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Mordecai Tsanin

Yiddish Orphanhood in Israel and Afterlife in Poland

MONIKA ADAMCZYK-GARBOWSKA

Fighting for the Yiddish Word

Soon after the end of the Second World War various Jewish organizations, institutions, and newspapers sent their representatives to Poland to examine the situation of the Jewish survivors. Of those travellers, some were journalists or professional writers, others political and social activists. Most of them were members of official delegations and stopped in Warsaw at the Hotel Polonia, the only decent hotel left in the ruined city. Usually, as well as visiting Warsaw and, especially, the ruins of the ghetto, they would visit Łódź and Lower Silesia—the parts of the country where most Jews were settling in the post-war period—and in case of visitors born and raised in Poland, their native towns. An obligatory part of the itineraries was the former concentration and death camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, sometimes also Majdanek.[1] Among the best-known travellers were Jacob (Yakov) Pat, Shmuel Leib Shneiderman, Chaim Shoshkes, and Joseph Tenenbaum.[2]

A neglected traveller through Poland is Mordecai Tsanin, whose *Through Ruins and Ashes: A Journey through a Hundred Destroyed Jewish Communities in Poland* has never been translated into English and the Polish translation of which came out only in 2018, almost seventy years after its publication in Yiddish.[3] The difference between Tsanin and the other travellers is that, although he worked as a correspondent for the New York-based *Forverts*, he lived in Israel, while they lived in the United States. What is more, his report is the most detailed and the most distressing. Readers of the time were probably more interested in synthetic reports, without excessive details and obscure references or the extremely gloomy image Tsanin produced. Research on the reception of the Holocaust reveals that, soon after the war, some optimism was welcome. For example, at the beginning of his book, Tenenbaum set out the ideas that informed his trip: 'I go to Poland as an American Jew of Polish descent, on a mission to the heroic survivors of Polish Jewry in the new, liberated Poland', and expressed his hope that his book, which aimed at giving an honest presentation of facts and conditions at work in Poland at that time, 'may offer a modest educational contribution towards a better world'.[4]

Besides, the very titles of the other travelogues—Pat's *Ashes and Fire: Through the Ruins of Poland*, Shneiderman's *Between Fear and Hope: A Journey Across the New Poland*, Shoshkes' *Poland 1946: Impressions of a Journey*, and Tenenbaum's *In Search of*

a Lost People: The Old and the New Poland—sounded more universal and did not focus only on the situation of the Jews but on the destruction of the whole country, while in the title of Tsanin's book a strictly Jewish perspective was obvious.

Tsanin made a few trips to Poland in 1946 and 1947. Usually in his contacts with Poles he presented himself as a non-Jewish, English-speaking journalist or even as an Englishman, which allowed him to get a better insight into the general sentiments, prejudices, and attitudes towards Jews prevalent in Poland at the time. His reports were originally published in *Forverts*, and most were later incorporated into *Through Ruins and Ashes*. A number of them found their way into the *yizker bikher*, memorial books, of the various cities, towns, and villages that he visited. It was actually in the memorial book of Kuzmir (Kazimierz) on the Vistula that I first came across his report, and it immediately struck me with its unique literary and documentary value.[5]

Mordecai Tsanin was born on 1 April 1906 as Mordecai Yeshayahu Cukierman in Sokołów Podlaski, where his father David Cukierman ran an office which assisted people with legal matters. He had five siblings. The eldest brother Herman (Henryk) left with his wife and his father for New Zealand in the late 1930s and then went to Australia, while his mother, Tova Malka, left for Palestine with the eldest daughter, Felicia. Another sister, Ester (Elsa), married the Polish Jewish writer Stanisław Jerzy Lec. Together with another sister, Rywka (Rysia), they survived in Poland on false papers. The eldest sister, Batya, died after a kidney operation at the age of 30.[6]

In Sokołów, Tsanin attended *ḥeder* and yeshiva. In 1920, when the family moved to Warsaw, he went to a Polish gymnasium. He supported Bundist ideas and was rather critical of Zionism. He made his debut in Warsaw in 1929 with stories and feuilletons in the Yiddish press. At that time he assumed the pen name Tsanin, which gradually started functioning as his actual name. Among other things, he wrote for *Oyfgang* and *Naye folkstsaytung*, Yiddish newspapers published in Warsaw. He published two books before the war: a collection of stories, *Viva Life!*, and a novel, *On Swampy Ground*.[7] Melech Ravitch, secretary of the famous Yidishe Literatn un Zhurnalistn Farayn, the association for writers and journalists at 13 Tłomackie Street, who first met him in Warsaw before the war, described him as a reporter through and through, as if the art of reportage popularized at that time in Europe by Egon Kisch were designed especially for him, 'for his looks, temperament, and character', and as a 'fighter', very energetic and fully involved in whatever he did while at the same time quite sensitive to the gloomy side of the human condition: 'an assertive personality, but in spite of all this assertiveness very sentimental'.[8] Many years later, Jack Kugelmass described him as 'a *shtarker*—he was afraid of no one'.[9]

