A Whimsical Pen-Portrait of the Artists, Scholars and Farmers of Lithuania

Profiles of a Lost World
By Hirsz Abramowicz
Wayne State, 385 pages, $39.95.

By ALLAN NADLER

Among the extraordinary moments during the pope’s visit to Israel last month, perhaps the most poignant was the meeting with his descendants from the Polish town of Wadowice. A small group of elderly survivors from Wadowice reminisced with Pope John Paul II about such ordinary things as playing soccer, copying homework and—remarkably—convincing their fathers to take the future “Holy Father” along with them to hear the great Warsaw cantor, Moshé Koussevitzky, perform in Wadowice’s central synagogue.

The enormity of what was lost in Europe is often best captured in precisely such quotidian reminiscences of what once was. And few books offer a richer kaleidoscope of pre-war Jewish civilization in Eastern Europe than Hirsz Abramowicz’s 1950s Yiddish masterpiece, “Parshenot Gezikot” (Vanished Figures). This collection of memoirs, historical essays, biographical sketches and ethnographic studies of 20th-century Lithuanian Jewry is now finally available in English, largely a result of the determination of the author’s daughter, Dina Abramowicz, who for 40 years was YIVO’s senior reference librarian, until her death earlier this month. She conceived the project, meticulously edited the translation and guided it to publication.

Although this is not an autobiographical work, virtually all of the essays are informed by Hirsz Abramowicz’s unusual life. The son of farmers, raised in the tiny village of Wysoki Dwor (the subject of the essay “A Lithuanian Shetel”), Abramowicz eventually left the family farm for Vilna—the Jerusalem of Lithuania—a city of rabbis, Jewish intellectuals, cultural leaders and political revolutionaries. The profound and lasting impact upon Abramowicz of growing up on a Jewish farm is captured in his daughter’s stirring biographical sketch, “My Father’s Life and Work.” The book combines whimsical memoirs of Jewish farms and shetel folk with meticulous studies of Jewish academies, scholars, artists and revolutionaries, from a quirky description of the many uses to which the simple Lithuanian Jewish village could put a potato (including such curious creations as bondes, shekhukht and krasnik) to an appreciation of the work of the great Vilna sculptor Mark Antokolsky to a hilariously absurd analysis of nicknames in the shetel (e.g., Leybi the Head, Sholem the Jacket and Itche the Chatterbox) and a portrait of the great Judaica librarian Haykal Lanuki.

There are also eyewitness accounts of events in Jewish cultural and political history—from being imprisioned in Harrassov to meeting the great Hebrew and Yiddish literary figures of the day—that furnish important original material for Jewish historians. In his descriptive account of an evening in Odessa honoring the great Yiddish writer L.L. Peretz, Abramowicz paraphrases the many speakers who rose to praise him. Of particular interest here is the multilingual and multicultiral nature of the Odessa Jewish intellectual class in attendance. Abramowicz describes speeches delivered in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. But, Yiddishist though he was, Abramowicz reserves special praise for Hayyim Nahman Bialik’s Hebrew remarks: “At the evening in honor of Peretz, the young Bialik astonished all the participants with his speech, which was both profound and poetic, almost prophetic. The provincial young man disappeared and the fiery mountain stood before us in the person of Bialik, the great poet...The Hebrew he spoke was almost Biblical...Bialik’s address was a masterpiece.”

Abramowicz’s rendering of Peretz’s acknowledgements on that occasion is also worth citing:

In his response — which was delivered, strange as it may seem today, in Russian—Peretz began by joking that he had been praised...for the heavens and the earth...for the sun and for the cellar.

One commentator found his work to be nationalistic, another saw it as internationalistic; one found it religious, another heretical, and so on. This was not quite right. He was a Jew, and he directed his attention wherever he saw Jews. A writer should not be the product of a political party or class. He must be sensitive to every phenomenon in the life of his people. He should react to everything that is great and beautiful in the community for which he writes.

Here it seems that Abramowicz is speaking as much for himself as for Peretz. The book offers a rich variety of essays on great many aspects of Lithuanian Jewish culture and history while offering only rare and very brief glimpses of the author’s own beliefs or ideology. Abramowicz’s most original contribution to Jewish social history is, without a doubt, his evocative portrayal of rural Jewish life. Given his upbringing, Abramowicz had a deeply personal interest in precisely those rural Jews whom Jewish historiography has largely forgotten: the yishuvniks, or isolated farmers. In a series of ethnographic sketches on the occupations, diet and folkways of these rural Jews, he captures a Jewish world that flourished beyond both big city and shetel, until the trauma of World War I and the drastic dislocation that followed.

The English rendering of Abramowicz’s rich Yiddish prose is generally smooth and faithful to the original. Yet, there are periodic reminders that the translator, like even the most skilled Yiddishists of this generation, does not bear the full trove of the tradition that Abramowicz and the Jews of his generation carried so naturally. So, for example, the Yiddish expression “dsheyn in taf,” which refers specifically to a Jew’s poor pronunciation of the Hebrew prayers, is incorrectly translated as “weak in Jewish knowledge.” A cryptic reference to “zitei lynus,” a series of biblical verses that are recited responsively on Simchas Torah before the scrolls are removed from the ark, is simply left untranslated. Numerous references to biblical and talmudic stories are not properly noted and explained. So, when Abramowicz states that for Lithuanian Jews, the potato was like the biblical manna, what he certainly had in mind was the midrashic tradition that the manna was so adaptable it took on the taste of whatever the Israelites most desired at the moment they were eating it. Abramowicz’s references to the expression in Belarusia directed at the Jewish inksters, “Let it be as Sara said,” refers to God’s advice to Abraham to accede to Sara’s demand to banish Ishmael from his “inn.” Unfortunately, there are more than a few such examples of the author’s intent being lost in cultural translation and left unexplained in the notes.

The Yiddish articles in the original book focused primarily on Jewish life in Lithuania in the interwar period. Yet they were not published in book form until 1956, in Buenos Aires. Though the Holocaust therefore leaves only a shadow over the entire volume, it is rarely mentioned. The notable exception is when Abramowicz refers to the fate of the subjects of biographical sketches who died in the ghettos and death camps. Still, it is impossible to read any of these essays about Jewish life in Lithuania without...
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being reminded constantly of its terrible end. For example, Abramowicz's memoir about the remarkable Jewish Agricultural School in the colony of Vieluciany, some 30 kilometers from Vilna, is laden with terrible ironies. This unusual school was established by the Jewish chaplain of the German 10th Army in the wake of its conquest of Lithuania and was administered by the German military in association with the Jewish vocational organization known as "Help Through Work" (an organization described by Abramowicz in a separate essay). The German army's collaboration with the Jewish "Hilf durch Arbeit" during World War I stands in stunning contrast to the Gestapo's treacherous use of the eerily similar slogan, "Arbeit Macht Frei," just two decades later.

The difficulty of extricating the living memory of the vibrant Jewish civilization of Eastern Europe from its final tragedy is precisely what makes Abramowicz's book so important. It presents the fullness of the world celebrated as "Yiddishland," while almost never referring to its doom. The further that world falls from memory under the increasing awareness of the Holocaust, the more imperative it is that light be shed upon it. In that context, it is worth citing the words Max Weinreich wrote in July 1958, in his preface to the Yiddish edition of this book (which the editors unfortunately chose not to include in the English version): Abramowicz "succeeded in describing a cross-section of a world and life that are no more. And the picture that he paints is all the more important for those who have never known the original. The importance of this book will steadily grow as we move ever further from the years when it was composed."

And indeed it has.