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THE BEGINNING OF EARLY MODERN YIDDISH HISTORIOGRAPHY IN ASHKENAZ

The main purpose of this paper will be to present the origins and growth of the popularity of historical writing in Yiddish in the 16th–18th centuries in the Ashkenazi Diaspora. This issue is linked directly to Jewish attitudes toward history and historical writing in this period and the placement of historiographical works in Yiddish into the mainstream of Jewish Culture. I would like to demonstrate their close relationship with medieval historical writing in Hebrew.

The number of papers and articles in specialist journals dealing with this subject is far from impressive. Researchers have focused mainly on works written in Hebrew by authors from both the Sephardic and the Ashkenazi Jewish communities. The trend begun by Y.H. Yerushalmi of studies on Jewish historiography has essentially not included the literature we are interested in. Another great historian of the last generation, S.W. Baron, also focused mainly on so-called “historical literature” in Hebrew. Moshe Rosman, in his book *How Jewish is Jewish History?*, in general did not mention Yiddish historiography of that time.¹

Moreover, the majority of works were usually devoted to one narrow subject, and hence there is a definite lack of a systematic survey of early modern historiography in Yiddish and attempts at putting together the works of individual researchers. What is more, there are hardly any works written in Polish. There is, then, a real need to carry out systematic research and multi-faceted analysis of the resources that would surely contribute to a better understanding of the mentality of the Jews in the Ashkenazi Diasporas. Furthermore we should state that the vast majority of early modern Yiddish texts have never been subjected to any serious scholarly examination, so we still lack a comprehensive study of the contents of works classified as historical literature.

Primarily we should consider the Jewish attitudes toward history and historical writing in this period. History and historical awareness in Jewish society has for many centuries functioned on the margins of Jewish social and cultural life.² The most important task for Jewish scholars was to study the details of Talmudic law and the issues from the field of mystics and theology, entirely apart from historical questions. This type of content was never of prime importance. Such an approach was largely the effect of understanding the philosophy of the history of the Jewish nation in the Diaspora, according to which the history of the chosen nation is a stage in the realization of the divine plan manifested in the history of the world and, in particular, in the special place and role assigned to the Jews.

¹ See Baron 1958; Yerushalmi 1982 (and 1988); Rosman 2007.

² See Bonfil 1997, 9.

As Rosman claims, “such an attitude towards ‘Jewish history’ as a special subset of ‘history’, in addition to whatever general rules there were, was bound by the terms of God’s covenant with Israel.”³ Writing about historical events and their analysis made sense if it fulfilled for future generations *zakhor*, the religious maintaining of memory. In no case were these Jewish authors capable of interpreting content without religious context. The most important issue was the eschatological dimension. Biblical history was too holy to be the object of historical research. Post-biblical stories written after the destruction of the Second Temple were read in the context of the expectation of the final salvation by the Messiah. It seems that this was the main reason why the two main branches of Jewish historiography in the Middle Ages, the Ashkenazi Crusader chronicles and the Sephardi chains of tradition, both had a religious function in remembering the martyrs and the rabbinical hierarchy. In the 16th century appeared a whole corpus of chronicles dealing with the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Its function was also the remembrance of the victims of the Inquisition, although a new interest in European politics arose too. The historiographic works at that time were mostly written in Hebrew. This might not be surprising, since Hebrew was the language of the intellectual and religious elites. This combination resulted in a Hebrew historiography that was produced by the literate class and interwoven in religious discourse.

Undoubtedly, this type of writing was not appreciated by a rabbinic orthodoxy that was concerned about the discussion of dogmatic and doctrinal purity. Negative attitudes towards history entered Jewish thought along the same path, as did the change of attitude towards other profane activities cultivated almost innocently by medieval Jewish society. Halakhic rigidity over this issue was one of the particular aspects of the general process of building a Jewish identity in the medieval Diaspora. Similarly, the Jewish historical writers in the early modern period, being socially dependent from the rabbinical and administrative establishment, were well aware of these sensibilities. They therefore evaded critical positions, concentrated on the facts and stories themselves, and only introduced new facts and stories that were thought not to harm the interests of the Jewish community.

