

This article was downloaded by:[Boston College]  
On: 12 April 2008  
Access Details: [subscription number 788779786]  
Publisher: Routledge  
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954  
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## East European Jewish Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:  
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713720502>

### BOOK REVIEWS

Elena Katz <sup>a</sup>; Shaul Stampfer <sup>b</sup>; Frank Wolff <sup>c</sup>; Lars Fischer <sup>d</sup>; Hanna Kwiatkowska <sup>d</sup>

- <sup>a</sup> St. Antony's College, Oxford
- <sup>b</sup> Hebrew University Jerusalem,
- <sup>c</sup> University of Cologne,
- <sup>d</sup> University College London,

Online Publication Date: 01 April 2008

To cite this Article: Katz, Elena, Stampfer, Shaul, Wolff, Frank, Fischer, Lars and Kwiatkowska, Hanna (2008) 'BOOK REVIEWS', East European Jewish Affairs, 38:1, 105 - 118

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/13501670801897593

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501670801897593>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article maybe used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## BOOK REVIEWS

**An anthology of Jewish-Russian literature: two centuries of dual identity in prose and poetry**, edited by Maxim D. Shrayer, New York/London: M.E. Sharpe, 2006, 2 vols., 1279 pp., £130 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-7656-0521-4

Russians take a lot of pride, and very justifiably, in their literature. Jews, as this timely anthology of Jewish writing in Russian shows, should be no less proud of their input into Russian literary culture. More than 130 names of famous (such as Babel, Mandelstam, and Nobel Prize winners Pasternak and Brodsky) to lesser-known writers and poets have been brought together in this collection to reflect Russian Jewry's dual cultural sense of self, both Jewish and Russian.

In the course of the third quarter of the eighteenth century Russia acquired the largest Jewish population in the world, Polish Jewry, who were transformed into Russian subjects as a result of the partitions of Poland. The complex processes of Jewish assimilation and acculturation resulted in the appearance of literary figures like Grigory Bogrov and Lev Levanda in the nineteenth century who entered the mainstream of Russian social and cultural life and were at pains to examine Jewish experience through the prism of Russian literature. As the census of 1897 demonstrated, only 1% of Russian Jews considered Russian their mother tongue, yet a couple of decades later the Russian literary scene was, in Judaeophobic terms, "judaised." The influential literary critics, journalists, poets, and writers with a Jewish background articulated their creativity through the medium of Russian. The presence of Jews became so visible in the Soviet cultural and artistic milieu that for many Judaeophobes of Soviet and later post-Soviet times this fact has been a disturbing, sleepless experience of formulating the guilt of Jews in shaping Russian culture. One of many examples is an emotionally charged volume published in 2003 by Andruishkin, a Judaeophobic St. Petersburg's literary critic, in which the author firmly believes in the Jewish pollution of "the holy of holies" of Russia – its literature.<sup>1</sup> The accusations lack originality – Jewishness is viewed by him as a disease spreading throughout twentieth-century Russian literature so that even Russian literary icons of non-Jewish origins are affected and turn Jewish in the nature of their writings (such as Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Achmatova, and Vladimir Mayakovsky).

Under the auspices of its editor, Maxim Shrayer, an academic and a bilingual poet and prose writer himself, the anthology addresses one of the most complex issues of Jewry's linguistic self-expression in non-Jewish languages in the diaspora, that is, the Jewish historical, religious and cultural legacy that the Jews brought to Russian letters. Critical debates are devoted to discussion of the conflicting sense of bicultural and bi-national identity of the Russian Jew who by writing in Russian becomes a Russian writer.<sup>2</sup> A commonly asked question is to what degree they have remained a Jewish writer, with their Judaic heritage informing their Russian writing. One of the best examples is Babel's *Red Cavalry* – the cycle of stories articulating the Russian Revolution and Civil War simultaneously in Gentile and Jewish environments.

The editor's aim in this massive two-volume collection is to investigate "the dilemma of cultural duality by attempting a story, a history – and an encyclopaedic overview – of Jewish-Russian literature" (vol. 1, xxviii). In doing so Shrayer makes a judicious use of previous scholarship that is expertly summarised in his general introduction. He starts by defining the canon of Jewish-Russian literature, looking at the case of Russia in relation to Jewish culture in the diaspora in general and key issues surrounding critical discussions of dual literary identities of

Jewish-Russian writers and poets writing in nineteenth-century imperial Russia and worldwide in the twentieth century. Shroyer's choice of term is "Jewish-Russian literature" rather than "Russian-Jewish literature" as the "most direct and transparent one: the first adjective determines the literature's distinguishing aspect (Jewishness) and the second the country, language, or culture with which this literature is transparently identified by choice, default, or proxy" (vol. 1, xxxi). This cardinal shifting of the criteria for constructing a canon will further an ongoing polemic in which the expression "Russian-Jewish literature" has traditionally been utilised by authors and scholars alike. In Shroyer's argument the author's Jewish identity and the presence in their texts of Jewish or Judaic themes, viewpoints, cultural references to history, spirituality, and daily life provide "more precise criteria for measuring the Jewishness of a literary text" (vol. 1, xiii). Yet equally there is another side to the author's work – its Russianness in terms not only of the language of expression, but also of the referential framework to Russian cultural heritage which is also imbued into the text – a fact that would allow the critic to employ the term "Russian-Jewish literature."