Mobilized into the Polish army in September 1939, Tsanin found himself in a division headed by General Bortnowski. After the surrender of Poland he returned for two months to Warsaw and then via Białystok he reached Vilna, where he remained until the occupation of Lithuania by the Soviets in 1940. Thanks to the visa he received from the Japanese consul in Kovno,[10] he reached Japan via Vladivostok, and from there via Shanghai, India, and Egypt he arrived in Palestine in 1941. First he

did manual work and then returned to journalism and writing fiction, remaining faithful to the Yiddish language until the end of his long life. From 1947 to 1956 he was an official correspondent for *Forverts* in Israel. He also wrote for other newspapers and periodicals published in various countries, including *Tsukunft*, *Di goldene keyt*, and *Davar*. He edited *Ilustrirte veltvokh,* and in 1949 initiated and became editor-in-chief of *Letste nayes*, the first Israeli daily in Yiddish. That is where his monumental historical novel *Artopanos Comes Home* appeared in instalments. It was later published in six volumes: *Jerusalem and Rome*, *Foreign Skies*, *Love in a Storm*, *The Rebellion of Mezhibozh*, *The Jordan Flows into the Dead Sea*, and *The Verdict*.[11] This enormous work, unsurpassed in Yiddish literature in terms of its size, covers the history of the Jews from the conquest of Judea by the Romans until modern times, describing the vicissitudes of the protagonists against the background of the stormy history of Jews in the diaspora, marked with persecutions and constant wandering. It is one of the neglected classics of Yiddish literature. As with numerous other writers in Yiddish, the shrinking readership contributed to this lack of recognition.

Tsanin published collections of his journalism: *Where Is Japan Going?*, *Sabbath Chats*, *The Paths of Jewish Fate*, *Decadence of a Messiah*; an autobiography: *Borders up to the Sky*; collections of stories: *Keys to Heaven*, *Snow in Summer*, *Don't Sleep, Mamma*; and a biography of the theatrical actor Herz Grosbard. He also contributed substantially to lexicography as the author of a great Yiddish–Hebrew and Hebrew–Yiddish dictionary.[12]

Mordecai Tsanin lived in Tel Aviv, initiating and getting involved in various activities aimed at preserving and developing Yiddish culture. He was a co-founder of the Beit Leyvick Center for Yiddish Language and Culture (named in honour of the Yiddish writer H. Leyvick). In 1973 he received the Itzik Manger Prize (another laureate in the same year was Isaac Bashevis Singer).[13] For many years he was president of the Association of Yiddish Writers in Israel (Farayn fun Yidishe Shrayber in Yisroel). He died on 4 February 2009 in Tel Aviv at the age of 103.

In the first years of Israeli statehood, the Yiddish language was treated with a good deal of reservation by the authorities as emphasis was placed on the development of Hebrew. When, in 1949, Tsanin wanted to transform *Letste nayes* from a weekly into a daily he had to obtain special permission. It was granted for only three issues a week. However, Tsanin found a way out: he created another paper, *Hayntike nayes*, also published three times a week, alternating with the other one. The authorities tolerated that stratagem, and finally, in 1957, they gave their permission for *Letste nayes* to be published as a daily (at the end of 1991 it was turned into a weekly again). In 1977 Tsanin left the editorial board and devoted all his time to writing and social work. *Letste nayes* was published until 2006, when it stopped appearing as a result of the shrinking readership.

On various occasions Tsanin stressed the sense of orphanhood he shared with other Yiddish writers. 'Yiddish Writers are Orphans' is the title of a short essay he published in a Polish literary supplement in the early 1990s.[14] In it he recalled his childhood in Sokołów Podlaski, the traditional education he received there, and

learning Polish from a primer. He mentions that, after the family moved to Warsaw and he started writing, he also wanted to write in Polish, but realized that he did not know the language well enough, so he decided to write only in Yiddish. He deplored the fact that when the State of Israel was created it was necessary to get rid of the culture of the diaspora. He stated that therefore, when a book was published in Yiddish in Israel, there was almost no one to give it to: 'Those who know Yiddish in Israel now have bad eyesight, they grew old . . . Here, in Poland, a nation without a state grew but with a great culture. When they gained a state, it turned out that Yiddish literature did not belong to it.'[15] He expressed similar feelings in conversation with Agata Tuszyńska. Interestingly enough, he called himself a Zionist, but a Zionist writing in Yiddish, not Hebrew, which made him a stranger in Israel.[16]

Because of his tenacity in pursuing activities on behalf of Yiddish culture Tsanin could not avoid conflicts with the Israeli establishment. It is not therefore surprising that in an essay, *The Seventh Million*, published in book form by the Association of Yiddish Writers in Israel, Tsanin was critical of the attitudes of David Ben-Gurion and other members of the Israeli government (he called them 'der tsyonistisher establishment', 'the Zionist establishment') towards Yiddish language and culture, as well as of the attempts—in his opinion insufficient—of Jewish organizations in Mandatory Palestine to rescue Jews in Europe during the Second World War.[17]

