



Back to the post-Communist motherlands

Reflections of a Jerusalemite historian

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*Remote celestial stars, celestial stars so close
Remote and distant from the watching eye
And yet their lights so close to the observer's heart*

'Remote Celestial Stars', Jerusalem 1943
(Tchernichovsky 1950: 653),
translated by Israel Bartal.

Remote and distant, and yet so close

In his last poem, written in a Greek Orthodox monastery in Jerusalem in the summer of 1943, the great Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovsky (1875–1943) eloquently expounded in some dozens of lines his life experience. Watching the Mediterranean sky, the Ukrainian-born Zionist was reminded of his youth under the skies of Taurida, Crimea and Karelia. His self-examination while watching the Israeli sky brought to his mind views, memories, texts and ideas from the decades he had lived in Eastern Europe. After some twenty years of separation from his home country, the provinces in imperial Russia still remained intimately close, yet they had turned alien and even frightening. Tschernichovsky was one out of several thousands of East European Jewish intellectuals, poets, writers and historians who immigrated to the Land of Israel between 1880 and 2019.

All of them, regardless of date or place, have shared similar sentiments regarding their old countries. My thesis is that this was the case not only for the first generation of East European newcomers; many of those born in Israel (the 'second generation') have continued the ambivalent attitude towards their countries of origin, so beautifully alluded to by the Hebrew poet, myself included.

Historically speaking, Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe have been until very late in the modern era members of an old ethno-religious group that lived in a diverse multi-ethnic environment in two pre-First World War empires. Several decades of social, economic and political upheavals exposed the Jewish population to drastic changes (Bartal 2006: 17–31). These changes led those who left to look back at what had happened as both involved actors and distant observers. Hence, Israeli historians of East European origin

found themselves confronted with a crucial question: in what way was the past in the old country connected (if at all) to the history of Israel? Or to put it bluntly: how did subjects of the partitioned Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth who made up a large ethno-religious body of people end up founding a nation-state far away in the Middle East?

I am a Professor Emeritus at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I have studied the history of Eastern European Jewry for nearly half a century. My intellectual identity goes beyond my academic studies, however. It was formed, first and foremost, by my family background: born in a town in western Austro-Hungarian Galicia, my mother emigrated to Palestine with her widowed mother as a sixteen-year-old in 1935. My father hoped to leave the same town to emigrate to Australia in the summer of 1939, when he boarded a rickety vessel setting out from the Black Sea port of Constanța that May. He arrived, penniless, in Eretz Yisrael, losing the pictures of his family members along the way and leaving me with only one photograph of my grandfather and grandmother. In the fall of 1941, most of the town's Jews were shot dead, among them nearly all my paternal and maternal relatives. These dry facts make me one of the hundreds of thousands of Israelis whose personal life stories are interwoven with the collective biography of the Eastern European Jews who survived the end of the war.

I was born in the fall of 1946, the height of the struggle waged by the Jewish Yishuv's armed groups against the British, on a day when the British security forces had closed off the Jewish neighbourhoods of the 'First Hebrew City' (Tel Aviv). I was raised during the earliest years of the State of Israel in a small town east of its largest city, Tel Aviv. Yiddish, Polish, Russian, German, Hungarian and Romanian were the languages I heard on the street. At home my parents spoke Yiddish. The language of high culture that

the neighborhood's many Polish immigrants did their best to speak was German. When my parents wanted to keep some piece of information from their children, instead of Yiddish they spoke Polish – the language they had learned in school in Polish Galicia (now western Ukraine) in the 1920s and 1930s – with a thick Yiddish accent. We learned Hebrew at school and spoke it with our peers. Yet Eastern Europe was ever present in our memories, in the Zionist education system's instruction in Hebrew literature and in the culture of the youth movements. But at the same time, it nevertheless felt rejected, threatening, and the children of my generation, who had been born in Israel, sought to avoid it and everything it symbolised. Between 1948 and 1968, elementary school and high-school students continued to study the works of the Haskalah movement, the Jewish Enlightenment, in which Jewish life in Eastern Europe was depicted as piteous and disgusting.