The existence of terminological controversy assists in attempts to explain the tormented experience of writers whose Jewishness was perceived by others as a negative shadow, *piataia grapha* (a fifth column) in their Soviet passport, which did not let them forget who they were when trying to pass as Russians. Were they divided and suspended in feeling both Russians and foreign? Did they feel like impostors in the Russian literary milieu, or did they make it their adopted home when expressing their Jewish soul in Russian? The works gathered in this anthology tell a multi-faceted story of enduring and unsuppressed Jewish spirituality. The testimony by that famous literary chronicler of the Moscow intelligentsia and unconverted Jew, Mikhail Gershenzon (1869–1925), is of particular interest. In assessing a Hebrew cultural renaissance, exemplified by the poetry of Bialik, Gershenzon was thrilled with the development of a "carefree" Jewish lyrical spirit which comes across even in translation and affirms a sense of a proud, national spirit of selfhood with an optimistic faith in Jewry's abilities "to build its own destiny" (vol. 1, 215–16).

One of the editor's major achievements is the successful combination of form and content wherein the three levels of the anthology – a Jewish-Russian literary history, an encyclopaedic compendium, and a collection of individual literary works – are well balanced. The dynamic and articulate structure allows the reader not only to read chronologically, but also to selectively read individual sections and works by particular authors out of sequence. The anthology is divided into 11 sections according to the editor's periodisation of the history of Jewish-Russian literature, which are preceded by his introductory essays presenting the major artistic periods and aesthetic developments and trends in Jewish-Russian literature of the time (the chronological span for volume 1 is 1801–1953, for volume 2 1953–2001).<sup>3</sup> The anthology greatly benefits from a concise two-part survey of Jewish-Russian history and supplementary bibliographies written by the historian John D. Klier which provide a good starting point to further reading for readers less familiar with major developments in Jewish-Russian historic encounters.

The survival of Jewish memory and identity through the medium of Russian is shaped by such events as the suffering during the recruitment of Jews under Nicholas I (the prose of Osip Rabinovich), the Kishinev 1903 pogrom (the poetry of Dovid Knut), the Nazi invasion (the poetry and prose of Ilya Erenburg), the post-Shoah suppression of Jewish writing in the Soviet empire alongside the existence of the literary underground (poems by Yan Satunovsky and Genrikh Sapgir), the waves of emigration that produced talented mosaics of Jewish-Russian authors worldwide (the prose of Dina Rubina, Fridrikh Gorenshtein, Grigory Kanovich; the poetry of Anna Gorenko), and post-Soviet writers still living in Russia (popular post-perestroika literary comedian Mikhail Zhvanetsky and Russian Booker Prize winner Ludmila Ulitskaya).

Each author is introduced by a critical essay that mainly focuses on the authors' artistic career and their place in literary history. In addition each author's work or selection of works is prefaced with a note outlining the literary and historic background to the work's formation and publication

history. Other important tools for the scholar are provided by the editor, including a system of cross-references, bibliographies of primary sources, and a comprehensive index of names, works, and subjects referenced in the anthology. The quality of literary translations is worthy of special credit to the editor and the team of literary translators he has worked with over eight years while compiling the anthology. Much of the selected writings by Jewish authors have been unavailable in English translation to the Western reader and the anthology fills this gap (for example Leon Mandelstam, Leyb Jaffe, Matvey Royzman, and Mikhail Kozakov). Taking into account the panoramic scope attempted, the work of selecting the pieces from the immense amount of prose and poetry available, both fiction and non-fiction, could not have been easy. It is unfortunate that space did not allow the inclusion of dramatic works in the anthology even as representative excerpts.

In conclusion, I would like to commend the editor not only for the remarkable quality of presentation of the literary translations, but also for a thoroughly researched study of Jewish literature and culture in its Russian context. The anthology narrates the story of how in the course of two centuries of defining and redefining identities the Jews became Russian writers and poets while also remaining Jews. This story for most authors presented in the anthology encapsulates the saga of how they both enjoyed life and endured it in the land “where all’s alien but dear.”<sup>4</sup> The anthology would be a valuable companion to both academic and general readers who have a love of Jewish literature, or indeed to anyone interested in Russian literature’s masterpieces created by Jews.

### Notes

1. Andriushkin, *Iudei v russkoi literature XX veka*.
2. See for example Sicher, *Jews in Russian Literature between Hope and Apostasy*; Murav, *Identity Theft*; Nakhimovsky, *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity*. Shrayer’s anthology provides a comprehensive list of a selected bibliography presenting a history of the study of Jewish-Russian literature from the 1880s to the present day with preference given to works in English.
3. The sections in volume 1 are as follows: the beginnings; gaining a voice (1840–81); first flowering (1881–1902); on the eve (1903–17); revolution and betrayal (1917–39); emigrations (1917–67); war and terror (1939–53). The sections in volume 2: the thaw (1953–64); late Soviet empire (1964–91); the Jewish exodus (1967–2001); in post-Soviet times (1991–2001).
4. The land “where all’s alien but dear” refers to the Pale of Settlement and comes from the poem “Where’s Home?” (1925) by a poet and Lithuanian patriot, Evgeny Shklyar, who died in the Nazi concentration camp outside Kaunas.

### Bibliography

- Andriushkin, A.P. *Iudei v russkoi literature XX veka: kniga bez podteksta*. St. Petersburg: Svetoch, 2003.
- Sicher, E. *Jews in Russian Literature between Hope and Apostasy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Murav, H. *Identity Theft: The Jew in Russia and the Case of Avraam Uri Kovner*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Nakhimovsky, A. *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity: Jabotinsky, Babel, Grossman, Galich, Roziner, Markish*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Elena Katz  
 St. Antony’s College, Oxford  
 © 2008 Elena Katz

**New Jewish identities: contemporary Europe and beyond**, edited by Zvi Y. Gitelman, Barry Kosmin, and Andras Kovacs, Budapest/New York, Central European University Press, 2003, 365 pp., £38.50, ISBN 9639241628

It may be asked: what is the point of academic conferences? This volume, a product of a conference held in Budapest in July 2001, offers an answer. This collection of 16 papers, is a significant step forward in understanding many of the changes in European Jewry a bit more than a decade after Europe was transformed by the collapse of communism. The participants in the volume include some of the most creative and interesting researchers in the field and many of these studies will be landmarks in their respective fields.