Tsanin was generally known as a sharp critic on political and social issues as well as on literary matters. Like a number of other Yiddish writers and literary critics, he spoke with reservation about Isaac Bashevis Singer, especially compared with his brother, Israel Yehoshua, Sholem Asch (whom he considered the greatest Yiddish writer[18]), or David Bergelson, not to mention Sholem Aleichem, for whom 'it was worth creating the Yiddish language'.[19] And yet he admitted that Bashevis Singer was a talented storyteller: 'Singer is toilet pornography. That's how I could call it in Yiddish. Perverse literature, but beautifully told. This is dangerous, a God-given talent. As far as its values are concerned, I don't value it highly. But when you start reading, you cannot stop.'[20]

Photographs of Tsanin reveal his elegant looks. Always in a stylish three-piece suit, with a pipe: no wonder that while travelling to Poland in the 1940s he could easily play the role of an English gentleman. But he had little of the proverbial English reserve: his prose and the controversies he raised among both Jewish communists in Poland and Zionists in Israel testify to his strong individualism, fiery temperament, commitment to the ideals he cherished, and sensitivity, but also to a sense of humour and irony, an ability to observe details, and an excellent ear for the linguistic nuances of Polish and Yiddish. The title of a collection of essays published in 1997, *Dos vort mayn shverd* ('The Word is My Sword'), aptly renders his years-long struggles, his passion, and his uncompromising nature.

Jeremiad on the Ruins of the Earlier World

The title of Tsanin's report from Poland is very difficult to render, because the Yiddish idiom *iber shteyn un shtok* implies a long journey across country, and in this case the country is marked with the stones and rubble left after the destruction of the Jews in Poland.[21] Therefore I decided to give to the Polish translation a less ambiguous title: *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, which literally means 'through ruins and ashes'.

Tsanin's perspective in his report from Poland is dramatic. In spite of some humorous elements and descriptions resembling the plot of an adventure novel—for example, his failed attempt to get to Bełz and Bełżec by train because a Polish officer, believing he was an Englishman, warned him he might be taken for a spy trying to cross the Soviet border, not to mention the particularly dangerous situation in those regions due to skirmishes with scattered Ukrainian units—his book is one great jeremiad,[22] a lamentation, a threnody, and at the same time a detailed report written with the hope that sometime in the future it would attract the attention of historians. The book is dedicated to his wife Dora Tsanin (1912–96), who accompanied him. However, in the text itself there are no references to their common experiences, reflections, or feelings, although among the shtetls visited, apart from Tsanin's birth town Sokołów Podlaski there was also Wolbrom, where Dora was born. This might be a conscious literary device to strengthen the tone and significance of the jeremiad: in a number of testimonies in *yizker bikher* a similar position is taken by authors presenting themselves as the only Jewish visitors, although usually this was not the case.

Like other Jewish travellers to post-war Poland, Tsanin started his report with a description of Warsaw, devoting three chapters to the city: the ruins of the ghetto, the old Jewish cemetery at Okopowa Street, and the evening before Yom Kippur. He juxtaposed memories from before the war with the present: the entire book, except chapters devoted to visits to former concentration and death camps, is constructed in such a way that images from the past are confronted with the post-war reality. In Warsaw he saw no sign that Yom Kippur was coming; only in the vicinity of the Nożyk synagogue did Jews pass, as if furtively (religious Jews hiding their beards and sidelocks is a recurring motif). Tsanin stressed that he was most afraid of the visits to Warsaw and Łódź, since he realized that the contrast with the situation before the war, when huge and vibrant communities had existed there, would be the most painful. He recalled the richness of cultural life in Łódź and compared it with its present state. He described attempts to revive the Jewish theatre, stating that there was almost no audience for it because the majority of Jews inhabiting the city had little in common with the refined audiences before the war. Although this was the largest Jewish community after the war, he only heard children speaking Yiddish once, at a school performance when a choir sang a cheerful song.

In Łódź, Yiddish was not heard in the street either; if at all, then at 66 Zachodnia Street, where the post-war life of the Jewish community was concentrated. While there, he wondered if perhaps not everything was lost, if perhaps Jewish life could be

revived, but after a few conversations he concluded that the majority of Jews wanted to leave Poland anyway. It was in Łódź where he actually admitted openly to his interlocutors that he came from the Land of Israel, first in his encounter with a droshky driver who half-jokingly asked if he could take his horse to Palestine, and then with a larger group in the courtyard of the heart of the local Jewish community. However, this encounter was marked with bitterness and irony, like most encounters with Jewish survivors:

> They see an unfamiliar face so they surround me. 'Sholem aleikhem, where does the Jew come from?' 'From Erets Yisro'el.' 'From Yisro'el?' Even more people approach me to say 'Sholem aleikhem.' Their eyes light up. A Jew from Yisro'el. They want to know how things are in Yisro'el. And I say: 'I want to hear how things are here. At your place': 'And how can they be? Haven't you seen Łódź yet? So have a look and you will see how things are.'[23]

The only other mention of Israel in the book is in a chapter on the eve of Yom Kippur in Warsaw where Tsanin recognized near the Nożyk synagogue some Jews familiar to him from Tel Aviv. He guessed that they had returned from Palestine to Poland to start a new life as 'Poles of Mosaic faith', and he noted ironically that some Jewish women who in Tel Aviv associated with Poles and 'wore golden crosses on white necks'[24] now, after their return to Poland, came to Kol Nidrei.

