

One of the Burning Candles ...

It is only natural that the few surviving remnants in Israel and in the Diaspora, after the Holocaust, should aspire to commemorate their cities and *shtetls* by erecting living monuments in memory of their loved ones - *Yizkor* Books.

It is a sacred duty not to forget and not to cause others to forget those tortured to death, who [in their death] ordered us to live and, together with this, to deliver to the coming generations a true testimony of our horror-filled epoch. As an effect of this concern to immortalise their memories and their birthplaces - the localities and communities - which were wiped off this earth by the accursed 20th century Asmodeus, the literature of the Holocaust is ever widening. Each one of these *Yizkor* Books is like another memorial candle - and thus the number of burning candles becomes larger and larger and, all of them together, not only become one with the vast and dreary episode of the greatest of all catastrophes, but also with the colossal treasury of extensive descriptive and narrative material of the folklore, lifestyle and distinctive spiritual existence, which were so characteristic of the Jewish *shtetl* in the Diaspora. And even though this material has been portrayed in no small measure in our general literature, and the name "*Diaspora shtetl*" has already long since become an abstract term implying specific and fixed concepts, just reading the descriptive-factual material shows one clearly that, as similar as most of these towns were, each one of them possessed something special in its physiognomy, in its community leaders and in its own lifestyle. And even the Holocaust itself - although everyone suffered and the method of murder and annihilation was similar in all of the towns - still, in many cases, each community was destined to meet its demise in its own distinct manner.

You leaf through the vast quantity of material from the recent past and from the Holocaust days that lies before you. Now and then, you glance at the specifics of the events of those dreadful days. Once more, you come up against descriptions of suffering and torture, which a pen could never fully describe – and the wound is so fresh and it is not healing. You stand, once more, before the piercing question: How did this happen? How is it that thousands upon thousands turned into ravaging beasts with a thirst for the blood of innocents? How is it that the Jewish population of *Nazified* Europe was not aware of the plot of mass murder that was being woven around them?

From what dark sources had the moral degradation, the diabolic free-for-all and the mass murder surged and erupted forth with such force – the likes of which humanity has never seen before, albeit that there have been, in the course of its history, various periods of downfall in no small number?

A desert-like jungle reveals itself before you, in which man-beasts with lowly manes run about - equipped with perfect tools of annihilation and imbibed with [such] a horrific loathing, moral depravity and abysmal impurity - until it seems to you that there is no innocence left in your soul, and that you have no more place for burning agony or helpless rage. Is it then no wonder that, in this devastation, some of our persecuted brethren reached the point of losing all human semblances and renouncing their origins? And could one envisage a more abysmal and shocking image than that of a small Jewish boy, who has not yet sinned, in order to save his own soul, trying to help the foes of the Jews to hunt down another Jewish child, thus hiding his own Jewishness? What we have before us is not the murder of the body, but that of the soul!

Has Satan indeed not [yet] created the vengeance for [the blood of] a small child¹?

¹ [TN: Reference to a verse in Ch.N. Bialik's poem "On the Slaughter": "Vengeance for the blood of a small child, Satan has not yet created."]

Terrifying spiritual abysses gape before your eyes, not just from the horrific deeds themselves – which are hard to imagine – but also from the utter inability to find an explanation for them. You stand before the exalted heroic deeds of individual and organised Jews. And, at the same time, you also come upon the vile and sinister doings of many among the population of the lands where the Jews were annihilated, upon whose conscience weighs the blood of our brethren and whose hands reached them wherever the bloodstained hands of the Nazis could not reach. But all said and done, it turns out that this is not everything yet, because you finally come to the *Question of Questions* - which is the most chilling of them all - Where were all those cultured peoples in the different lands, with their political and spiritual leaders, and what did they actually do, having heard, seen and been aware of what was happening? They could have, at least, tried to prevent it. They could have bombed not only Germany's military industrial centres, but also Asmodeus' sophisticated extermination complexes. They had ample opportunity to do so – so why did they not? The Nazi Asmodeus had one clear goal - to exterminate the Jews. But did any of the warring factions set itself as one of its targets to save the Jews?

It, therefore, emerges that the most horrifying and startling [aspect] of all that took place in those hellish years is not the **intention** to exterminate, in itself, but in the very **possibility** that Asmodeus was given to carry out his objective on such a colossal scale.

It could, therefore, well be that one, who wishes to retain his faith in the likeness of God in mankind, is forbidden from putting this type of questions before himself. He is then left with but one course - to turn the thought towards some small spark of light within this spiritual darkness - to the manifestations of humanity which we witnessed even in the midst of the Devil's machinations. To our sorrow, these were isolated phenomena. But, nevertheless, there were those among the populace of Europe, here and there, who risked their lives with great devotion and without foreseeing any recompense for themselves - to save those who had been sentenced to death.

Hence, we may at least find some small consolation in the actions of these people - to enable us to continue believing. Have we not, more than once, come upon facts that have aroused both our astonishment and our admiration at the same time? And among them is the physiological state of those marching towards their deaths, who were filled with total despair on the one hand, but with a fierce and pure faith on the other. There is obviously no other escape and other healing for the soul of a man in our generation - with his doubts and hopes, wars and dreams - but to allow the despair and the faith to dwell together as one inside his heart.