*New Jewish Identities* deals with various European communities but it clearly emphasises Eastern Europe. There is only one (short) article on French Jewry even though it is a large community and a vibrant one. There is none on German Jewry though it has changed immensely in the last two decades and there are a few other countries that are missing as well. However, since this is not a textbook but a collection of papers, what should get attention is what there is – and in this case, what there is, is very good. This is one of the most sophisticated collections of studies on European Jewish communities to have appeared and it sets a benchmark for future academic research in the field. The papers are extremely illuminating and often touchingly honest. It is certainly required reading for anyone interested in contemporary European Jewry.

In the words of the editors, this volume is intended to offer “an assessment of the status of Jewish identities, commitments and aspirations in Europe.” In most cases this is done by empirical studies and attempts to go past personal viewpoints and impressions. In almost every case, the data base is far from ideal but the authors bring to their work an awareness of the limitations and an intimate familiarity with the context. As a result, the conclusions are usually reliable and in almost every case they are a major step forward in our understanding of what is happening in these communities. These studies are intended to be impartial and objective, something that cannot be taken for granted when reading about contemporary Jewish communities in Europe. Many organisations and interested parties are active and each has their agenda and views of what the current situation is and what needs to be done. However, their involvement and commitments colour their understanding of what is before their eyes and hence their interpretations. This volume is a sorely needed corrective and in many respects it is quite unique.

The range of topics covered is rich. Among the Jewish communities dealt with are those of Britain, France, Sweden, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Central Asia, Hungary, and Poland. There are also specific articles on the Jewish press and Jewish identity in St. Petersburg, and on Jews and the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet period, and more comparative pieces by Jonathan Webber and Charles Liebman.

It is difficult to come to any general conclusions about the nature of Jewish identity or of Jewish culture today in Europe. As Jonathan Webber writes (335), “At most, one can try to get certain perplexities into focus.” At the lowest level, one can note that Europe is very different from North America and also from Israel. It would be interesting to explore the question of the degree of similarity of European Jewry today to that of South America – though that clearly is a topic for a different conference. What is clear is that traditional patterns of religious identification and community activity have been at the very least transformed and in many cases are unrecognizable. What this volume has done is to raise many of the questions that should be asked and to present methodologies for dealing with many of them. Hopefully, these papers will inspire researchers in other countries to undertake similar

studies that will allow for comparative studies and make it possible to follow developments over time.

Shaul Stampfer  
Hebrew University Jerusalem  
© 2008 Shaul Stampfer

**Diaspora Nationalismus. Zur Geschichtskonstruktion Simon Dubnows**, by Anke Hilbrenner, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007, 315 pp., ISBN 13: 978-3-525-369852-2

Simon Dubnow, author of the *Weltgeschichte des jüdischen Volkes* in ten volumes, was not only an outstanding Jewish historian – his life-span also covered a whole epoch of Jewish history. Born in 1860 in Belorussian Mstislavl, he gained political influence after the 1881–2 pogroms and was deeply touched by intellectual trends at the end of Tsardom. In the interwar period he lived temporarily in Berlin, but it was in German-occupied Riga that he was murdered in 1941. In this era of first change and then destruction, the self-made historian Dubnow authored, on the one hand, a great bandwidth of articles and monographs and, on the other, took a leading part in several institutes, political groups, and parties. With his interest in enlightened ideas and popular culture, he can be seen as a prototype of the Russian-Jewish intellectual. Looking at the increasing interest in Eastern European Jewish culture since the 1990s, the need for an analysis of his work and life becomes obvious. It is this interrelation of life and work that forms the focus of Anke Hilbrenner’s 2003 dissertation, which has now appeared in the series Papers of the Simon-Dubnow-Institute. This series was established in 2004 with a German edition of Dubnow’s autobiography *Buch des Lebens* (Kniga Zhizni – Book of Life), a project in which Hilbrenner was involved. Up to this time, Dubnow was almost only seen as the grand seigneur of East European Jewish historiography, often cited, but rarely researched – so it was about time (for the Institute and indeed for Jewish historians in general) for a solid and elaborated up-to-date study of him. Hilbrenner’s book fills this gap.

Working with Dubnow’s personal records, mainly his autobiography and the vast corpus of published material written by him, Hilbrenner aims to describe a branch of modern Jewish historiography which stood aside from the German-Jewish *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. This was mainly embodied by Heinrich Graetz who took up a position quite distant from Dubnow’s. Hilbrenner wants to challenge the popular view of reading Dubnow only as a successor to Graetz (17, 270). According to Hilbrenner, this lineage, drawn later by Western historians, had a narrowing effect. Research was limited to, or measured along, Western-Ashkenazi thought. But especially in the case of East European Jewry a certain historical and political consciousness developed, which evolved into a huge variety of national and de-territorial cultural concepts that had great impact on culture and politics. Hilbrenner sees Dubnow’s “diaspora-nationalism” as one of the most influential of these intrinsic ideas. Yet modern Jewish historiography is closely bound to the name of Salo W. Baron. His rejection of Dubnow’s historiographic work is considered by Hilbrenner to be a result of Dubnow’s later marginalisation as a historian (19), juxtaposed with his “martyrisation” (254ff.). After Dubnow’s death, according to Hilbrenner, critical reception of his work was suspended, mainly as a consequence of the homage paid to him after his tragic death. In short, as a respected person respected, as a historian denied, Hilbrenner’s aim is to redraw the relations between the essential parts of Simon Dubnow’s life, worldview, and historical concepts.