In Kraków, where 6,000 Jews resided, it seemed to him that Jewish life had ended. He found it only in private apartments: for example, at the painter Manuel Rympel's, or in a cafe where the Jewish intelligentsia gathered. But 'the street belongs to the non-Jews. Kazimierz, the Jewish town, the narrow streets of Kazimierz, where in the past such a colourful Jewish life went on, today belong to the non-Jews'.[25] There was no Jewish press, no Jewish associations, clubs, or salons.

Tsanin's visit to Kraków took place at the beginning of the school year. In the street he saw crowds of children hurrying to school but did not notice any Jewish children among them: 'Here, in the street, I see the scope of our misfortune. Among so many thousands of children I don't notice even one pair of Jewish eyes.'[26]

He gets a strange impression in Tarnów, where approximately 350 Jews were trying to revive their earlier lives:

> They are building from scratch. Three hundred and fifty Jews are building their community again. They have a rabbi and a ritual slaughterer. They established, when it was still allowed, political parties: General Zionists, Bundists, Po'alei Tsiyon Right and Left, and Hashomer Hatsa'ir, and the Polish Workers' Party (communists), and a party of religious Jews. Altogether three hundred and fifty people, including children and non-party members. The communist party (the Jewish section) consists of *two* members; one of them entered the board of the *kehilah* as a representative of the 'masses', that is, of his only party comrade.[27]

At the Tarnów *kehilah* there was a large library with books in Yiddish, a sports association, a Bundist choir, and a Po'alei Tsiyon theatrical circle: '"For whom is all this?" I ask. "For the masses" . . . God alone knows how stubborn and romantic Jews are', comments Tsanin.[28]

As one of very few foreign journalists, he visited most of the former death camps: Chełmno, Majdanek, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. The last chapter of the book bears the title 'The Gold Rush' and sums up what he saw during his travels. While writing about people searching through human ashes in and around the former death camps for gold and other valuables, he stated that writing about all this was 'too much for a Jew'. At the same time he expressed his hope that perhaps at some time when 'this nightmare will be further away, in coming generations a writer, a historian, will appear who will be able to research this chapter and describe it as a document of the terrible downfall of humanity in the twentieth century'.[29] While following discussions of Jan Gross's *Fear*, on the Kielce pogrom, and *Golden Harvest*, on scavenging the areas around Treblinka and other former death camps, I would often recall these words. Gross and a group of historians from the Polish Center for Holocaust Research in Warsaw undertook a number of the themes that Tsanin left for future scholars to consider.[30]

The end of the book is clearly pessimistic; nothing is left except ruins and ashes:

> A Jew is travelling now across the destroyed cities and shtetls, wanders around ruins and rubble and cannot find a single untouched grave that has remained after the annihilated life. Only when you see a field grey from ashes will you know, Jew, that these are the ashes of your people. And only there can you cry out your 'Yisgadal veyiskadash'.[31]

Although Tsanin noted positive attitudes from some Poles—an antique collector in Lublin, a station-master in Treblinka, priests in Mława and Wolbrom, a farmer from the village of Wierbka—his general opinion of Polish behaviour was very critical. While asking why survivors were being settled in Lower Silesia,[32] where each stone was a cursed testimony to the earlier presence of Germans, instead of being enabled to return to their own homes or native towns, he concluded that such a return was rarely possible because of the hostile reaction of Polish neighbours. One of the results of the German occupation was a wall between two peoples that had coexisted for centuries. This wall was marked with permission to murder Jews and loot their possessions. In Tsanin's opinion, contact was hindered by the deeply hidden sense of guilt among Poles:

> When a Pole in a shtetl talks to a Jew he does not look into his eyes and remains silent. Why cannot he tell him that he hid his father or brother, that he took care of his house, that he saved his sacred objects, that he helped a Jewish partisan by offering him a sip of water? Nothing like this. He is silent. Because in order to be able to speak freely with a Jewish survivor and look straight into his eyes, hundreds of thousands of Poles would have to carry out Jewish possessions from their houses, collect them in one place, and say:
>
> 'Jews, take away your things that we rescued from the hands of our common enemy. Germans murdered you and enslaved us, we helped as well as we could, take everything that has remained from your possessions. Go back to your homes, return to your work, and let's build together our lives as we did for long generations. Perhaps we didn't behave properly when you were being murdered; perhaps we did wrong persecuting your partisans in the forests. The enemy was cruel, terrible, he demoralized us. He humiliated us in our own eyes, and we no longer behaved like people and we let them demoralize us.'[33]

While there were almost no Jews in the little towns, their traces were visible everywhere: cupboards and tables in appropriated apartments and houses, candleholders and chandeliers in inns, peasant women in blouses made of Jewish prayer shawls, fragments of tombstones used for construction purposes, destroyed and desecrated cemeteries, and synagogues adapted for storehouses.