The children and grandchildren of the founders of the Yishuv, unlike the early immigrants, were no longer plugged directly into the *shtetl* experience. They absorbed the spirit of the *shtetl* from the hostile Hebrew literature that their teachers, born in Eastern Europe, crammed into them in their Zionist schools. Accounts of the degeneracy and ugliness of Jewish society in the Pale of Settlement by Mendele Moykher Sforim (1836–1917), garnished with the neo-Romantic tales of I. L. Peretz (1852–1915, translated into Hebrew by Shimshon Melzer in the 1950s), bequeathed to several generations of Israeli pupils a cast of characters that was very far from the real world of Russia and Poland. Stereotypes originating in critiques of European Jewish life by exponents of the Haskalah movement were thus planted in the soil of the embryonic Israeli culture. Books in Hebrew served young Palestine-born *sabras* in the Mandate era and Israel's first decades as a wide bridge across which

knowledge and consciousness that had existed in Eastern Europe (or had been memorialised as if it had existed there) were brought to the evolving entity in the far-away Middle East.

Not until the late 1960s did Israeli schools move on from this Eastern European literature. This was a result, among other things, of the protests of high-schoolers themselves, who formed a movement called 'Nimrod' to oppose what they considered an archaic and 'exilic' curriculum.

Diametrically opposed to this negative image affixed to traditional Jewish society was the one Soviet cultural agents in the Land of Israel were able to imprint in the consciousness of my generation: the ideal 'world of tomorrow', a world many Israeli youngsters – whose parents had survived genocide in their lands of origin – saw taking shape around us. All of us (even those in political movements that were light-years away from socialism) grew fond of the revolutionary songs made common in the meetings of the youth movements: we didn't know the first thing about the terrible truth behind the magnificent, quasi-Messianic façade presented by the world's most sophisticated propaganda machine. Indeed, the two 'secular Messiahs' took hold of Israeli culture and shaped its politics: the national 'Messiah' and the social-radical 'Messiah' were connected and became one and the same. Moreover, they would prove difficult to separate from one another further along the intellectual path. The Soviet Union's part in the defeat of Nazi Germany was engrained in its favour within Israeli collective memory, and remained there even after the horrors of Soviet totalitarianism were known to the world.

It is a shocking historical fact that, though the cultural and political presence of the legacy of Eastern Europe was so strong and influential in Israel, there was almost no direct contact with the former homeland. I grew up in an Israel disconnected from Eastern Europe,

and not only geographically and historically: throughout much of the twentieth century, a nearly impenetrable curtain stood between Israel and these countries. The generation of young Israelis mentioned above, for example, was raised and educated on the products of Soviet culture (literature, children's books, poetry, film, records and the experience of youth movements in the Land of Israel), and absorbed large portions from its popular culture, but almost exclusively without any direct engagement with the actual realities of the Soviet Union or its satellite states.

I could not have known, while eagerly reading the heroic Soviet literature disseminated in Hebrew translation in the 1950s, that it was absolute propaganda. I do recall, in 1965, innocently approaching the cultural attaché of the Soviet embassy in Ramat Gan to ask for documentary materials on the Soviet Union in Hebrew for teaching purposes. I have yet to receive any response. Later I would learn that only activists in the Israeli Communist Party (Maki in its Hebrew acronym) could receive materials from the cultural attaché, since it was the only political faction recognised by the Soviet régime at the time. Nevertheless, officers' course cadets in the IDF at the time were required to read *Panfilov's Reserve* (Bek 1946), a half-fictional depiction of the victory of a Red Army division in a battle near Moscow written by the Soviet author Aleksander Bek. Unbeknownst to a soul in Israel, by 1948 a secret investigation by the Soviet Military Prosecutor had already determined the bulk of the book's details on this battle to be complete journalistic fabrications with no factual basis, not even the names of the participants.