Furthermore, Hilbrenner positions her work against a double polarisation concerning the East–West dichotomy (28) as much as collective–individual opposition. Aiming at such defragmentation of formerly well-distinguished spheres, she develops a theoretical framework that sets

up the proceeding analysis. Dubnow's construction of history is interpreted as a *harmonisierende Deutung* (harmonising interpretation) (271), both as a synthesis between East and West and between East European Jewish tradition and modernity. She takes a close look at these patterns of synthesis with reference to Dubnow's historical writing as well as his autobiographic self-representation. Consequently, the two main parts of the study are devoted to the analysis of Dubnow's autobiographical narrative and his national-historical drafts. In the latter case, Hilbrenner mainly exemplifies this by a groundbreaking in-depth analysis of Dubnow's historical interpretation of the Jewish kahal. Altogether she takes a huge step towards understanding Dubnow as a part of his (changing) times. The result is a coherent image of Dubnow as an individual and as a historical protagonist.

A closer analysis of the two central parts of the book produces a somewhat mixed result. In analysing Dubnow's autobiography, Hilbrenner follows the well-established route, considering the autobiography of the author as a version of a Bildungsroman (educational novel). Through his eternal self-education the protagonist aims to overcome his personal incompleteness, and the strictures placed upon his life by the Russian authoritarian system and traditional Jewish life (32ff.). Aside this self-description this autobiographical line-up is meant to be a role model for its readers and a possible way, offering an alternative and modern way of life – without the need of assimilation. Hilbrenner follows Maria Kłanska's "Aus dem Shtetl in die Welt" (Out of the shtetl, into the world) as a model, which is very limited in its application to Dubnow's writing, first because Kłanska exclusively focused on a very narrow selection of East European Jewish autobiographies, written in German, the language of the new country, and secondly because Kłanska's linear dictum is more a description of a normative narrative than a universally applicable category. Following recent studies,<sup>1</sup> East European autobiographical culture cannot be oversimplified as a *Spielart* (variety) of the prototypical Western memorial narrative of Kłanska and Hilbrenner (37).

But nonetheless, Hilbrenner inventively uses Kłanska's cognitions and connects them to the "evolutionary triad" in Dubnow's memories. This dialectical triad is a structural model to unify the circular traditional Jewish memorial patterns with modern progressive linearity in one synthesis, embodied by Dubnow himself. Not only is the evolutionary triad represented in the description of his personal development, but also his personal *lieux des mémoire* (Mstislavl', St. Petersburg, Odessa) mirror the dialectical character of the Eastern-Jewish experience – all in all a harmonisation that Hilbrenner can convincingly relate to comparable trends in Russian intellectual life (89f.).

But it remains unexplained why Hilbrenner almost exclusively examines Dubnow's narrative in relation to Western-Jewish or Russian paradigms. If Hilbrenner follows Lederhendler and reformulates the particular feature of the East European Jewish experience as a singular kind of modernity without assimilation and emancipation which, even without individual emancipation, had already led prior to 1917 to an inherent historiography – why should it not also have led to its own autobiographical practice? Here Hilbrenner focuses too closely on the person Simon Dubnow. He finished his memories after the First World War in exile, like many Eastern European Jews. Having such a huge mass of Jewish autobiography at hand, the question arises of why Hilbrenner constantly looks at Russian or Western comparables without looking at the close, sometimes even personally related Yiddish political culture. Not only did his daughter Sofia marry the leading Bundist Henryk Erlikh (which must have led to various discursive influences), but his friendships with Shloime An-skji and Chaim Zhitlovsky were also influential in both directions (182) and their thought had a great impact on the developing Yiddish national culture. This new Jewish self-cognition later induced a great output of Yiddish autobiographical texts. Moreover, Dubnow was a founding father of cultural institutes, such as YIVO. Nowadays YIVO is famous for its large-scale collections of autobiographies, which enable "the common man to

mount the pulpit and teach us the meaning of his life,” as Max Weinreich once put out. A mapping of Dubnow in this long-term political and autobiographical discourse could have been reasonable. Furthermore, it remains under-discussed why Dubnow switched from his mother tongue, Yiddish, to Russian. Maybe it was in order to position himself in a contemporary Russian and not Jewish discourse. It would be interesting to know why Dubnow agitated mainly in his Yiddish-based Folkspartey, but composed his life-review in the language of the surrounding majority and his intellectual friends.

Following this, Hilbrenner’s astonishment at Dubnow’s later rejection of his former ideals on equality and gender roles (66) can be explained. His and his young intellectual colleagues’ positioning “against the traditionally patriarchal society in all its peculiarities” (“gegen die traditionell patriarchalische Gesellschaft mit all ihren Ausprägungen”) (68) was more self-fashioning than practical, more a rhetorical pattern than adaptable politics. From a wider perspective, his writing could be compared with contemporary Eastern European Jewish autobiographers and, from this point, Dubnow’s concept was in no way singular. It is a representation of the time, as for example Bundist autobiographies would show. Although the Bundists came politically to quite different conclusions, their narrative methods and their cultural self-representation functioned comparably. Other similarities, which Hilbrenner underrates, lie in the role of popular and self-education and in the model of national autonomy – here Dubnow’s enmeshment with his culture of descent is far stronger than Hilbrenner admits. Not only did his view of history become an obligatory part of the Eastern-Jewish self- and world-perception (271), as Hilbrenner states, but the special Eastern-Jewish space of experience also hugely influenced him. Cross-comparison with similar Yiddish literature could have strongly underlined Hilbrenner’s thesis. In these chapters Hilbrenner’s book remains ambivalent, sometimes theoretically brilliantly reflecting, but sometimes too closely following the lines drawn by Dubnow’s autobiography itself, mixing his self-representation with the course of his life.

