Sarunas Liekis, Antony Polonsky, Chaeran Freeze. *POLIN 25: Jews in the Former Grand Duchy of Lithuania since 1772*. Oxford, Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013. 509 p. ISBN 978-1-904113-93-5

Polin's 25th volume presents a collection of articles about Litvaks and, to a good extent, other Jewish communities bound together by geographical or conceptual contiguity to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, an area that covers all of present-day Lithuania, parts of Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, and Latvia. The collection is expansive (contains more than 500 pages), disciplinarily diverse (moves from history and political science to literature and linguistics to anthropology and sociology) – and no easy task to review for an historian. Given the broad swath of methodologies employed by professional practitioners of history across Europe, Israel, Canada, and the United States, the miscellaneous articles are a mirror reflection of the different traditions of historical writing. If described schematically, North American scholars follow the Anglo-Saxon tradition of historical argumentation that prefers interpretation and ideas; those on continental Europe walk more along the lines of the positivist methodology that places emphasis on the narrative and factual data; and Israeli scholars, under the influence of both schools, alternate between them.

The volume's title requires some explanation, too. As the volume's editors note early on, the background to the Jewish strand of the story is highly complex. For one thing, the Jewish story and other East European stories are embedded within each other. They develop within a set of historical contexts, not just one particular, Jewish context. In historical terms, none of them follow a *Sonderweg* trajectory. Although the volume's Jewish story starts with the demise of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, it actually goes further back to the historical legacies of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, from its creation in 1253 by the first baptised Lithuanian ruler Mindaugas, its reformation, in 1569, into a dualistic state of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and its demise, as part of the Commonwealth, in the wake of the First Partition. The first partition of 1772, a parceling out of the Commonwealth by Imperial Russia, was soon followed by another two, with spoils divided by two other empires, Prussia and Austria. Thus in 1795, during the last, third partition, the Commonwealth ceased to exist, ending the Polish-Lithuanian endeavor to sustain a democratic republic of sorts in the midst of rising empires. As such, Poland and Lithuania disappeared off the map of Europe.

From a Jewish perspective, they did not. That is why the contributors write about Jews living in the area that Jews, albeit anachronistically, called *Lite* in Yiddish. For Ashkenazi Jews, *Lite* (Lithuania) meant a vast territory once known as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Once a sovereignty, later a part of the Commonwealth, the duchy remained intact as a conceptual frame of reference. It retained the same geographical boundaries as the old Lithuania, yet over time became a web of intertwining Polish-Lithuanian, Russian (both tsarist and Soviet), German, and Habsburg legacies. In 1918, the old duchy reemerged in a geographically smaller and politically narrower nationalist form as the Republic of Lithuania.

After a comprehensive introduction by the volume's editors, the book takes its readers to a potpourri of Jewish topics. All the major heated issues emerge: tensions belying the budding Jewish, Polish, and Lithuanian nationalist movements in late tsarist Russia, Lithuanian-Polish-Jewish-Russian sentiments of mutual distrust or outright animosity, Lithuanian dual collaboration (with both Nazis and Soviets) and passivity during the Holocaust, Polish-Lithuanian, Russian-Lithuanian, and Lithuanian-Jewish relations, alongside the unitary Lithuanian national memory (in a country that to this day likes to boast of its ethnic diversity and tolerance) – to name just a few. The range of topics is big; the need for hyphens even bigger. Time and time again, the reader finds himself in a bewildering interlayering of historical and cultural perspectives in the lands where Russian, Polish, Yiddish, Belorussian, German, Lithuanian, and many other speakers lived side by side. As a result, the history of Lithuanian-Jewish relations includes more historical actors than just Jews and Lithuanians.

Above all, Lithuanian-Jewish history has a lot, if not everything, to do with Polish-Lithuanian and, by default, Polish-Jewish relations. One cannot understand the complexity of their relations from a perspective of Jews and Lithuanians (who were still figuring out what it meant to be Jewish or Lithuanian or both and, on top of that, a citizen of Lithuania). Poles were always there in the history of *Lite*, due to the shared past. And for the same reason there were Russians, turned Bolshevik, turned Soviet, turned Stalinist. For centuries, Jews were a visible presence in *Lite*'s urban centers until, after World War II, their numbers became negligible. For centuries, too, Poles, Russians, and their 'higher' cultures were part of the urban story of the Grand Duchy and its remains in modern times. As for Lithuanians, their presence was most palpable in the countryside; they were mostly peasants whose language was not a language of the written word until the late 16th century. The statistics show that before World War II ethnic Lithuanians constituted only 2 percent in the city of Vilna. Historian David Fishman notes in his contribution: in tsarist Vilnius (*Vilne* for Jews, *Wilno* for Poles) Jews made up around 41 percent of the population, according to the 1897 Russian Census, while in the interwar Vilnius under the rule of Poland, its numbers dwindled to about 29 percent, according to

the 1931 Polish Census.¹ To the despair of Lithuanian ultra-nationalists of the time, Kaunas, capital of interwar Lithuania, was as much Lithuanian as it was Russian, Jewish, and Polish: in 1910, Lithuanians constituted only about 18 percent of the town's population and about 60 percent in 1939 (Liekis and Polonsky, p. 17). Taken together, these multiple viewpoints make the Jewish story three- or four-dimensional (and we have not yet started talking about a breathtaking diversity of positions within Jewish communities themselves).