Filled with imaginary memories from places I had never set foot in and beset by illusions about a 'world of tomorrow' that already did exist, I made my way to the Hebrew University in 1967, only a few weeks after the Six-Day War. Jerusalem was then the undisputed

academic capital of the young state. The Israeli historiography I met in Jerusalem was a product of several migrations – of people, of ideas and of memories. These were post-crisis migrations: post-revolutionary, post-war, post-Holocaust. In this new place where they arrived with no intention of returning, the immigrants immortalised a memory of Eastern Europe, one that became further and further disconnected not only from the destroyed and annihilated past, but also from the ongoing events in their lands of origin. Between the two world wars, Jewish academics left their homelands in large numbers

and, while many others were not so lucky, many were scattered around the academic world between New York, Oxford and Jerusalem. A large group of young Jews, graduates of the *gymnasia* of Eastern Europe who had been issued immigration permits by the British Mandate government, began studying at the Hebrew University in the late 1930s.

Several of these students, whose lives had effectively been saved by this move, would become my teachers in the 1960s. Several professors who taught at the Jerusalem campus had better Polish or Russian than Hebrew or English. Their intellectual world had been shaped first and foremost in a Polish *gymnasium* or Soviet high school. They were exposed



Front cover of the Hebrew translation of A. Bek's pro-Soviet book

to schools of thought developed in England and the United States only when, after years in Palestine, they pursued advanced degrees at universities in the West. During the winter of 1967, the voices of the pre-eminent historians trained at the best Central and Eastern European universities could still be heard ringing through the lecture halls and seminar rooms. These historians, in their teaching and research, inculcated in their Jerusalemite students much of the early-twentieth-century historiographical tradition that dealt with the border region between the Germans and Slavs.

There is no better example of the impact of these founding fathers on Israeli historiography than the 'transplantation' of research on German military orders that settled in Slavic territories onto the research on the Land of Israel. Professor Richard Koebner (1885–1958), one of the founders of the history department at the Hebrew University, after being forced to abandon his position at the University of Breslau (Wrocław) in 1934 with the Nazi rise to power, found a position as professor at the new campus on Mount Scopus. One of his finest students, Joshua Praver (1917–1990), was born in Będzin, Poland, a graduate of a Polish *gymnasium* who came to Jerusalem as a student with an immigration permit from the Mandate

authorities. He is regarded today as one of the founding figures in research on the Crusades in Israel.¹ Prawer describes in his short autobiographical sketch how Professor Koebner suggested ‘transplanting’ research on the Teutonic crusaders who settled in Poland onto his study of the Crusader colonisation of the Holy Land (Prawer 1990).



Hebrew University Mt Scopus campus, before 1948

Most of my teachers on Mount Scopus were of Prawer’s generation. In the hallways, behind their backs, they earned the titled ‘the Polish mafia’. Among the teachers of Jewish history were those who persisted in variations of the radical-national tradition of research on Eastern European Jewry that had flourished in Poland and the Baltic countries between the two world wars. The lectures and seminars they taught in history, literature, Hebrew, Yiddish and other humanities offered us an intellectual path into Eastern Europe. At the time, this was a replacement for the actual historical and geographical journey between the imagined Old Country so engrained in the collective consciousness of our little Mediterranean land and the actual times and places of Eastern Europe before the Holocaust.

The semi-permeable Iron Curtain

The waves of Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe that swamped the fledgling State of

1 Prawer’s major works in the field: *Histoire du royaume latin de Jérusalem* (1969); *The Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem: European Colonialism in the Middle Ages* (1972); *The World of the Crusaders* (1972); *The History of the Jews in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem* (1988).