Besides Dubnow’s autobiography, Hilbrenner examines his historical works and contextualises them with his political activities – here the study becomes clear and pristine. Especially her reading of Dubnow’s kahal theory and his attempted revitalisation of this concept in everyday politics, a new kahal lookalike as the place for national autonomy, is intriguing. The kahal grows into a concept in which Hilbrenner can persuasively unify the historical fact of the kahal with Dubnow’s interpretation of it and its binding back to the author’s life and his time. Following his personal contacts, Hilbrenner elaborates the closeness of Dubnow’s kahal and the *narodniki*’s concept of the *obshchina* (179ff.) and convincingly portrays this as the “turn to the people,” to which many intellectuals of the time were dedicated. Consequently Dubnow’s kahal becomes the centrepiece of an East European mental landscape, an ordering system for his times as much as a historical experience. With this concept Dubnow the historian could present both a political orientation and progressive utopia in one. Hilbrenner therefore describes his concept of the kahal as the “secularization of the national idea,” the founding part of his diaspora-nationalism.

The conclusion of the work considers Yiddish literature. Hilbrenner asserts that Dubnow is not an isolated island. She widely discusses the relation between his work and his time as well as his personal and scientific interactions with other leading figures and groups. She rightly states that his influence reached its peak in the Russian Empire, and was later marginalised, mainly by American Jewish historians who used his politically inspired historiography only as a folio for their own counter-positions. But is Baron really the touchstone for Dubnow’s impact on intellectual life in general? Hilbrenner has done a lot more than explain Dubnow’s contemporary relevance – she has portrayed Dubnow’s individual preconceptions, political expression, and historical work in a single coherent picture. But the sharpness with which Hilbrenner outlines Dubnow’s marginalisation in subsequent times is questionable. Here the issues of secondary reception and inter-textuality need to be researched. However, in Hilbrenner’s study, one of the

greatest Jewish intellectuals under the late tsars is not only honoured, but critically examined and contextualised. Because of the longevity of Dubnow's historical conceptions that largely became transported by later historians and popular writers, Hilbrenner's book is a precious resource for anyone researching the field of twentieth-century historiography and socio-cultural Eastern-European Jewish thought.

### Note

1. Herzberg, "Autobiographik als historische Quelle zwischen Ost und West."

### Reference

Herzberg, Julia. "Autobiographik als historische Quelle in 'Ost' und 'West'." In *Vom Wir zum Ich. Individuum und Autobiographik im Zarenreich*, ed. Julia Herzberg and Christoph Schmidt, 15–62. Cologne, 2007.

Frank Wolff  
University of Cologne  
© 2008 Frank Wolff

**Music in the Holocaust. Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps**, by Shirli Gilbert, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, xvii + 243 pp., £30.00 (hardback), ISBN 0-19-927797-4

Shirli Gilbert's important and accomplished study mounts a sustained challenge to the "widespread and simplistic conception of music as spiritual resistance, a conception based on unrealistic assumptions about inmate solidarity and the possibility of resisting Nazism's calculated policy of dehumanization." Why, she asks, is it so widely assumed that music was somehow "inviolable by social forces, or that it was immune to the processes of politicization and corruption that infiltrated so many aspects of life" during the Holocaust? It is her contention that in the ghettos and camps in particular, "where the perverted moral codes and deeds of the regime had their most concentrated expression, nothing could escape contamination." Hence, instead of focusing on music's empowering or redemptive potential, Gilbert has begun to write a social history of music in the Holocaust which "explores hierarchies and other patterns of power within inmate communities, and illustrates how a variety of social and political factors affected the ways in which different groups could make use of music." The practice of, and access to, music thus emerges as a telling reflection in its own right of the social structures that developed in the ghettos and camps. Yet the general significance of this study by no means ends there. As opposed to the bulk of relevant sources that in fact date from the post-liberation period, the songs created and sung in the ghettos and camps provide us with "a significant body of texts originating from the time itself" and hence "convey to us not a retrospective understanding of individuals that survived (as do post-war testimonies), but the uncertain and constantly shifting perspectives of prisoner communities facing new daily realities over an extended period of time" (3).

The four sections of Gilbert's book discuss the situation in the ghettos in Warsaw and Vilna and then focus on Sachsenhausen and Auschwitz. One of the themes that recurs throughout the study is the use, especially in the camps, of "forced music-making as a means of humiliation" (30), including "torture sessions in which music was used in inventive and sadistic ways" (145). Another issue central to Gilbert's discussion is the extent to which access to music was ultimately dependent upon the German authorities' willingness to allow

it. Music as a “social activity” thus emerges as “a marker of status, a symbol of the power of some and the helplessness of others” (54). A case in point are the cafés that formed a crucial focal point of musical life in the Warsaw ghetto. They were “opened with the help of the Gestapo or Judenrat members and could continue to operate only through high-ranking connections” (28). Corruption and personal gratification apart, what would have motivated the authorities’ approach to music in the ghetto? Reviewing a wide spectrum of relevant activities, Gilbert ultimately concludes that “in an ironic inversion of the spiritual resistance argument, it seems that music was one of many activities tolerated by the SS precisely because by diverting their attention from what was really happening to them, it helped in deflecting any urge on the part of the victims to resist” (37). In Vilna too much of the musical activity within the framework of the ghetto theatre, for instance, clearly had a predominantly quietist effect and the ghetto leaders certainly intended it that way. Even so, as Gilbert rightly stresses, “it is difficult to take an entirely cynical view” of these activities. They were extremely popular and the ghetto theatre “functioned as an important social space, where people came together voluntarily to restore some sense of normality, and to seek emotional support within the community framework” (94).

