, as Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi teaches us, record the past as it was. Jews, by contrast, remember the past not necessarily as it happened, but rather in