The compilation, which lays before us, is dedicated to the town of Żarki, a town the majority of whose inhabitants were Jewish - one of many along which, during hundreds of years, spread itself the chain of the lives of multitudes of Jews devoted to their heritage, their religion, their language and their national goal.

Every line, every letter and every fact connected to the memories of childhood and adolescence will naturally cause a stir in the hearts of all the remnants of the *shtetl*, wherever they may be in the world. Each one of them will sense, in every detail of the material presented here, the atmosphere of the time and the place in which were woven all the threads of his past, which bound him to all those who are no longer living and whose memory is dear to him as a part of his own life - the lives of his family, relatives, companions and friends. However, any reader leafing through the pages describing the town's life - even if he is not from Żarki himself - will find an image very reminiscent of that of his own *shtetl*. In most cases, the structures of life and tradition, the disciplines and conditions, and the [local] characters - even if, in his own town, they had different names - were alike, and they represent the same social climate, the same customs and the very same pictures,

even if, here and there, they appear with somewhat unique characteristics. Hence, the folkloric value of a great part of the material, to which we have dedicated an important part of this compilation and of which we shall subsequently speak of this further.

We are now living in the midst of the tremendous revolution through which the Jewish People is going - the greatest in its history - which destroyed entire worlds and which awakens and gathers strength to build new ones. The Diaspora *shtetl* already belongs to a world that has been destroyed and is gone. Regarding the process of the Diaspora *shtetl's* economic collapse (and especially in Russia after the revolution), much was written even prior to the Holocaust, which brought with it its final eradication. The renowned Jewish [literary] critic "*Ba'al Machshoves*"², the fastidious man of delicate taste, wrote, years ago in one of his critical works, that the literature of each people reflects that most characteristic of its life. Thus, for example, in Russian literature, first and foremost, is reflected the smell of its broad fields, just like the smell of the smoke from the chimneys of the industrial factories in the Western European literature and, at the centre of Jewish literature, stands the way of life in the *shtetl*, which was so prominent and so typical of the life of the Jews in Eastern Europe.

It is, therefore, not difficult to become convinced regarding to what extent the order of life in each individual town reflects the lifestyle of this Jewry as a whole. We, therefore, did not suffice with gathering materials on the Holocaust itself, among whose victims was also Żarki, but we also gave much attention to collecting materials that depict, citing real facts, everything we deemed important from this community's past, which reflects, in such great measure, the past of the Jewish Diaspora in the towns of Poland in general - about the disciplines of its traditional life, about its awakening to a change of values, about the internal struggle between its different spiritual currents, about the changes in its life, which were bound up with an aspiration for national revival, and about anything preceding the horrific Holocaust which deserves to remain in our memory, not only as a remembrance of the past, but also as a sign and symbol of aspiration and yearning for the future.

And it is unnecessary to overly idealise the *shtetl* way of life. Quite the contrary - our writers devoted no small creative forces, especially during the times of the *Haskala* [Jewish Enlightenment], to highlighting all the negative aspects and faults of that life. Indeed, the *shtetl* life was one of a limited environment, a stagnating existence, a provincial approach and an excessive opposition to any new winds. It is, however, not difficult to explain these [phenomena] and even to justify them - they arose from the objective of the Diaspora Jews to retain, even in an alien environs, their original national character. But, even with all the critical attitude which is sometimes also excessive, when you look at the great deal of positive in this Jewish lifestyle, you discover that it was they who continued spinning the ancient thread and who maintained the national values which have brought us thus far. When you pass before you the multitude of toiling Jews scattered across hundreds and thousands of towns, interspersed amongst the different nations - a mass of people fighting hard for its [daily] bread and, at the same time, clinging obstinately, with limitless devotion, to its Jewish world; when you look at this world and at the existence permeated with a fierce lust for life, on the one hand, and together with this, a profound love for the Torah and a desire to preserve its ember, albeit in different attires - Chasidic, traditional, *Misnagdische*³ or Enlightened; when you take into account that, amongst the Gentiles in an ocean of ignorance and illiteracy, this Jewry displayed a surprising concentration of spirit, knowledge, expertise and deep insight into the circumstances of the world and the individual, and gave rise from within itself to many spiritual giants; when you are reminded how strong the spiritual foundation of this historic Jewry was, which observed to such an extent the study of Torah *for its own sake* - the likes of which you will not find among any peoples and tongues - and in this Torah they focused their love, devotion, and admiration and they did not

² [TN: "*The Thinker*"; pseudonym of Israel Isidor Elyashev (1873–1924).]