In other ways the Vilna ghetto offers an interesting contrast to its counterpart in Warsaw. Robbed of the bulk of its older and weaker population by a devastating initial wave of massacres, it went through a period of relative stability from December 1941 to April 1943. In this time it had “a younger and more politicised character than many of the other east European ghettos” (59). It experienced a well-documented “explosion of cultural life” (63), producing some of the rawest and most harrowing responses to the horrors of the ghetto and the unfolding genocide. Yet even under these circumstances most of the ghetto’s inhabitants “did not – or, more accurately perhaps, could not – view what was happening to them as a radical severance from their past.” Gilbert presents a wealth of material that bears testimony to the widely shared notion among Jews in the ghetto that what they were encountering “was still something that could acquire meaning within the broader narrative of Jewish suffering” (68).

Gilbert’s treatment of Sachsenhausen in many ways forms the most interesting and instructive part of the book. She assesses in turn the situation of three distinct groups: the (non-Jewish) German political prisoners, the (non-Jewish) Polish prisoners, and, finally, the Jewish prisoners in the camp. At this point the issue of access to music emerges very clearly as a reflection not only of the National Socialists’ racial priorities but also of the lengths to which the German authorities went in spelling out the implications of these priorities for all walks of (camp) life. Gilbert gives full credit not only to the relatively rich musical life among the (non-Jewish) German political prisoners but also to the help they sought (with varying degrees of success) to extend to other groups of prisoners. Even so, as she rightly emphasises, “it is important to acknowledge that the political would not have been granted” the relative freedom they enjoyed in this respect “if the SS had perceived their activities as a serious threat” (119). The ambivalences involved here are illustrated not least by the official camp song, the “Sachsenhausenlied.” As Gilbert points out (citing Hans-Ludger Kreuzheck’s findings), “the SS at many of the larger camps deliberately used official songs ... most of which reflected a ... spirit of defiance and longing for freedom – as a tool of demonstrating their control over the inmates, to mock them as they marched to and from work, or at forced singing sessions.” One of the authors of the text of the “Sachsenhausenlied” epitomised the attempt to evade the dialectics of this constellation when he later made the surely untenable claim that the SS had simply been “too stupid” to pick up on the defiant character of the lyrics (115).

At the heart of Gilbert’s account of the situation of the (non-Jewish) Polish prisoners lies the collection of Aleksander Kulisiewicz (1918–82) now held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where Gilbert has been a Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies fellow. A

survivor of Sachsenhausen himself, Kulisiewicz played an active role in the musical life of this group of prisoners and dedicated a great deal of his post-war life to the documentation of musical activities among the victims of the Holocaust. While the songs of the German political prisoners were mostly optimistic and tended to gloss over the horrors of camp life in a somewhat triumphalist manner, Gilbert shows that those of the Polish prisoners genuinely “confronted difficult issues relating to camp life.” Often characterised by “sarcasm and black humour, they displayed their contempt for the regime, and openly expressed the desire for revenge” (121). Rather tellingly, “Kulisiewicz’s provocative tone, both in his songs and in his post-war writings on cultural life in the camp, drew censure during the 1970s from former German political prisoners.” They took issue with his “relentlessly negative emphasis” and insisted that prisoners in the camp would not have wanted to listen to such “dark and troubling songs” (122). Yet these songs were indeed performed and they “elicited powerful responses from their audiences” (126).

If the (non-Jewish) Polish prisoners faced rather harsher conditions and restrictions than their German counterparts and the character of their musical response reflected this, the situation of the Jewish prisoners in Sachsenhausen requires a different approach altogether. The short-lived activities of the choir led by Rosebery D’arguto that created what must surely be one of the most harrowing responses to the Shoah, the “Jüdischer Todessang” (Jewish death song), are fairly well known but they clearly mark the exception that confirms the rule. For the authorities showed an “astonishing lack of tolerance for Jewish activities” (141) and consequently “the absence of songs is a more telling testament to the Jewish experience in the camp than the few songs that remain” (140).

Auschwitz, by contrast, was a death camp and the (racial) hierarchy among its prisoners on the whole much flatter. It is therefore little wonder that “the majority of Auschwitz prisoners only experienced music as it was imposed by the SS” (146). This throws the role of the camp orchestras all the more sharply into relief. As Gilbert puts it, “these orchestras played a valuable role in the extermination process, helping the operation to run smoothly and assisting in the maintenance of discipline and order” (145). The perversity of this situation has repeatedly been commented upon, of course, and Gilbert cites Primo Levi as a case in point. For him this practice epitomised the camp’s “geometrical madness” and the determination to “annihilate us first as men in order to kill us more slowly afterwards.” Nor can there be any doubt that the musicians themselves generally “experienced these activities as painful and distressing” (185).

Even so, “in addition to the life-sustaining material advantages as well as the individual identity their jobs afforded them,” some musicians also “derived emotional relief and support from their activities” (192). Indeed, it remains true, of course, that “for some, music helped to restore and strengthen a positive sense of identity.” On occasion it did “allow victims to bond together in their suffering.” Important, though, is the recognition that this process was “seldom uncomplicatedly heroic.” As Gilbert rightly stresses, this was not the fault of the victims but down to “the invasive climates of the ghettos and camps.” Her point is not that music did not have the empowering and redemptive function that has so often been ascribed to it because the inhabitants of the ghettos and the prisoners in the camps failed to realise its potential. The real misunderstanding lies in the assumption “that people had the power to choose whether or not to be robbed of their dignity in the first place” (200). Finally, there is an additional rather chilling twist to the perpetrators’ perception of music in the camps. For, “apart from all their practical functions, the orchestras enjoyed the prominent existence they did because the SS valued a sense of ‘civilised’ culture, and valued the self-image they were able to promote (if only internally) through engagement with it.” Music, far from being considered at odds with what transpired in the camps, was in fact seen as “a vital and thoroughly appropriate part of the camp enterprise” (195).