Israel had an enormous impact on the nascent national culture. They brought to the country hundreds of thousands of expatriates from Warsaw, Vilnius, Odessa and other towns where the new Hebrew culture, the offshoots of which had been replanted in the Middle East, had taken shape. This population of Jews, however, was differ-

ent, distinct from the generation of David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973), Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880–1940) and Ber Borochov (1881–1917). The immigrants who streamed from Eastern Europe to Israel after the end of the Second World War did not resemble, in their demographic makeup and social nature, the members of the 1881–1939 migrations that had set the New Yishuv in motion. In historical terms, one may divide post-Second World War immigration to Israel into two cultural and linguistic stages: the ‘Polish’ stage, mainly 1949–68, and the ‘Russian’ stage, starting a few years after the Six-Day War. Between the 1940s and the 1970s, most of those reaching Israel were refugees who had been displaced during the war and the Holocaust and had lost relatives and property, and their social and cultural underpinnings. Nearly all of them, after emerging from the Israeli melting pot, joined political and cultural systems that their counterparts from earlier *aliyot* had established.

Although Polish and Russian were common vernaculars in Israeli towns and villages in the 1950s and 1960s, the cultural baggage that the new arrivals had brought received neither prestige nor recognition from the establishment. Many Holocaust refugees in Eastern

Europe had returned from the USSR to Poland in the mid-1950s, and nearly all members of this group came from areas that the Russian Empire controlled until after the First World War – the interwar nation-states that the empire, in its Soviet incarnation, re-annexed. In fledgling Israel, no influential mass movements or large political parties came into being that preached the preservation of the East European linguistic and cultural legacy (in contrast with the large emigration destinations in Western Europe and the Americas). Nor did additional political parties emerge that expressed a secular messianic vision in the spirit of the human engineering that the Enlightenment heritage, in its radical East European metamorphosis, advocated. Just the same, writers and poets in Israel continued to nurture their culture and language and write in Yiddish and Polish without striving to earn official state recognition. In the Tel Aviv of my childhood it was still possible to imagine that one was in interwar Warsaw.

The image of Eastern Europe that runs through my historical research was shaped in large part by encounters with the different generations of its emigrants. Throughout the history of immigration to the young State of Israel I spoke of earlier, those who left that world behind (or their progeny) periodically encountered those who had stayed behind, and joined a few years later. When the Red Army repressed the Hungarian uprising in the fall of 1956, for example, thousands of Jews fled to Western countries. Many of them came to Israel. A couple of months later, the new Polish party secretary, Władysław Gomułka, permitted Jews to leave the country if their destination was Israel. Some 35,000 Jews, including many from the Soviet Union who were former Polish citizens, emigrated. Overnight, this added scores of Eastern Europeans to the small community in the State of Israel, where more than half the population was already made up

of immigrants – refugees who had arrived a few years earlier from the transit camps housing the survivors of the Holocaust in Central Europe and in Cyprus, from the countries of the Mediterranean basin and from the post-Second World War ‘People’s democracies’. The surviving members of my father’s family, who had found refuge in the Soviet Union during the war, arrived in Israel in early 1957. The large Polish- and Hungarian-speaking contingents in Israel increased by a significant number. A further wave of immigration, smaller in number, came in 1968 with the increasingly anti-semitic tendencies of the Polish authorities.

Immigration from the USSR from the 1970s onwards, meanwhile, brought to Israel nearly a million people who were second-, third- or fourth-generation carriers of Russian culture – an imperial culture in Soviet guise. The huge numbers of Russophone immigrants who adhered to the language and culture, with which they identified, acted collectively to vitiate the discourse of the Hebrew-Zionist political culture that had enjoyed hegemonic status in Israel’s early years.