And yet for many years Poland played an essential role in the lives of Jews, for it was their home:

> There was once Jewish Poland, an inn on the route of Jewish wandering. This was where they unpacked their bundles, the inn became their home. Under the Polish sky, generation after generation continued a chain of customs and traditions, spun a tale about holidays and sabbaths, embroidered life with the same tenderness, with which Jewish brides embroidered bags for phylacteries and parochets. And it seemed that the beautiful sky over Poland was also embroidered with the longing of Jewish hearts. The Jewish sky on which sunrises were mixed with the wine of Kiddush and sunsets burnt with *havdalah*.
>
> And although Jews wept so many tears on the Polish land, there was also a sea of joy in their lives. A joy from working and creating, from living and persisting. But the German Amalek brought a storm of fire and death on Jewish life in Poland. And everything was destroyed and annihilated.[34]

However, although Tsanin was a more critical observer than his fellow travellers, sometimes his political naivety came to the fore. In spite of his critical view of communists, he thought that from the Jewish perspective their regime was a better solution than the regime of 'reactionary' Poland. Registering statements of simple people in little towns about the government consisting of 'Bolsheviks' and Jews, he did not try to understand their comments or reflect on them. As a socialist he was surprised that in Białystok a number of Poles behaved dishonourably towards Jews: such behaviour did not surprise him in little towns, for his opinion of Polish peasants was basically very low and not devoid of stereotyping. He presented them as an ignorant and primitive mob, while he associated the big city with the working class, from which he expected different attitudes.

Tsanin was also critical of Jewish institutions for insufficient involvement in commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. In an article published in *Forverts* in January 1948, soon after he left Poland, he wrote about his growing conflict with them, which resulted in them detaining him on the Polish–Czech border and confiscating some of his notes.[35] He was asked to leave the train at the border town of Zebrzydowice, when he was leaving the country after a half-year stay. Interestingly, Tsanin stressed the friendly attitude of the Polish authorities. He did not have any problems with extending his visa, and even when his articles started being published in the American press he did not encounter any criticism. As he states: 'the Polish authorities gave me the possibility of visiting all the places and looking at whatever my heart desired . . . I talked a number of times with important members of the government about my articles, and each time I met with friendly interest and understanding.'[36] Surprisingly, he was detained because of numerous complaints and

denunciations from the Central Committee of Jews in Poland. Tsanin did not blame the whole committee but the communists within it who, in his opinion, made all possible efforts to prevent an objective look at the Holocaust, including the various attitudes of Poles.

He quoted a conversation with a Polish officer at the border who treated him very courteously and apologized for what happened but explained that he could not do anything about it. Supposedly the officer was very embarrassed and explained that he cared a lot about the reputation of his motherland and was afraid that arresting a foreign journalist might make a bad impression abroad. He tried to get in touch by phone with his superiors and the authorities in Katowice, 80 kilometres from Zebrzydowice, but it was impossible at 2 a.m. He managed to get in touch with them only several hours later.

They had to wait for a commission from Katowice that had left the city at 8 a.m. but whose arrival was delayed because of a snowstorm. As a result its members arrived at the border at 4 p.m. The commission consisted of two Jews, who, in response to Tsanin's question about the reason for his detention, responded that he 'wrote about things that should not be brought to light'.[37] They were not convinced by his argument that he was writing the truth. Even if it were true, it would still be harmful for the Jews, for, in their opinion, it was hostile propaganda against Poland. In the end, Tsanin was subjected to a thorough search which lasted until late at night and ended with the confiscation of his notes:

> My arguments that the material was engraved in my memory and it was ridiculous to confiscate my notes on the destroyed Jewish communities did not help.
>
> The commission explained that they did not find enough evidence on the harmfulness of my activities and they announced that I was free and I could cross the border by the earliest train.
>
> At one o'clock at night I found myself, released, abroad.[38]

This report confirms Tamar Lewinsky's claim that Tsanin's critical perspective on the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, and, especially, as he believed, their insufficient interest and concern about the victims and what remained of the Jewish heritage, made him *persona non grata* with the committee.[39] Perhaps if it had not been for that intervention he could still have returned to Poland and covered more cities and towns in his reports.

The report on his detention on the border and his other articles on the topic of commemoration constitute valuable material on the shaping of the official memory about the Holocaust in the early post-war years.

The Polish intelligence service in Israel had its eyes on Tsanin in the 1960s. In a note from 12 March 1962, *Letste nayes* is described as 'the most anti-Polish paper in Israel'. The reason for such a description was the fact that it published a series of articles in which the hostility of a large part of the Polish population towards Jews during the Holocaust was discussed. The note ends with a comment that the editor-in-chief and co-owner of the paper was 'a Jew from Poland, Jeshayahu Mordekhai

CANIN, generally known as a "communist- and Soviet-baiter"'.[40] Also in another note, undated, referring to a meeting about the book *Siódmy wilk* by Henryk Dankowicz, a journalist from the Polish-language Israeli daily *Nowiny i Kurier*, it is stated that Tsanin spoke in Polish to a crowd of 400 people, expressing his 'anti-communist' and 'anti-Polish' feelings and claiming that 'the communist system breaks people down'. 'It is no secret who Tsanin is', the author of the note concluded.[41]

Tsanin's travelogue is written in a variety of styles and registers. Next to journalistic parts aptly rendering conversations with Jews and Poles there are highly emotional and lofty fragments full of rhetorical figures. On the one hand, they are stylistically reminiscent of biblical texts; on the other, they abound in socialist rhetoric. Moreover, since these reports were published in the press in instalments, Tsanin could not avoid some repetition, not all of which was removed from the book version. Therefore readers may find the frequent paeans on idealistic and altruistic Jewish youth fighting for freedom for the whole world, or exaggerated descriptions of the cultural significance of little towns in Podlasie, monotonous.