Gilbert's book could have been proof-read slightly more carefully and there are one or two minor irritants such as the pejorative use of the term "decadent" (29) or persistent adherence to the term "gypsies." Historians in the field are likely to find the introductory sections on each ghetto and camp a little too extensive. On the other hand, the book's 34 handsomely produced music examples notwithstanding, musicologists are likely to be disappointed because the volume offers comparatively little explicit discussion of the musical substance (rather than the texts) of the songs that Gilbert covers. Yet both groups will nevertheless benefit immensely from this book and the fact that it cannot be all things to all people hardly speaks against the author or her research. It merely underscores how much more work remains to be done (both on a highly specialised level that speaks to either of the two disciplines and in a synthetic form accessible to both) to pursue the agenda that Gilbert has set with her ground-breaking monograph.

Lars Fischer  
 University College London  
 © 2008 Lars Fischer

**The Crosses of Auschwitz. Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland**, by Geneviève Zubrzycki, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 2006, 280 pp., £14.50 (paperback), ISBN 0-226-99304-3

*The Crosses of Auschwitz. Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* uses the controversy that has stirred emotions in Poland and worldwide as a key to explaining the co-dependence between Polish nationalism and Roman Catholicism. In 1998 a field of crosses was erected at Auschwitz by a group of extreme nationalists. It was a powerful manifestation of the idea that Catholic symbols should be displayed there to commemorate Catholic victims. The nationalists alleged that they were defending the papal cross, the removal of which from premises adjacent to the camp was recently under threat. It was also a backlash to the earlier controversy that saw the Carmelite convent established next to the premises of the camp moved to a different location. In 1993 Pope John Paul II, recognising that the issue of the convent was a hurdle to Jewish–Catholic dialogue, was personally involved in the negotiations and issued a disposition for the nuns to move to a different place.<sup>1</sup> However, another issue remained unsolved. In the camp a large wooden cross stood in the area of Żwirowisko (the gravel pit), the same cross that stood in Auschwitz-Birkenau when Pope John Paul II celebrated a mass there in 1979. Żwirowisko, the pit where about 300 crosses were erected, is a site outside the boundaries of the Auschwitz Museum. However, it was the site where many prisoners of the labour camp were shot, including Russian soldiers and Poles.<sup>2</sup>

The convent, the papal mass and cross, and even the field of crosses are partially an expression of the need Catholic Poles feel to commemorate the 150,000 Polish inmates of Auschwitz, including about 70,000–75,000 who died there, and in a more general sense to commemorate Polish suffering experienced during the Nazi occupation. However, this need to honour Catholic victims in a manner appropriate to their religious beliefs is not always neutral. As in the case of the crosses controversy, it is often tainted with nationalism and antisemitism. The religious symbol of the cross has been abused as a tool for political dispute. The ringleader of the crosses campaign in Auschwitz, Kazimierz Świtoń, became a media emblem of a mad antisemite. It has to be pointed out that public opinion in Poland viewed this affair with embarrassment, even in the nationalist press, though it supported the idea that Catholic symbols should be present in Auschwitz and tried to distance itself from the controversial leader of the Defenders of the Cross group.

These widely publicised events present Poland as the country of backwardness, mixed with religious zeal and hotheadedness, and above all strain the already fragile relations with the international Jewish community. For Zubrzycki the controversy, albeit thoroughly recounted and analysed, is only a pretext for investigating the nationalist ethos in Poland. The transition to post-Communism is mostly viewed through the economic changes and democratisation of political life. *The Crosses of Auschwitz* focuses on the more neglected phenomenon of post-Communism – that of nationalisation.

In the first chapter the author offers us a summary of the “Genealogy of Polish Nationalism.” She looks back to the Partitions and statelessness as a crucial period when national identity was rearticulated with the heavy use of religious myths and symbolism. Zubrzycki makes an interesting point on the clash between the Vatican’s policy on the Partitions, favourable to the partitioning rulers, and the actions of the local Polish clergy, who fully embraced national-religious rhetoric in the fight for freedom (49). (Incidentally, the clash between the wider interests of Roman Catholicism and those of the local, Polish Church is no less apparent today.<sup>3</sup>) Furthermore, Zubrzycki takes us through the Communist period, when the cross and religious symbolism were yet again interwoven into the definitions of Polish patriotism and the rhetoric of struggle against a powerful oppressor. What emerges from the analysis is that Polish national identity needs the cross and Catholic ethos at times of crisis. Whether the same strong definitions of *Polak-Katolik* (Pole-Catholic) and Poland as being tied to the Catholicism are needed in a time of independence and stability is a question the author attempts to answer in the following chapters.

The process of redefining national identity in post-Communist Poland was largely influenced by the growing secularisation. Also, the Church that for decades had taken an active part in political life, albeit on the side of opposition, began to be criticised for its involvement in politics in democratic Poland. Zubrzycki discusses the constitutional debate on whether to include *invocatio Dei* in the constitution of 1997. The constitutional debate not only highlighted the differences between the outlooks of the political left and right in defining Polish national identity. It also provided an important focus point for the fragmented right: once again God and religion were used as a powerful weapon in the political struggle (96).

Zubrzycki further discusses the symbolism of Oświęcim/Auschwitz (chapter 3). I think many readers, even if they are already familiar with Holocaust historiography, will be interested in the author’s discussion about Oświęcim as a core Polish and also Roman Catholic symbol and her account of the Polish experience of Auschwitz. In addition, the author refers to the Polonisation of the site and the memorialisation of Auschwitz by the Communist regime and the impact on how Poles view the site today.

The fourth chapter focuses on what the author calls “the War of the Crosses” – the controversy over the field of crosses erected on the pit in Auschwitz. The issues of Polish martyrdom, memory, and identity are explored at length and the analysis of the aesthetics of the events provides an interesting background to Zubrzycki’s conclusions on Polish nationalism. The backdrop of pictures of the Pope and Our Lady of Częstochowa, and patriotic chants were meant to evoke the feeling that current events on the gravel pit in Auschwitz were equally important as significant, identity-defining events in Polish history – resistance under the Partitions, Solidarity’s struggle for freedom, and the miraculous survival of the nation thanks to its faithfulness to the cross/Catholicism.