Most Israeli academics specialising in the study of Eastern Europe – both those dealing with the history of Jews in those regions and those working on other topics – took it upon themselves, soon after the founding of the state, to maintain some connection to the large Jewish community located behind the Iron Curtain. As historians who identified to some degree with the ideas of the Jewish national movement, our connection with that community went without saying. I, too, took an active part in this initiative, which operated almost exclusively through secretive channels until the late 1980s. The opening of the Soviet Union to selective emigration in the early 1970s contributed to projects of collection, documentation, and research on contemporary East European Jews. Among these, particularly remarkable was a wide-ranging initiative to

survey the Soviet print media for information regarding Jews.²

In 1988, the first issue of a new scholarly, peer-reviewed English-language journal, *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe*, appeared. This was published by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem until 2008. It enjoyed a respected reputation in the field of East European Jewish studies. At the same time, an industry of Russian-language publications meant for underground distribution among millions of Soviet Jews continued to grow. A significant quantity of this material consisted of reprints of the best historiographical literature from the period predating the Bolshevik Revolution, as well as translations of the best contemporary Israeli historiography. Tens of thousands of copies of these essays, printed on especially thin paper as pocket-sized books, reached the Soviet Union. Especially worth mentioning in this regard is the Russian translation/adaptation of the classic collective essay written by my teachers from the Zionist school of historiography (the Jerusalem School).³ *A History of the Jewish People*, published in Hebrew in 1969, was being read in the Soviet Union no later than 1972 by many people, in the form of an 872-page Russian text (Эттингер 1972)! Students in Jerusalem called this 'the Red Book' not because of the political leanings of its authors, but rather because of its binding, a red not so different from another booklet known by the same name, the collection of Chairman Mao quotations that millions of Chinese were memorising at just this time. When I arrived in Moscow after the collapse

2 Jews and Jewish Topics in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, 1985–92.

3 The Jerusalem School emerged simultaneously in Germany and the Russian Empire. Its founders moved to Palestine in the 1920s. For critical studies on Zionist historiography in Palestine/Israel see Shmucll 1986: 147–78; Myers 2009: 389–406.

of the Soviet regime, I saw a copy of this Israeli Red Book in the private library of a colleague.⁴ A few years later, chapters from this Red Book were required reading in the history classes I taught at Moscow State University.

For Israelis, a further stage in the loosening of the Iron Curtain (at least as far as historical research was concerned) came in the late 1970s. At the time, relatively free scientific meetings were permitted between Israeli scholars and their colleagues in Poland and Hungary, leading to the first initiatives to hold joint scientific conferences for those on both sides of the Iron Curtain. At the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, a centre for the study of Polish Jewry and its culture was founded and worked energetically to institutionalise these scientific contacts. Two conferences that began what would become a series of academic meetings that continue to this day⁵ were held not in Israel or in Eastern Europe, but in the USA and England.⁶ In the spring of 1984, only a few years before the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, I set foot for the first time behind the Iron Curtain. A large group of historians and scholars of Jewish literature and culture from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, many of whom had participated in these conferences at Oxford and Columbia, organised a journey to Poland to meet colleagues at the universities of Warsaw and Krakow. Most members

4 His forbidden books had been kept hidden for decades behind thick volumes of editions of the complete works of classic Russian literature.

5 See the recently published comprehensive chronological description and analysis of the renewal of academic contacts between Israel and Poland in the field of Jewish studies (Polonsky *et al.* 2018: xi–lvi).

6 Poles and Jews, Myth and Reality in the Historical Context, Columbia University, March 1983; Polish-Jewish Relations in Modern History, Oxford University, September 1984.

of the delegation had been born in Eastern Europe and emigrated to Palestine before the Second World War, or had survived the horrors of the Holocaust and arrived in the young State of Israel. They included the great scholar of Yiddish literature Professor Chone Shmeruk (1921–97), who escaped a bombed-out Warsaw in September 1939 and spent the war years in the Soviet Union; the scholar of Hebrew literature Professor Shmuel Werses (1915–2010), a native of Vilnius who came to Jerusalem as a student in the 1930s; and the Holocaust scholar Israel Gutman (1923–2013), once a member of Hashomer Hatzair youth group in Warsaw, where he fought in the Ghetto uprising and came to Palestine as a ‘pioneer’ and founding member of a kibbutz in the far north, on the Syrian border. No Polish visas were stamped in our Israeli passports, which was *de rigueur* in the dictatorships of Eastern Europe under the authority of the Soviet superpower. We were placed under constant surveillance by unidentified individuals, and even our hosts’ apprehension was apparent in their cautious words.