Jewish chronicles dating from the 16th–18th centuries in Hebrew had a framework similar to the first of this type of chronicle, David Gans’ *Zemah david* (Prague, 1592), and were divided in two sections. One part covered the history of the Jews, the other that of other nations. Both “reviewed all of the events the authors considered to be significant from the creation of the world until their own times,”⁴ and followed the example of very popular medieval works such as the anonymous *Sefer Yosippon*.⁵ In these books was expressed the conviction that “Jewish history was governed by different rules and was headed for a different destiny from the rest of humankind’s history. According to early modern historiographers, the Jews had a special relationship with God and, while He managed all history, He situated theirs in the reward-and-punishment and exile-and-redemption matrices that were delineated long ago in the

³ Rosman 2007, 43. See also Bonfil 1997, 9.

⁴ Rosman 2007, 43.

⁵ See Flusser 1978/1980.

Bible.”⁶ This attitude was changed by the Haskalah movement, and mainly it was brought about by the activity of the German Jews with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, who were extremely conscious of the importance of historical problems.⁷ It was then that the breakthrough and the redefining of the former intellectual ideas took place. If we discuss the previous period, however, we must take into account the peculiarities of works dating from the 16th–18th centuries, in terms of both their content and their methodology.

Yiddish chronicles, which have survived in small numbers to the present, were basically free translations of popular authors writing in Hebrew as well as various compilations of texts. In Zinberg’s *History of Yiddish Literature* a few works were mentioned which were translated from Hebrew. The most popular was a Yiddish translation of the well-known *Sefer Yosippon*, published in Zurich in 1546 by a convert to Christianity, Michael Adam, following the later Hebrew version that Tam Ibn Yahya published in Constantinople in 1510. This book included stories about the fates of the Jews in the Diaspora and found enormous favor among ordinary readers, and was therefore soon reprinted and appeared several times in various translations and editions. As early as 1591 an anonymous translation appeared in Krakow of Salomon ibn Verga’s popular historical chronicle *Shevet Yehuda*. This work also enjoyed great success among the people and was reprinted a number of times.

Michael Stanislawski speculates that, although we do not know anything about the author of the translation, his background might have been similar to that of the publisher of the work, about whom we know a good deal: Isaak ben Aaron Prosnitz. He was one of the most important Hebrew and Yiddish printers in Poland in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. He was born in Prosnitz, Moravia, and learned the art of Hebrew printing in Venice. From there he came to Krakow, where in 1567 he was granted a privilege by King Zygmunt August II to remain in Poland for 50 years, and then founded a publishing house. Of the 200 books published by him and his descendants, 73 were in Yiddish and included both original works, such as the *Brant Spiegel* and *Seyfer Mitsves Nashim*, and many translations into the vernacular of liturgical works as well as the books of Samuel, Song of Songs, Psalms and Daniel, the ethical works of the great luminaries of Polish Jewery, including Moses Iserles, Salomon Luria, and Mordecai Jaffe.⁸

However, not all the Hebrew chronicles translated into Yiddish found a wide audience. A good example is the abovementioned David Gans’ *Zemah david* (Prague, 1592), translated into Yiddish and published by Solomon Hanau in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1698. This chronicle was originally written in an official style that frightened away simple and uneducated readers. Though Gans’ annals are very dry and have no great intrinsic value, they are noted as the first work of this kind among the German Jews,

⁶ Rosman 2007, 43.

⁷ However, L. Hecht (2005, 347) claims that Prague was a center of Jewish historical writing before the birth of *Wissenschaft*, and the historical narratives of three distinct Bohemian *maskilim*, Peter Beer (1758–1838), Salomo Löwisohn (1789 en 1821), and Marcus Fischer (1788–1858) are shown to illustrate the options available to Jewish historians before institutionalized German historicism came to dominate the field.

⁸ Stanislawski 1998, 137.

who at that time appreciated historical knowledge, but at a distance. Indeed, in his preface to the second volume the author deemed it necessary to justify himself for having dealt with so profane a subject as the annals of general history, and endeavored to demonstrate that it was permitted to read history on Saturdays. The case of the chronicle *Jeven Metzula (The Abyss of Despair)*, published in Venice in 1653 and written by the historian, Talmudist, and cabalist Natan Hannover, was considerably better. The rhymed version of this book, describing events during the Chmielnicky Uprising, was published by Moses Abraham ben Amsterdam two years later, and immediately achieved publishing success. The *Jeven Metzula* passed through many Yiddish editions, especially among the Polish Jews, because Hannover gave in his work a very vivid account of Jewish life in Poland and of the *yeshivot*. He also provided a brief description of the Polish government of the time and its relationship with the Cossacks, and thus indirectly indicates the causes which led to the Cossack insurgency.