In the last chapter Zubrzycki concludes that while the crosses controversy had antisemitism as its catalyst, it actually developed into a debate about Poland and was reframed as a crisis of Catholicism. The latter, though, later came to be viewed as a crisis external to the Church, as the Episcopate actually took a stance against this unauthorised and hysterical erection of crosses in Auschwitz.

Finally, Zubrzycki concludes that in the controversy “Jews and Jewishness served as a trope to discuss Polishness and that Catholicism played a role in defining and shaping the latter” (207).

There is no doubt that Zubrzycki’s book fills a lacuna in research on nationalism in post-Communist Poland, and more specifically the relationship between current nationalism and Catholicism, especially viewed at the level of religious symbolism. However, her attempt at a more extensive sociological analysis is weakened by the focus on the crosses controversy, the most publicised expression of the mixture of Catholicism and Polish nationalism at its extreme. The event itself provided a neat framework for analysis. However, in my opinion, the work fails to capture the more subtle and complex factors in the ongoing debate about the role of the cross and religion in Polish nationalism. While those who erected crosses on the pit wanted their actions to be viewed as a war in post-Communist Poland, even during the controversy in 1998, as I would argue, there was no such event as the “War of the Crosses.” There was no “war” because the role of the cross in the Polish psyche was never really challenged. As Zubrzycki notes herself, the validity of the presence of the big, papal cross was never debated.

Similarly, the central role of the cross and Catholicism in Polish identity has not yet been properly debated. This is because the majority of Polish society accepts the centrality of both. The deep attachment of Poles to their religion means that many are adamant that Catholicism should have a place even in public and political life. This by contrast with other societies that are more secular may seem overzealous and intolerant. In a survey of 2001, the statement “It is right that there is a cross in the Parliament, rather than any other religious or secular symbol. We live in a Catholic country. The cross is our Polish symbol” was supported by 86% of farmers, 48% of the intelligentsia, and 75% of pupils and students.<sup>4</sup>

Zubrzycki points out that the cross and Catholicism suffered an instrumentalisation in the struggle for freedom. I think that the internal debate over the crosses controversy was essentially about religious symbolism being hijacked by an embarrassingly extreme nationalism. The Episcopate and even the right-wing media decided that extreme nationalists, or at least certain individuals, should not abuse this sacred symbol for their political gain. Hence, the field of crosses was removed. But as the papal cross remained in Auschwitz, so does the cross remain at the centre of Polish national identity. I do not think this centrality was ever really debated by society at large. What has been contested since 1989, and was also the subject of the *invocatio Dei* debate, is the extent to which the Church should be allowed to influence political life. And this debate is very different from the one Zubrzycki refers to, namely the role of religion in national identity. Secularisation has not yet reached the sphere of national identity. But Zubrzycki is right in pointing out that civil society has started threatening the privileged role of the Church as a powerful player in political life. Is that secularisation or simply a demand for the Church to ignite much needed spirituality instead of political debate? No doubt many intellectuals, including those extensively quoted by Zubrzycki, would like to see the secularisation of both political life and Polish national identity, but this has not happened yet. Moreover, since the publication of this book, we have observed three years of significant Catholicisation of politics and the public sphere under the government of the Law and Order Party (PiS).

Zubrzycki argues that “The War of the Crosses should be seen as an attempt to revitalise what is now an increasingly contested version of national identity that fuses ethnicity and religion into one group” (208). I already cited the response of the public to the cross in the Parliament, another example how the cross/Catholicism remains an uncontested part of Polish identity. I would call this the “Silent Crosses Revolution.” Since 1989 crosses have been put up, as a grassroots initiative, in classrooms, shops, hospitals, and even the offices of public servants. There was no debate about or backlash against this very public expression of Catholic identity.

To sum up, *The Crosses of Auschwitz* is an informative and well-researched work. Zubrzycki should be commended for not taking a shortcut to viewing the crosses controversy solely as an expression of antisemitism. She presents many interesting points on Polish nationalism, and her theories provide a fresh look at the symbiosis of Polish and Catholic identity – a coexistence that is often taken for granted.

Hanna Kwiatkowska  
*University College London*  
 © 2008 Hanna Kwiatkowska

### Notes

1. Sherwin, “Katolicka teologia judaizmu w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II”, 159; see also: Bartoszewski, *The Convent at Auschwitz*. A journalistic account of the convent controversy can be found in Klein, *The Battle for Auschwitz*.
2. The fact that the site which was at the centre of the controversy so acutely highlights the different fate of Poles and Jews at Auschwitz has not been sufficiently used for educational purposes at the height of the debate about the crosses. This indeed was a lost opportunity as it would have been a chance to challenge the prevailing stereotype that Poles suffered as much or even more than Jews during the Nazi occupation.
3. See Kwiatkowska, “Conflict of Images”.
4. CEBOS report from Feb. 2001, as published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 125: 31 May 2002, p. 18.

### Bibliography

- Bartoszewski, W.T. *The Convent at Auschwitz*. New York: George Braziller, 1990.
- Klein, E. *The Battle for Auschwitz. Catholic-Jewish Relations under Strain*. London: Valentine Mitchell, 2001.
- Kwiatkowska, H. “Conflict of Images. Conflict of Memories. Jewish Themes in the Polish Right-wing Nationalistic Press in the Light of Articles from *Nasz Dziennik* 1998–2007”, PhD thesis, UCL, London, 2008.
- Sherwin, B.L. “Katolicka teologia judaizmu w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II”, in: B.L. Sherwin, H. Kasimow (eds.), *Jan Pawel II i dialog międzyreligijny*. Kraków: W.A.M., 2001.