When I first set foot on Polish soil, it occurred to me that each generation of Eastern European émigré (whether they were born there or were raised by parents from Poland, Ukraine or Belarus) experiences its return to the uprooted past differently. I myself could not actually remember anything from the Old Country of my parents. The landscapes may have been familiar to me from fading, yellowed photographs. Everything I touched or smelled was familiar, again, merely from what I had heard or read. My senior colleagues, who were born and raised in that world and cut off from it for several decades, were astounded at the gap between what they remembered and what they encountered. As I write this, I recall the writings of those who, long before me, returned from Palestine to the homelands of their childhood, for example the words of

David Green (Ben-Gurion), born in Płońsk, Poland, who would become the first prime minister of the State of Israel. Now a young and ambitious leader in Palestine, he had left the tsarist empire several years before its fall and returned in 1923, as a temporary guest, to a Soviet Union taking its very first steps. In his diary he described his encounter with the magnitude of the change undergone by Jewish society across only a few years of war and revolution, his Zionist-socialist point of view serving as a filter, organising, sorting and interpreting every moment (Ben-Gurion 1971: 220 ff.).⁷

Likewise, many men and women left the Soviet Union shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution and returned, this time to Moscow, on diplomatic missions in the late 1940s. In their writings one also finds a convergence of shock at the enormous scale of change in the regions of their birth, with signs of the intellectual-political layer in which they packaged the experience of their visit. The senior colleagues with whom I travelled to Poland in 1984 were no different. Meeting directly what remained of the great destruction – of people, organisations, streets and buildings – laid bare before me the painful force and full meaning of the term ‘genocide’. Still more painful was the unbearable shape of the memory of millions of Polish citizens of Jewish descent murdered during the war, as transmitted by the political and cultural discourse fostered by the state.

Academic cooperation with Polish colleagues and institutions developed quickly. A large international conference devoted to Jewish history was held in the summer of 1986, the first of its kind on Polish territory.⁸ Some

7 For a recent evaluation of Ben Gurion’s 1923 trip to the Soviet Union see Segev 2018: 174–9.

8 Jewish Autonomy in Pre-Partition Poland, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, September 1986.

Nearly all of the hundreds of thousands of émigrés from the imperial territories, offspring of the largest Jewish collective in the world, today reside in Israel, North America and Western Europe.

Thus, as had happened a hundred years earlier, a new Jewish diaspora consisting of immigrants from Eastern Europe has formed in the West and in Israel. The cultural legacy that the masses of post-Soviet émigrés brought from Eastern Europe to the new destination countries has added another tile to the mosaic of Jewish identities at the dawn of the twenty-first century. It is a diverse multilingual and multicultural mosaic. Some of its main roots hearken to centuries of Polish and/or Russian-Jewish experience in Vilnius, Krakow, Warsaw, Moscow, St Petersburg, Kiev, Odessa and Minsk. Within this mosaic, the Eastern European community in the Middle Eastern nation-state continues to carry the residues of the culture of vanished empires.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, all the dams broke at once: within a few years, Israeli historians (myself included) were examining archives and libraries throughout Eastern Europe. After seven decades of isolation between Israeli historians and the primary sources necessary to their research in the archives of Warsaw, Prague, St Petersburg and Moscow, the new wave of documents was celebrated in Jerusalem and in Tel Aviv. This was a multi-period and multi-disciplinary eruption: eighteenth-century community minute books last examined by scholars of Simon Dubnow's generation were simply placed in front of us, especially as we grew accustomed to the working methods of archivists who, now free from the constraints of a totalitarian regime, changed their institutional customs rather more slowly.