This is not the only historical literature in Yiddish, however. Subsequently there came into being works originally written in Yiddish, describing present events in European-Jewish society. These comprise numerous, usually short and anonymous reports about pogroms, expulsions, and accusations of ritual murder and of using human blood (allegedly, the blood of Christian children was especially coveted, the so-called “blood libel”) in Jewish rituals, which had the purpose of keeping these sad events alive for descendants. They were not chronicles in the strict sense, but rather the legacy that authors wanted to preserve of the memory of these traumatic occurrences for the next generation, depicting the medieval nature of this type of writing about the Jewish past. To this circle undoubtedly belongs the anonymous account about the expulsion of the Jews from Worms in 1636. The book, entitled *Tzores Wermayze*, was first published in 1898. In another work, published in 1669, were described the miserable results of the accusation of blood libel towards Rafael Levi in Metz. On the title page was an explanation of why it had been written and for whom: “Be seen and read, to all of us, men and women, boys and girls may the miracles God has done for us to protect us from Israel’s enemies. Therefore may everyone study to serve Him with their whole soul. Amen.”⁹ Works responding to numerous anti-Jewish incidents also came into being in Poland during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. At the beginning of the 18th century, for instance, Haim Alshech published *Teshuat Israel*, which was translated into Yiddish and contained three separate reports about an accusation of blood libel in Viterbo, Italy, in 1706.

Yerushalmi remarked that nearly all of these works were prompted by the traumatic expulsion from cities and countries in western Europe or by the Chmielnicky massacres in the Polish-Lithuania Commonwealth in the middle of the 17th century, an event which forced a new consideration of historical events, especially persecutions. Yet its principal effect was to arouse once again the problem of theodicy and to intensify messianic hopes. With the exception of the Hebrew chronicle of Solomon Ibn Verga and Azariah de’Rossi, there is little evidence among the 16th–18th-century writers of the critical temper which characterized the Renaissance. Moreover, as we

⁹ Zinberg 1975, 230.

mentioned above, interest in post-biblical historical events still remained on the periphery of Jewish memory and outside the mainstream of Jewish creativity in the early modern period. Only in this period would it become central and the earlier works be held up as precedents.

In many cases Jewish writers were influenced by the works of the Protestant Reformation's authors, particularly French and German historiography. This proves that the Jewish philosophers and scholars writing in Yiddish were in touch with European culture, and their works are largely the reflection of the then-current trends prevailing in West European historical writings. It requires further study, however, to find out to what extent they had adopted the critical instruments and the methodology worked out by the European historians of the modern times and what role was played in this process by historians writing in Hebrew. The attention of the outer world was drawn by the later fate of the Jews. Schudt, in his *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten*, gave a short history of the past and a fairly accurate and complete account of the contemporary condition of the Jews. He was followed by Jacob Christian Basnage, who for the first time put in systematic form an account of the history of the Jews during the Christian centuries. His work remained for a long time the chief source of information to the outer world on Jewish history.

The first Jewish author to address the issue of the legitimacy of using non-Jewish authors was the Hebrew writer Azariah de' Rossi, who selected and translated this type of texts, after careful editing which might often have been sheer manipulation. Menachem Man ben Salomon Halevi Amelander followed the same path in Yiddish.¹⁰ A prominent scholar, historian, translator, Hebrew grammarian and one of the most eminent Hebrew and Yiddish publishers in Holland, Menachem Man was born in Amsterdam to a rich Jewish family in about 1698 and studied for a few years in Prague. He translated into Yiddish numerous popular Hebrew works, including a bilingual edition of the Bible published in conjunction with his brother-in-law Eliezer Zussman Rodelsheim (Amsterdam, 1725–1729). In the preface of *Sherit Yisroel*,¹¹ he explained that he decided to print the Yiddish translation of the *Sefer Josippon* with a short history of Jewry from the destruction of the Second Temple until the year 1743 to show the broader Ashkenazi audience the fate of the Jews in the Diaspora. This book was printed in Amsterdam in 1743 and completely unknown to Polish scholars and not translated into the Polish language.