Comparing Tsanin's book with other travelogues, it seems that he predicted most accurately the course of Jewish existence in Poland after the war. Also, his individual point of view, the richness of his emotional states—from despair through lyrical reflection to irony and the grotesque—and its literary values render his report particularly interesting, albeit difficult, reading for the contemporary Polish audience.

Reception in Poland

The Polish edition of Tsanin's book appeared at the end of 2018, the same year as the controversial Holocaust law was announced, triggering a diplomatic crisis and various fierce and bitter debates. Soon afterwards, the monumental two-volume edition of *Dalej jest noc* came out, stimulating discussion and generating both favourable and very critical reactions. It could have been expected that Tsanin's book would be exposed to similar criticism, and yet the reception so far has been surprisingly positive, and the book seems to have hit the Polish reading audience at the right time. A number of reviews[42] and scholarly articles[43] were published, and meetings promoting the book in various cities and towns (among others, Warsaw, Lublin, Łódź, Kutno, Olkusz, and Kazimierz Dolny) were very well attended. I cannot think of any other book translated from Yiddish into Polish that has attracted so much attention. In her review, Anna Bikont, the author of an important book on Jedwabne,[44] notes that what Jan Tomasz Gross showed to Poles in his *Neighbors* in 2000 had already been described by a Jewish journalist fifty-three years earlier. She also refers to the memorable scene in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, in which the director talks to the station-master from Treblinka and observes that Tsanin conducted a similar conversation thirty years earlier.[45] Yet Gross's book was met with a great deal of criticism (as was Lanzmann's film in communist Poland), while Tsanin's was not, although one can easily find exaggerations and simplifications in his report. The decisive factor in

its favourable reception might have been the fact that it was written soon after the war by an independent journalist, making it difficult to raise the same accusations against him as have been raised against contemporary scholars: of distorting facts, manipulation, ignorance, and courting publicity or even financial gain. Furthermore it is a first-hand account, and these are always difficult to contradict.

The publisher Krystyna Bratkowska and I received a number of letters from readers with personal comments. The most moving letter came from Ryszard Szczepaniak from the town of Zielonka near Warsaw, who as a young boy was a witness of a deportation from his home town:

I cannot find the right words to properly acknowledge the great significance of publishing the book by Mr Mordecai Tsanin *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*. I was for a short time, for only about one hour, a witness of the Holocaust and in spite of my 86 years I am still accompanied by horrible images and I hear very clearly the terrible crying of people who are being deprived of dignity, hope, childhood, old age, family, God and motherland. Yes, and motherland. The author's work grants him the nobility of righteousness and honour. I am turning my thoughts to Nature and God who gave him a long life.[46]

I have no doubt that Mordecai Tsanin would be deeply touched reading these words and feel that the prayer expressed in the introductory chapter to his book had been heard:

God Almighty, give me the strength so that I can describe with my poor words what my eyes saw and my heart felt during my wandering across the rubble and ruins of the life that is no more, and so that I could uncover at least a small piece of that great epic poem that was called Jewish life in Poland.[47]

Notes

1 See J. Kugelmass, *Sifting the Ruins: Émigré Jewish Journalists' Return Visits to the Old Country, 1946–1948* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2014); M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, 'Krajobraz po Zagładzie: Relacje dziennikarzy żydowskich z powojennej Polski', *Midrasz*, 2012, no. 1, pp. 16–20.

2 Y. Pat, *Ash un fayer: iber di khurves fun poyln* (New York, 1946); Eng. trans.: *Ashes and Fire*, trans. L. Steinberg (New York, 1947); S. L. Shneiderman, *Tsvishn shrek un hofenung: a rayze iber dem nayem poyln* (Buenos Aires, 1947); Eng. edn.: *Between Fear and Hope* (New York, 1947); C. Shoshkes, *Poyln 1946: ayndrukn fun a rayze* (Buenos Aires, 1946); J. Tenenbaum and S. Tenenbaum, *In Search of a Lost People: The Old and the New Poland* (New York, 1948).

3 M. Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok: a rayze iber hundert khorev-gevorene khiles in poyln* (Tel Aviv, 1952); Pol. trans.: M. Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza: Podróż po stu zgładzonych gminach żydowskich w Polsce*, trans. M. Adamczyk-Garbowska (Warsaw, 2018).

4 Tenenbaum and Tenenbaum, *In Search of a Lost People*, p. viii.

5 M. Tsanin, 'Kuzmir', in *Pinkes kuzmir*, ed. D. Shtokfish (Tel Aviv, 1970), 270–8. This was the first fragment that I translated and included in my anthology of texts on Kuzmir (see *Kazimierz vel Kuzmir: Miasteczko różnych snów*, ed. M. Adamczyk-Garbowska (Lublin, 2006), 269–73). Later I translated and published his chapters on Kielce, Zamość, and

Janowiec (M. Canin, 'Kielce', trans. M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, in *Tam był kiedyś mój dom… : Księgi pamięci gmin żydowskich*, ed. M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, A. Kopciowski, and A. Trzciński (Lublin, 2009), 451–3; id., 'Zamość', trans. M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Midrasz*, 2011, no. 2, pp. 15–16; 'Janowiec', trans. M. Adamczyk-Garbowska, *Midrasz*, 2012, no. 1, pp. 24–5).