³ [TN: Pertaining to the "*Misnagedim*," or the anti-Chasidic faction among the ultra-orthodox.]

require an answer to the questions “Who is a Jew?” and “What is Jewish cognition?”; when you discover how much goodwill there was to do good for the masses, even in the fierce and sometimes bitter fight between the zealous *Chassidism* and the *Misnagedim*, between the conservatives and the enlightened and between the Zionists and those who were not their allies; when you call to mind the simple folk, the working people, among whom were those who walked the straight path all their lives and who, even under the most difficult conditions, did not forgo [reciting] a Psalm, [learning] *Pirkei Avot* [The Ethics of the Fathers] and poring over *Ein Yankev*⁴ - after all this, is the vast spiritual and cultural treasure trove that was stored within this Jewry still a wonder to you?

And how much of the beautiful traditions and the expression of devotion and mercy there was in their way of life, sublime expressions of mutual aid - aid to the elderly, the sick and the needy. A Jewish stranger chancing upon the town, at once felt that he was not a stranger, for he found himself among his people and the local synagogue was his house as well because, upon crossing its threshold, a hand would be extended to him and, after the first question - where had the Jew come from - would come a friendly conversation and the offer to put him up and feed him because, as is known, the custom of our forefathers in the *shtetl* was to bring home a wayfaring guest from the synagogue on a Friday night.

And how great was the activity in the different societies - public *cheders*, support for orphans, clothes for the naked, visiting the sick, marrying off [poor] brides - and how symbolic, among the different societies, was the one called “*Soimech Noflim*” [Supporter of the Fallen]!

When you look at all this, this Jewry is revealed, before your eyes, not just in its various shades, but in all the splendour of its unique settings. And the heart aches that this magnificent tree was torn up with its roots and that all this has passed from the world, and that the number of those who still know how to appreciate the sources, from which our nation’s best drew forth and imbibed during generations, is steadily decreasing. True, there was provinciality and fanaticism, and there were conflicts - and even extremely fierce ones - but all these were immeasurably surpassed by the spiritual wealth, the popular patriarchy, the love for Torah, the love for fellow Jews and the spiritual necessity to act for the benefit of others!

And it is not in vain that the bard sang:

*“Wherever I turn, there I shall find
My stepmother the Diaspora, who is both hated and loved...”*

Z. Shneour (*In the Mountains*)

If we mentioned, above, that a large part of the material in this compilation may serve not only as a remembrance of the past, but also as a sign and symbol for the future - what we mean to say is that, following the destruction which struck the town and its Jews, after the strongholds of Torah and the spiritual centres in Eastern Europe were eradicated and ruined in the quest of annihilation and devastation, our people stands before the concern of the spiritual-traditional continuation of historic Judaism and of conjoining the generations. A unique role, in relation to the existing Diaspora, has now been assigned to the State of Israel. One must admit that ultra-orthodox Jewry, on its part, is doing great things in this field and it displays activities which sometimes defy belief.

⁴ [TN: Aka “*Ein Yaakov*” (*Jacob’s Eye*); a 16th century compilation of all the Aggadic material in the Talmud, together with commentaries, which was particularly popular with the more uneducated religious working element.]

In his latest book, *The National Character of Diaspora Jewry*, the researcher Jakób Leszczyński⁵ points out the revival of the Torah centres in Israel and in America and he sees, in this, one of the miracles of our generation.

Our writers, public figures and the thinkers among us are all unanimous in relation to the premise that there can be no Jewish future and no Jewish consciousness, unless they grow and draw nourishment from the heritage of our culture over the course of all the generations. In Israel, the government has set itself, in its basic guidelines, the task of deepening the Jewish consciousness amongst the masses of our people and, first and foremost, among the youth in the schools. It is no secret that Israeli youth treat the literature describing the Diaspora with some degree of contempt and there are various reasons for this, including perhaps the Zionist doctrine itself which, to a large extent, has taught not only the denial of **exile**, but also the denial of the **Diaspora**.

This attitude is now changing and, hence, the great value of material dedicated to the memory of the Diaspora and the eradicated communities, in which one may find many appealing and interesting things and which has the power to aid us, not only to provide the reader and the Israeli youth with the historical background and the specific conditions in which this special *shtetl* system arose and was formed over the course of centuries, but also to discover the Jewish genius which grew between the walls of the *cheder* and the study-hall and who, even under the most difficult circumstances, when he was chased and wounded, gashed and despondent, was able to work wonders, even on the threshold of annihilation.

And perhaps precisely now, in these times when the patterns of the past are being torn down, the belief in ideals and in elevated moral values is collapsing and religion has ceased to serve as the primary factor in Jewish social life - precisely now, it is necessary to present the youth, not just with the negative and the faults, but also with the spiritual and moral light, the mind set and way of life of the Diaspora Jews - a way of life permeated with adherence to hallowed values and profound religious and national feelings, which had the power to serve them as a trusted spiritual support in any time of trouble and difficult hour. It is this same Jewry who wove, with thousands of spiritual threads, the love for the Land of Israel, for the People of Israel and to its everlasting values. In this spiritual life, in whose shade generations upon generations took refuge, and in this atmosphere of deep affinity with spiritual and moral values, many of the best of the pioneers of our revival as a nation and as a state were educated and arose. Without all these, who knows if we would have remained a nation with an historic destiny - an everlasting nation with an everlasting destiny?

Yitzchak Lador

⁵ [TN: Aka Jacob Lestschinsky.]