

Jews of Pinsk

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have just read almost a thousand pages of the two-volume history of *The Jews of Pinsk* published by Stanford University Press. It is translated from Azriel Shohet's Hebrew, and I got hold of a copy through one of the editors of the English version, Mark Jay Mirsky. I should mention that his beautifully written prefaces to the two volumes are reason enough to read them. The volumes are packed with facts and tables, not for the fainthearted or those used to getting their information predigested in abbreviated form. This magisterial work underlines both inspirational and disturbing features of Jewish life in the Eastern European diaspora.

Polish Jewry was the child of the expulsions and catastrophes inflicted on the Ashkenazi communities of England and the Rhineland during the crusades. Dislocated remnants of destroyed communities headed east. Poland was short of people. First Boleslaw the Pious welcomed the refugees in 1264, even though his own clerics opposed him. Then Casimir the Great (who reigned from 1333 to 1370) granted the Jews extensive charters and laid the foundations for a self-governing quasi-autonomous community which slowly over the years became the most dynamic Jewish community in the Christian world.

Pinsk, on its eastern borders, sat on the convergence of river systems that linked it with the Baltic to the north and the Black Sea to the south. It came to be the town with the largest proportion of Jews in all Europe, and it eventually merged with its satellite town Karlin. During the course of its history Pinsk came, in sequence, under Polish, Lithuanian, Swedish, Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, German, Russian and finally Communists Polish regimes. How's that for instability?

The first volume, dealing with the years 1506 to 1880, describes life initially under the Poles and the self-regulating Jewish Communal Organization, the Vaad Arbaah Aratzot, which combined the regions of Greater Poland, Lesser Poland, Ruthenia, and Volhnya. Each community was in effect governed by its wealthy members and its rabbis, a kind of aristocracy both serving and benefitting from power, united by bonds of financial support, marriage, and vested interests. The state of affairs in which the poor were effectively treated as second-class citizens has been well documented, including the Littman Library's 2004 publication *Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller: Portrait of a Seventeenth-Century Rabbi* by Joseph Davis.

During the Cossack invasions and pogroms under Bogdan Chmielnicki and his allies, too often the rabbis and the rich abandoned their communities, leaving the poor unprotected to bear the brunt of the atrocities. It is reminiscent of the way before the Second World War many great rabbis in Eastern Europe told their followers to stay and not emigrate but then they themselves got out through their contacts and influence, leaving the poor to suffer disproportionately from the Nazis and their allies.

One gets a picture of the instability of life even under the most benevolent of monarchs. The constant agitation of the church (of every denomination: Catholic, Orthodox, and Reformed), the unpredictability of invading forces, shifting alliances, and constant danger from marauding bandits and mercenaries meant that life for most people at the time was indeed as Hobbes described it "nasty, brutish, and short." For Jews it was doubly so. Yet for all the ups and downs, one step forward and two back, the Pinsk Jewish population grew and thrived.

The eighteenth century brought not only pogroms and dislocation but also the great popular movement of Chasidism which henceforth would divide every Jewish community in Eastern Europe. Pinsk was the epitome of the opposing Mitnaged tradition. Karlin became a great Chasidic center. As the nineteenth century brought change and challenges, the Mitnaged community tended towards intellectual advance and an appreciation of wider study. Chasidism set itself very much against alien culture.

The second volume starts with 1881 and goes to the twentieth century and the effective destruction of Jewish Pinsk. Life in Pinsk was divided beyond religion. The term Haskalah is often wrongly translated as "Enlightenment". Initially it meant no more in the east than introducing some secular education into the traditional curriculum, something that many leading rabbis favored. In Central and Western Europe Haskalah did indeed lead to assimilation in many cases. In Pinsk it was initially seen as helping many find employment and strengthen the community. However when the Jews of Poland were annexed by Russia and the anti-Jewish culture of the Czarist regime began to weigh down on the Jews of the Pale of Settlement, education imposed by the state was indeed associated with a policy of conscious repudiation of Jewish identity and values.

Under the Czars, the struggle for Jewish survival became a daily test. Hundreds of thousands emigrated. Amongst those who stayed, resistance to the regime in various ways led to serious fissures within communities. Radicals, socialists, and Bundists saw the future only in terms of liberation from class oppression and religious narrowmindedness. Secular Zionists dreamed of salvation in establishing a new Jewish ethos based on labor in the Land of Israel. Different groups competed, fought, and provoked each other. This roiling competitive atmosphere produced great literature in Hebrew and Yiddish, a flourishing cultural life, schools, and youth movements.

The religious too were divided, not just between Chasidim and Mitnagdim but between Zionist and anti-Zionist. The very tensions we find today in Jewish life, particularly in Israel, could already be found in Pinsk towards the end of the nineteenth century.

These tensions of wealth and ideology continued through the disastrous Polish regime after the First World War, where occasionally only American intervention stemmed rising anti-Semitism, made worse by the fact that Jews were prominent on both political sides and were blamed for everything, as always. It all deteriorates as the German Nazis and their Eastern European sympathizers brought catastrophe to Jewish life. That anything survived at all was a miracle.

The myth currently cultivated in certain religious circles about the idyllic Jewish life in the ghettos of the East is dishonest, manipulative, and a betrayal of the memory of those who lived through it. Unless you were rich it was insufferable and painful a life. Your wealth could disappear overnight. The relatively few students of yeshivas, even the great Lithuanian ones, often went barefoot, coatless, and hungry in winter. Even the numbers studying Torah full time were a fraction of those supported by Israel today, let alone the USA. There were indeed great rabbis and leaders, and Pinsk attracted and nurtured some of the greatest. But for the masses it was Hell on Earth.

The comparison with Israel today is compelling. Whether secular or religious, financial or political, regardless of all its troubles and tensions, Israel is a flourishing of Jewish life in the widest sense that puts even Pinsk in the shade. Whether the researchers had an agenda or not, the facts speak for themselves. The pretense that it was better then, is, as Solomon says in Ecclesiastes, "not a very clever thing to say."

It's a sad story of the disappearance of yet another once-great Jewish center. But Professors Mirsky and Rosman deserve gratitude for bringing this important work to the English speaking world. We can rejoice in the fact that we have survived and thrived.