6 See A. Tuszyńska, D. Barczak-Perfikowska, G. Latos, E. Strzałkowska, and W. Wejman, *Bagaż osobisty po marcu* (Warsaw, 2018), 94–6.

7 M. Tsanin, *Vivat lebn!* (Warsaw, 1933); id., *Oyf zumpiker erd* (Warsaw, 1935).

8 See M. Ravitch, *Mayn leksikon*, 5 vols. (Montreal and Tel Aviv, 1945–82), iii. 350–1.

9 Kugelmass, *Sifting the Ruins*, 7.

10 Chiune Sugihara, sometimes called the Japanese Schindler, issued Japanese visas to thousands of Polish and Lithuanian Jews in the summer of 1940, enabling them to escape from Soviet-occupied Lithuania.

11 M. Tsanin, *Artopanus kumt tsurik aheym*, i: *Yerusholayim un roym* (Tel Aviv, 1966); ii: *Fremde himlen* (Tel Aviv, 1968); iii: *Libshaft in geviter* (Tel Aviv, 1972); iv: *Di meride fun mezhibozh* (Tel Aviv, 1976); v: *Der yardn falt arayn in yam hamelekh* (Tel Aviv, 1981); vi: *Der gzar-din* (Tel Aviv, 1985); Eng. trans.: *Artopanus Comes Home*, trans. I. M. Lask (South Brunswick, NJ, 1980).

12 M. Tsanin, *Vuhin geyt yapan* (Tel Aviv, 1942); id., *Shabesdike shmuesn* (1957); id., *Oyf di vegn fun yidishn goyrl* (Tel Aviv, 1966); id., *Der dekadents fun a meshiyekh* (Tel Aviv, 1967); id., *Grenetsn biz tsum himl* (Tel Aviv, 1969/70); id., *Shlisl tsum himl* (Tel Aviv, 1979); id., *Zumershney* (Tel Aviv, 1992); id., *Shluf nit mameshi* (Tel Aviv, 1996); id., *Herts grosbard* (Tel Aviv, 1995); id., *Fuler yidish-hebreisher verterbukh* (Tel Aviv, 1982); id., *Fuler hebreish-yidisher verterbukh* (Tel Aviv, 1983). For more biographical information, see J. C. Frakes, 'Tsanin, (Yeshaye) Mordkhe', *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd edn., 22 vols. (New York, 2006), xx. 163–4; C. L. Fuks, 'Tsanin (Shaye) Mortkhe', *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, ed. S. Niger and J. Shatzkhy, 8 vols. (New York, 1956–81), vii, cols. 532–4; see also Z. Tsanin, 'From the Desk of Mordkhe Tsanin: My Father Worked on Letste Nayes, a Yiddish Newspaper in Tel Aviv' (31 Oct. 2018): YouTube website, visited 14 May 2021. I am grateful to Mr Ze'ev Tsanin for his helpful comments and some biographical information.

13 See Dr H.R., 'Nobilitacja języka żydowskiego', *Przegląd* (Tel Aviv), 1 May 1972, p. 27.

14 See M. Canin, 'Pisarze żydowscy są sierotami', *Ex Libris* (literary supplement to *Życie Warszawy*), 40 (1993), 4.

15 Ibid.

16 See A. Tuszyńska, *Kilka portretów z Polską w tle: Reportaże izraelskie* (Gdańsk, 1993), 55.

17 See M. Tsanin, *Der zibeter milyon: der khurbn un der tsyonistisher establishment in erets yisroel* (Tel Aviv, 1996).

18 Canin, 'Pisarze żydowscy są sierotami'.

19 Ibid. It is worth noting that at a time when most Yiddish writers and critics were boycotting Asch as a result of the publication of *Der man fun natseres* and other works with Christian themes on religious and national grounds, and *Forverts*, to which Asch had earlier contributed regularly and in abundance, would not publish his novels, Tsanin never joined the boycott, and *Letste nayes* was open for the writer. Melech Ravitch stresses this in his reminiscences about Tsanin as an illustration of his independence of mind (Ravitch, *Mayn leksikon*, iii. 353).

20 See A. Tuszyńska, *Singer: Pejzaże pamięci* (Gdańsk, 1994), 167.

21 Kugelmass translates the title literally as 'Over Stone and Branch', explaining that it is 'an expression referring to stumbling' (Kugelmass, *Sifting the Ruins*, 6, n. 22); *Encyclopedia*

Judaica has 'Through Thick and Thin' (Frakes, 'Tsanin, (Yeshaye) Mordkhe', 163); Wikipedia has 'Of Stones and Ruins' ('Mordechai Tsanin' (n.d.): Wikipedia website, visited 2 June 2021).

22 Kugelmass also mentions the 'jeremiad-like' quality of Tsanin's book (Kugelmass, *Sifting the Ruins*, 6).

23 Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok*, 80; Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, 147.

