

Jewish Poland Between the Wars (and Forever)

POYLN: MY LIFE WITHIN JEWISH LIFE IN POLAND, SKETCHES AND IMAGES

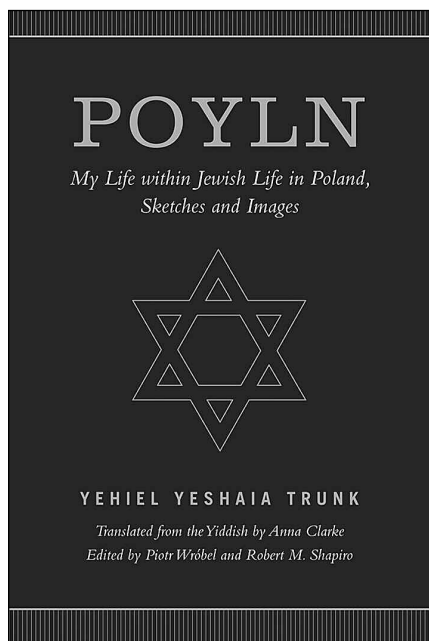
Yehiel Yeshaia Trunk. Translated from the Yiddish by Anna Clarke. Edited by Piotr Wróbel and Robert M. Shapiro. University of Toronto Press, 2007, 167 pp.

Reviewed by Marty Roth

Yehiel Yeshaia Trunk was a prominent Yiddish critic and novelist who came to maturity in the interwar years in Poland, and *Poyln* is the first volume of his lengthy memoir to be translated into English. *Paradisus Judeorum* through the mid-seventeenth century, Trunk's Poland is still the great good place for Jews. In the bucolic towns and countryside of his remembered homeland there is not a whisper of anti-Semitism; Jews abound, both very poor and very rich, and the latter are celebrated by peasants and adored by their solicitous gentile servants.

There is no foreshadowing of the Holocaust (at least in this first volume), and no sense of Poland's active industrialization. Almost no waves of social unrest cross over from Russia, even though Trunk was a lifelong socialist—more uniquely, he was a rich socialist. Still, as in most East European Yiddish fiction, his world is split between the religious countryside and the rationalist cities, between the rabbinical asceticism of his father's family and the capitalist affluence of his mother's; and, more generally, between asceticism and Hasidism, scholarly study and drunkenness and dancing.

Although he was a successful businessman by day, Trunk wrote and published much criticism and fiction in Poland, and much more later in America. *Poyln* is his great work; running to seven volumes, it has been called "a folk epic" and a



"*comédie humaine*." Trunk began it two days after he arrived penniless in New York after an odyssey through Vilna, Siberia and Japan, and finished it ten years later. It is a rich evocation of the lost world of diasporic Jewry, a testament and a gravestone. It is also the story of the decline of the old Jewish aristocracy and the rise of a new secular and socialist Jewishness.

One critic has speculated that *Poyln* represents Trunk finally making his way back to the authenticity of Sholem Aleichem. In Trunk's original literary home, the Peretz circle, Sholem Aleichem had been scorned as a petit-bourgeois humourist, but the Russian-Yiddish author allowed Trunk to realize the proper form and tone for capturing Jewish Poland. It is hard to base such an assessment on this slim first volume, but there is enough here to allow me to assent to that judgement.

Like *Tristram Shandy*, *Poyln* is

an autobiography without an "I." Trunk is barely born in the first volume in which he nevertheless relates the intimate lives of his grandparents and great-grandparents in detail. Elsewhere he praises the novelistic practice of having the history of heroes start in their mother's womb as the writer of the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau did with his main characters. Such a memoir is given a heartbreaking edge by the understanding that in a few years most of these people will be imprisoned or dead and their goods, so richly described, abandoned or stolen.

Poyln is also an ethnography and a family chronicle: the first volume takes one slowly through the maternal and paternal genealogy, the great rabbis and powerful landowners who married and bore children and eventually produced Y. Y. Trunk. All the relatives are present in colourful, often grotesque, detail—Talmudists, wild Hasidic revelers, and, in a shrouded balcony slightly off the main stage, their wives and daughters. The narrative is sometimes too thick with family names and titles.

However, the book most resembles a *kermis* or peasant wedding, a North European genre of painting most notably represented by Pieter Breugel—a picture of peasant merry-making—and it is presented in the festive caricatural style common to that tradition. This is because the incredibly lavish wedding of Trunk's parents takes up over two-thirds of the volume. The most fascinating sections are those detailing the additional wedding feasts given for the poor and the beggars of the neighbourhood. A wedding is what the book is, and it ends in dancing: the great in-laws all dance together at the end of the sabbath and the wedding.