Alongside these documents from the distant past, the protocols of Jewish political parties from the days of the raging storm before

and during the eruption of revolutions in 1917 – they had been confiscated in the early days of Soviet rule and locked away for generations – were also exposed. The fall of the walls that separated the community of historians in the West from the objects of their research in the East, therefore, made for a true revolution with regards to the availability of source materials. I will never forget the great excitement that gripped my Israeli colleagues, military historians, when the Czech military made available to them, without any limitations, archival materials from the days of the Israeli War of Independence (1948–9). Documents we had not dared to dream of – including detailed information on what took place behind the scenes on the Soviet side – landed on our desks in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Matters to do with the history of political parties, movements and military organisations that played a decisive role in the development of the Yishuv in Palestine came to light, and what had been considered secret and inexplicable became common topics for theses written by graduate students at Israeli universities.

Yet far more influential was the revolution prompted by the collapse of the Soviet giant on the historical perspective from which Israeli historians could now examine twentieth-century Jewish history. The fall of this, the *second* totalitarian regime to nearly destroy the largest community of Jews in the world (the *first*, of course, being the German National Socialist regime), made painfully visible a further chapter in a centuries-old history. While the Soviet Union stood, there were those who continued believing – on the basis of political beliefs regarding the ongoing presence of Jews as a distinct ethnic group within a multi-national empire – that there was a future for the millions of Jews living in Eastern Europe. What happened in 1989 has seemed, to some historians, a breaking point marking the end of the Eastern European period in the course of Jewish history.

Against the background of the collapse of the totalitarian regimes came the prospect of reviving the formidable historical research that, in Russia, had wilted with the revolutions and almost disappeared within a decade of 1917. Where these traditions did survive elsewhere in Eastern Europe, they were severely damaged during the Second World War and survived only in a limited, official and supervised capacity within the 'people's democracies'. The students of the students of the historians from the period before the Second World War, who saw themselves as regenerating an extinct historiographical project, strove to some degree to come full circle, returning to prewar topics. Israeli and Western scholars more or less identified with the national perspective on cultural research mobilised in pursuit of this idea, which today seems to me somewhat naive and devoid of any connection to the post-Soviet cultural reality. They were joined by scholars from the leading universities of the former Soviet Union. These scholars were the first to initiate a renewal of scientific research, instruction and publication in the Russian language.

Between 1998 and 2003, I took part in editing a scholarly publication in Russian, *Vestnik*, published by the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the State University of Moscow (MGU). I concurrently headed the Judaic Studies programme that opened at Moscow. Now located in that part of the world from which my parents had been uprooted more than eighty years ago, researching, instructing and overseeing academic publications, I followed the post-Soviet demographic, social and cultural trends impacting the Jewish community closely.

Changing perspectives, new modes

Let me share with you some of my thoughts regarding the impact of 1989 on the future of Jewish historiography. I have no doubt that

the critical historian who travels through the provinces he is studying is equipped with tools that enable him to question the currently accepted image(s) of the past. The image of the past, either dictated by the regime or directed by the market, challenges the historian's individual sense of 'space' and of 'time'. The historian strives to see and understand the different layers of the historical process without allowing those who control the upper layer – the newest one, chronologically speaking – to determine his understanding of what was. Moreover, an 'outsider' historian, who knows a story of the history of the Jews in Eastern Europe completely different from the one(s) being told today in Russia or in Poland, cannot stand patiently by in the face of the gaps between these stories.

Why is the Jewish historian so reluctant to buy current images of the past? Surely it is due to his or her sobering observation that *ideology* has impacted Jewish history in ways no one could foresee. In the early twentieth century, Jews of various political parties strove to realise a variety of political visions of the future. Zionists disagreed with members of the Bund and the Orthodox struggled with the liberals. Each prophesied a version of the future – but not a single one of the long-forgotten visions of those different camps alone can explain the totality of what ended up transpiring. Nevertheless, many historians (my Jerusalem professors included), studying the overwhelming changes undergone by the Jewish community in the twentieth century, have often been tempted (and remain so) to see in it the realisation of one or another of those past visions. This is because the national ideologies and the political radicalism of the aforementioned political strains in fact established modern historical research into the past of Eastern European Jewry.