24 Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok*, 20–1; Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, 59.

25 Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok*, 264; Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, 412.

26 Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok*, 264–5; Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, 413.

27 Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok*, 271; Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, 423.

28 Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok*, 271; Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, 424.

29 Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok*, 307; Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, 484–5.

30 J. T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (Princeton, NJ, 2006); Pol. edn.: *Strach. Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie: Historia moralnej zapaści* (Kraków, 2008); J. T. Gross and I. Grudzińska-Gross, *Złote żniwa: Rzecz o tym, co się działo na obrzeżach zagłady Żydów* (Kraków, 2011); Eng. edn.: *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York, 2012); see also B. Engelking and J. Grabowski (eds.), *Dalej jest noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, 2 vols. (Warsaw, 2018). This monumental edition contains studies by nine scholars on the fate of Jews during the Second World War and after in various counties in Poland. Some of these places, for instance Łuków, Węgrów, and Miechów, were visited by Tsanin in 1947, and the last chapter of his book is devoted to the pillaging of the areas around former death camps.

31 Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok*, 313; Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, 491. 'Yitsgadal veyitsadash' are the opening words of Kaddish, the prayer for the dead.

32 Tsanin, who visited many more places than other travellers, did not visit, or at least he does not mention in his book, the Jewish communities in Lower Silesia. As this region suffered less destruction in the war, it probably didn't fit into the pattern of confronting the present situation with reminiscences from the past.

33 Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok*, 310; Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, 487–8.

34 Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok*, 313; Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, 491.

35 M. Tsanin, '"Forverts" korespondent dertseylt, vi azoy er iz arestirt gevoren baym aroysfaren fun poylen', *Forverts*, 16 Jan. 1948, pp. 2, 7.

36 Ibid. 2.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid. 7.

39 See T. Lewinsky, 'Polish-Jewish Displaced Persons in Occupied Germany', in F. Tych and M. Adamczyk-Garbowska (eds.), *Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944–2010* (Jerusalem, 2014), 95–124.

40 See Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Warsaw, BU 01681/106: Sprawa ewidencyjno-operacyjna 'Parias'. Tsanin is listed there as 'Tsanin vel Canin, Jeshayahu-Mordekhai'. The case was closed in May 1969 due to the liquidation of the residency of the Polish intelligence service in Israel. I am grateful to Dr Łukasz Krzyżanowski for bringing these documents to my attention.

41 Ibid.

42 See e.g. A. Bikont, 'Raport z popiołów piekła', *Książki: Magazyn do czytania*, 2018, no. 5, pp. 46–8; H. Bortnowska, 'Przez ruiny i zgliszcza: Kto się boi tej książki?', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 25–6 Jan. 2020, pp. 28–9; Ł. Krzyżanowski, 'Była kiedyś żydowska Polska', *Newsweek: His-*

toria, 2019, no. 3, pp. 12–23; P. Smoleński, 'Każdy miał kuferek, a w nim coś po Żydach', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 16–17 Feb. 2019, p. 30; R. Sendyka, 'To, co było' (May 2019): Dwutygodnik website, visited 14 May 2021; P. Kieżun, 'Skarga i oskarżenie: O książce "Przez ruiny i zgliszcza" Mordechaja Canina' (29 Jan. 2019): Kultura Liberalna website, visited 14 May 2021; A. Kopciowski, '"Zgłębiłem tę czarną otchłań do samego dna…"', *Akcent*, 2019, no. 3, pp. 113–18.

43 See e.g. H. Datner, 'Epitafium Mordechaja Canina', *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*, 270 (2019), 511–20; M. Dubrowska, 'Klagelied und Aufschrei: Zum Problem des polnischen Antisemitismus in Mordechai Zanins literarischer Reportage "Iber sztejn un sztok" (1952)', in W. Brylla and C. Lipiński (eds.), *Im Clash der Identitäten: Nationalismen im literatur- und kulturgeschichtlichen Diskurs* (Göttingen, 2020), 283–99; M. Kawa, 'Przez ruiny i zgliszcza: Społeczne i kulturowe zmiany powojennej rzeczywistości widziane oczyma Mordechaja Canina', *Language–Culture–Politics*, 2019, no. 1, pp. 93–103; K. Kijek, 'Istotność marginesu, czyli wyparte wątki w historiografii Żydów i studiów żydowskich w Polsce: Uwagi wokół polskiego wydania książki Mordechaja Canina "Przez ruiny i zgliszcza"', *Studia Judaica* (Kraków), 22 (2019), 337–53.

44 A. Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego* (Wołowiec, 2004); Eng. trans.: *The Crime and the Silence: Confronting the Massacre of Jews in Wartime Jedwabne*, trans. A. Valles (London, 2015).

45 Bikont, 'Raport z popiołów piekła', 47; see J. T. Gross, *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny, 2000); Eng. edn.: *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ, 2001); C. Landsman (dir.), *Shoah*, documentary (Les Films Aleph, 1985).

46 Ryszard Szczepaniak, e-mail to Krystyna Bratkowska, 20 Feb. 2019.

47 Tsanin, *Iber shteyn un shtok*, 6; Canin, *Przez ruiny i zgliszcza*, 37.