According to Yerushalmi, the value of Menachem Man's chronicle from a methodological point of view is rather poor, but it should be considered as a very interesting source of cultural and social life and used as a history of individual local Jewish communities regarding various cultural and economic dependencies and separation from the predominantly Christian society.¹² Although the author dedicated a large part of his work to ancient and medieval Jewish history, we can also find in his chronicle a rich as well as unusually interesting description of Ashkenazi communities

¹⁰ For information on Menachem Man ben Salomon Halevi Amelander's biography, see Reizen 1914, 58–59.

¹¹ Hominer 1964.

¹² Yerushalmi 1982, 133.

in many European countries and the decline of individual centers of Jewish community, including Poland after the tragic events of the Cossack Uprising of 1648–1656.

The author employed various sources, of both Jewish and Christian provenance, and used a comparatively rich critical apparatus to present the wide political and cultural development of European Jewry. He was mainly influenced by the Jewish history of Basnage and the impact of the Dutch cultural environment which induced him to write in Yiddish, the language of the common people.¹³ For these reasons, his work constitutes an unusually valuable investigative material for scholars studying the history of Jewish “collective memory.” His chronicle was the main inspiration for other history books written in 18th century Amsterdam. These works are to be qualified as contemporary history. They deal with a short period of time and concentrate on the Jewish and general history of Amsterdam and the Dutch Republic.

The origins and the growth in popularity of historical writing in Yiddish might be explained by the development of publishing activity among Jews and the growth of the audience of the so called vernacular literature for which Yiddish – the language of women and uneducated men – was the carrier. In the 18th century Jewish historiography moved from the Hebrew domain into the Yiddish one. Yiddish had been the daily language of Ashkenazi Jews throughout Europe since the Middle Ages. Yiddish books were aimed at a larger public and dealt mainly with popular devotion, ethics and practical life, the so-called *Musar*-literature. Yiddish chronicles and historical works functioned partially as such literature for common people. Jacob ben Mattathias, publisher of a Yiddish translation of *Tam ve-Yashar* in 1670, declared on the title page: “Because in this book are related the deeds that God, Blessed Be He, did from the creation of the world until Joshua brought the people of Israel into Palestine, we have translated it from Hebrew into Judeo-German, so that all may know the miracles and wonders.”¹⁴ In similar words an anonymous author of a Yiddish translation *Shvet Yehudah* described his publishing intention: “Well translated in brief, for reading by common householders, men and women. One will find in it wonderful stories that happened to our ancestors in exile, and how many times they sanctified God’s name... With it man will awaken his heart to the fear of God. May God further preserve His People and send the redeemer, the Messiah, Son of David speedily, in our days. Amen.”¹⁵ Thus, we should enquire about the place of such works in the mainstream of Jewish, and especially Yiddish, literature. Although there was a wide readership of Yiddish historical works, this issue requires further research.

In summary, I hope I have demonstrated in this short review the beginnings and development of historical writing in Yiddish among the Jews in the early modern period. I have also tried to explain their attitudes toward history during this time. We should search for the roots of modern Jewish historiography in the later period, that is, the Haskalah movement, as in the 16th century processes began which culminated in the middle of the 18th. While it is true that in the early modern period, Yiddish writers copied and developed the Hebrew works, they nevertheless accomplished a very

¹³ See Fuks 1981, 170.

¹⁴ Zinberg 1975, 232.

¹⁵ Zinberg 1975, 230.

important task: they gave common readers entertainment in their spare time and moral edification as well. The chroniclers brought knowledge from the Hebrew corpus of the religious establishment into the language of the whole Ashkenazi community, just as they imported knowledge from the Christian society into the Jewish community, by using various Christian sources. They can be called the gatekeepers, who transmitted knowledge from the Hebrew and non-Jewish domains into the Yiddish. By analyzing early modern Jewish historical works in Yiddish we can focus on their function in Jewish culture throughout the centuries as well as their place in the realm of general historical analyses.

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