Let me provide one telling example, as it is impossible to discuss all 26 contributions. In his article, Sarunas Liekis examines Soviet partisan organisations that, despite their ideological focus on the working class, class struggle, and supra-national politics, formed along ethnic lines in Lithuania of 1939–1945. As he discusses what he brands as ‘warfare among nationalities’ in Lithuanian and Belorussian forests, he explores a simultaneous growth in anti-Soviet sentiments among the local Lithuanian population, as well as ever-stronger feelings of anti-Semitism. Like their Polish counterparts, many Lithuanians grew to associate Jews with communism, creating a myth of ‘Judeo-Bolshevism’ (according to which all Jews were conspiratorial communists, and Soviet rule was in fact Jewish rule). Before the war, as historian Egle Bendikaite writes in her article, the Lithuanian government saw socialist Zionists as ‘communist-leaning,’ ‘unreliable in both a political and civic sense’ (Bendikaite, p. 216). Highly probably, the socialist, national-cultural, anti-Zionist, pro-Yiddish Bundists were seen as communist as well. In wartime, Liekis continues, many Jews joined the communists for lack of any other option: no other nationalist but Jewish party would have them; death awaited Jews in Nazi-occupied territories, so Soviets appeared as the one and only viable option (even as the older, more traditional Jews in Kaunas disapproved, historian Saulius Sužiedelis notes in his piece) (p. 307). As communists did not care about ethnicity or religion and did about increasing their ranks, the Soviet Lithuanian partisans gladly took many Jews into their fold.

In the forests, the partisans also ran into the members of the *Armia Krajowa* (AK), a nationalist, often anti-Semitic Polish Home Army fighting for Soviet- and Nazi-free Poland. The Soviet partisans and the AK would fight against each other, even as they both fought against Nazi Germany, Liekis writes (p. 348–349). Why? It was because of the contentious Vilna Question that the Polish and Lithuanian partisans could not resolve their ideological differences. The Poles envisioned Vilna as part of sovereign Poland; the communist Lithuanians, as part of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania within the Soviet Union. The local Lithuanian population,

¹ Fishman, 396. The interwar statistics, I think, require a more rigorous examination because the newly created nation-states often massaged statistical data in favour of the titular nationality.

however, vacillated in their support of Soviet Russia. The first 1940–41 Soviet occupation of Lithuania and the subsequent deportations of Lithuanian citizens to Siberia in mid-June 1941 left the local population scarred and apprehensive about Soviet power (among some 20,000 deported, Jews made up 13.5 percent, Sužiedelis points out this often obliterated fact) (p. 34, 328).

After two years of Sovietisation, in late June of 1941, the local population greeted the Nazi invaders with a good measure of joy and relief. So did the Lithuanian police forces and civil administration, consisting of various Lithuanian nationalist organizations, many members of which served in the Lithuanian army during the republic years of 1918–1940. They did not see Lithuania as part of the Soviet Union or Poland and thus fought against Soviet partisans, Lithuanian or Jewish, as well as nationalist Poles. Somewhat naively, the Lithuanian police forces hoped to enlist Germans in their fight for sovereign Lithuania. And while pursuing such a nationalist dream, many of them helped Nazi Germans in their plan to exterminate European Jewry. Many Lithuanian nationalists – for historical reasons more complicated than pure religious and economic anti-Semitism (see Darius Staliūnas's article on Lithuanian anti-Semitism) – became perpetrators or accomplices in the gloomy history of the Holocaust in Lithuania. In 1944, during the second Soviet occupation of Lithuania, many switched allegiances and began collaborating with the Soviets. Left-leaning Lithuanians and Jews, those that survived, ended up playing a significant part in Lithuania's Sovietisation, as argued by a number of contributors to this volume.

So this is just one strand of the larger Jewish story in *Lite*, that of the pro-Soviet Lithuanian and Jewish partisan movement in wartime Lithuania. As they chronologically move in time towards the 20th century, the volume's authors touch upon many other controversial and multifaceted issues, such as a Lithuanian-Jewish symbiosis, Lithuanian anti-Semitism, and Lithuanian amnesia as regards the Holocaust. No less importantly, they continue telling the larger Jewish story of the community of Litvaks, smaller in number in 2013 yet no less diverse than in pre-1941 Lithuania.² Those that do, in a way that is more balanced, avoid the narrative of competitive martyrologies that nationalist historians privilege so much. After all, World War II left many victims in its wake; there are many legacies of victimhood that can potentially compete. But how is one to measure suffering? Are statistics adequate enough as a measuring stick? And how does one disentangle the mixed identities of victims who, very often, found themselves in the shoes of bystanders, rescuers, or even perpetrators and suffered no less as a result? In this volume, the reader can look for answers to these and many other questions.

² Today Lithuania has about 3,300 Lithuanian citizens of Jewish descent, which is a little over 1 percent of its prewar population of 220,000.

Overall, the volume's authors have written stories that are inclusive of the larger East European context and poke at the beautifully crafted, glorious nationalist narratives. Sometimes, however, some authors lack a more solid knowledge of Jewish history as they come to Jewish subjects from other fields of expertise. Hence their Jewish depictions are not as attuned to regional variations. Nonetheless, theirs is a major contribution to the field of Lithuanian Jewish history that is, to this day, abysmally under-researched. Because the book presents so many great archival and periodical materials, it is a wellspring of ideas for students in search of ideas for an academic project or scholars thinking about new research related to Lithuanian Jewry. To my knowledge, there are still millions of untapped resources on the Holocaust in Lithuania. And as the volume shows, there are quite a few topics that beg for closer scholarly attention.

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