The whole range of Jewish political movements was formed within the course of a few

years, around the turn of the twentieth century, and promptly attracted thousands of Jews in the multi-ethnic empires. Such growth was built in no small part by new historical research, and at the same time fostered and fed such research. On the eve of the First World War a diverse historiography in German, Russian, Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew was flourishing in unprecedented scope and quality. Branches of this political-minded historiography reached the coasts of America and the cultural centres of the renewed Yishuv in Palestine. I myself was effectively a member of the third generation of the branch of Jewish historiography that spread to Jaffa and to Jerusalem from St Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, Warsaw and Lviv.

There was a heavy scholarly price to be paid for the love affair between historiography and politics that sprouted from the Jewish intellectual circles of Eastern Europe: ideology often trumped critical examination of historical sources. Moreover, several of the ideological assumptions inherent in the writing of this new history (whether national, social-radical or both national and radical in various combinations) were engaged in a dangerous dialogue with the political tendencies taking shape between the Revolution of 1905 and the formation of the Communist regimes after the Second World War. From the mid-nineteenth century to 1989, research into the history of the Jews in Eastern Europe, beginning with the partitions of Poland in the late eighteenth century, was bent to adhere to expressly teleological – at times quasi-messianic – political narratives. To the great detriment of various ethnic groups living in the region, there were those who sought to turn these narratives into facts on the ground: in this way, the political messiahs rose up against both their creators and their believers, in addition to those who had rejected their visions or challenged them by their very existence.

Sober historical examination of what the Jews of Eastern Europe underwent with the rise and the fall of the political regimes that decided their fate throughout the twentieth century relies, in the opinion of a veteran Jerusalemite historian like me, upon complete separation from teleological narratives. Such a separation was made possible for the first time with the fall of the Soviet Union, which took place alongside the decline of the ‘grand narratives’ of Western historiography.

It is not my intention to propose a ‘revolt’ against the Jerusalem historical school, the one guided by the Zionist meta-narrative. I hope rather to advance another interpretation of this historiographical tradition. The history of Eastern European Jewry as it is taught and researched today – thirty years after the fall of the totalitarian regimes – ought to be written not from the teleological-messianic perspective of one who purports to predict the future but from that of the historian recognising that *what has transpired has already transpired*. My understanding is that what transpired in Jewish history had very little to do with the all-knowing versions of the future that messianic long-forgotten visionaries had once preached, and which prophets of doom had once foreseen as a certainty. In other words, the time has come for historical research to moderate, as much as possible, both its eagerness and urge towards *determinism*, and the tyranny of the *anachronistic*.

For me as a veteran Jerusalemite historian returning to the provinces of his research thirty years after the fall of the Soviet Empire, the contemporary reality is the starting point for my understanding of the historical narrative of Eastern European Jewry. What has transpired in this part of the continent over the past three decades seems to me to mark the almost complete end of a nearly nine-hundred-year-old chapter in the history of the Jewish people: a people that had existed as an ethno-religious

body for several centuries, well into early twentieth century, but hardly survived the challenges of modernity in the last hundred years. One of the most obvious conclusions to draw from this interpretation is to recognise that – though hundreds of thousands of Jews may live in this area – that what was the largest and most important Jewish community in the world until 1939 reached its final phase in 1989. What remains is but a modest epilogue, not necessarily a continuation, of a magnificent but settled history.

Thirty years after the disintegration of the USSR, the time has come for a new historiographic mode. Mass emigration and a dramatic depletion of the Jewish population of Eastern Europe have changed previous conventional perspectives. The historian has to cope with the post-Soviet experience, in a time when hundreds of thousands of immigrants from what was the largest Eastern European Jewish collective in the world inhabit a remote Middle Eastern nation-state.

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