Although the painter whom Trunk alludes to is Rembrandt, not Breugel, the distressing side of Polish Jewry is only hinted at in passing, mainly in the form of

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- munity (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
- iii The foregoing is based on my many years of participation in B'nai Brith.
- iv See Wikipedia entry on Joseph Ben-Ami.
- v Marci McDonald, "Stephen Harper and the Theo-Cons," *Walrus*, Oct 2006.
- vi Tim Shufelt, "When Lobbyists Speak in Tongues," *Ottawa Citizen*, April 12, 2008.
- vii The basic doctrines are nicely laid out by Bill Moyers
Journal, www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/1005207/profile.html
- viii John Howarth, "Christians United for Israel: A New Call to Put God's Word into Action," *Evangelical Christian Magazine*, February-March 2007, p. 29.
- ix Dean Bye, "Weathering the Times," on website of Return Ministries, www.return.co.il/article3/html
- x Rick Kardonne, "Israel Cannot Pull Out Anymore, Pastor Declares," *Jewish Tribune*, May 21, 2008.
- xi John Tweedie, "Why Israel? What Time Is It?," *Evangelical Christian Magazine*, January-February 2008, p. 18.
- xii See CUFI website or www.campus-watch.org/article/id/5102
- xiii For "sex with 14 year olds" see *Evan-*

- gelical Christian Magazine*, November-December, 2007, p18. On McVety and film censorship see Ian Austen, "Tax Bill Fuels a Canadian Debate on Film Censorship," *New York Times*, May 3, 2008. On McVety's social conservative activism see Dennis Gruending, "McVety, Charles - Evangelical Heavyweight Roams in Harper's Halls of Power," www.harperindex.ca/viewarticle.cfm?ref.00144
- xiv Adina Klein, "ROM's exhibit is 'sugar coating' Darwin's theory, McVety charges," *Jewish Tribune*, June 17, 2008. The story by Brianna Goldberg, "Protesters Rail Against Darwin Exhibition," *National Post*, June 13, 2008, showed critical awareness of McVety's charges and noted the critical reviews of the film.
- xv Ann Porter, "The Harper Government: Towards a New Social Order," *Dawn Ontario*, May 22, 2006/
- xvi Here I take issue with Marci McDonald, Gruending and others who believe that Harper is more directly tied to the Christian Right. He may indeed share some of their social conservative outlook but he keeps his distance from them. Jason Kenney is his point man

- in keeping cordial relations with both the Jewish and Christian rightists. Whether a Harper majority government would deliver on the Christian right social agenda is an open question. Certainly, however, he does deliver on Israel.
- xvii Tonda MacCharles, "Rae Objects to Harper's Smear," *The Star*, May 10, 2008.
- xviii The Jewish right has cultivated this alliance with American dispensationalists for many years, but it was late in coming to Canada. See Colin Shindler, "Likud and the Christian Dispensationalists: A Symbiotic Relationship," *Israel Studies*, Vol. 5, #1, 2000, pp. 153-182.
- xix Colette Avital, "They Only Appear to Be Supporters," *Haaretz*, June 3, 2008. Eric Yoffie, "Christian Zionism? Is it Good for North American Jews and Good for Israel? CCAR April 2, 2008. <www.urjorg/articlesindex.cfm?id.19553>.
- xx Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend*, (Baker Academic, 2004) excerpt on www.beliefnet.com/story/151/story_15165.html

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male madness and patriarchal abuse. As opposed to the insatiable sexual appetites in the work of his friend Isaac Bashevis Singer (Bashevis suggested that the title character in his story "Gimpel the Fool" was based on Trunk), Trunk is reluctant to talk about sexuality, even though he expatiates in great detail on how difficult it was to get his mother's wedding dress on her. *Poyln* takes place in an extremely patriarchal world where husbands and wives are usually locked in bitter conflict or estrangement and male prodigies are extravagantly worshipped.

Poyln inaugurates a new series on Jewish Poland at the University of Toronto Press, and even in translation the book moves to the sweet inflections of Yiddish thought and phrasing. There are a few infelicitous constructions, a few typos; I wish that the scholarly notes were devoted to something more historical and contextual than the location of place names and definitions of terms of Jewish belief and ritual. The translator, Anna Clarke, is an Emeritus Professor of Carleton University. ♦

Jottings by Sylvia Friedman

Well, Summer has finally arrived here on the West Coast, thankfully making life a lot more pleasant. And since it's time to think about vacation, lucky for me there isn't very much to tell you.

* First off, we would like to apologize to all our contributors who met the deadline for this issue but do not appear in these pages. We found ourselves with an abundance of riches and were really hard-put to decide whether to publish a double-sized issue or postpone printing a number of articles to the next issue. Unfortunately, our budget made the decision for us, and we had to choose the latter option. This definitely was a case of the Yiddish expression: *A khisor, di kaleh iz tsu sheyn* (A fault, the Bride is too beautiful!)

* We received a nice little note from ABE PADOLSKY'S son BARRY. Abe, formerly from Winnipeg, has been living in Ottawa for the last several years. Barry writes, "*Outlook* is amazingly good! I read excerpts to my father ... who was 100 years old on March 2, 2008." And as my mother would say, *keyn ayn-hore*. We wish you good health, Abe, *biz a hundert-untsvantik-yor!*

* BEA LEVIS of Toronto, who is one of the most active people we know, was forced to take a leave of absence in order to have a hip operation, and we are happy to report that it was successful. Husband TERRI thought it would be a good idea to take a rest at the same time, and had a fall which landed him in the hospital as well, but unfortunately, not in the same hospital, thus forcing their daughters KIM and DONA to run from one bedside to another. We wish you ALL a speedy recovery!

And we understand that BEN SHEK also had a misshap and broke his upper arm, but happily, not so badly so that he can still manage to use his computer. I hope your arm mends quickly, Ben.

* It has come to our attention that our readers in the United States did not receive their January-February 2008 issues of *Outlook*. It seems that the whole kit and caboodle got misplaced or lost somewhere, so we will be mailing out replacement copies shortly.

Have a great summer, at least what's left of it. Bye for now!

Sylvia