The Sounds of Silence of Jewish Lithuania

A historic human life is defined not least by its well-quantified ephemerality. The part of a death is the loss of the individual beloved, not any intellectual surprise at the advent of death-in-itself. For the universality of death is after all as much part of the story of life as the irksome contest to accomplish something of note while the clock yet ticks.

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One of the most accomplished genocides in the history of our planet was the Holocaust. And it happened in the living memory of people who are with us still today.

The stature of Jewish Lithuania reached a highpoint with the life and writings of the Gaon of Vilna, Eliezer ben Shlomo Zalman. When the totalitarian Soviet authorities decided to dismantle the old Jewish cemetery at Purim (now part of Siputeka) after the war, permission was given for his bones and gravestone, and those of his immediate family, to be moved.

The original gravestone inscriptions are preserved in a small mausoleum visited by the devout from many parts of the world (pp. 166, 167).

Traditional Jewish religious culture is the oldest of the traditions for which Lithuanian Jewry became prominent. Its writings were in Hebrew and Aramaic, and its vernacular was a singular Lithuanian Yiddish that became the most prestigious form of Yiddish in Europe. In later times it came to form the basis, internationally, of the modern standard literary language. Cultural counterstreams within traditional orthodoxy spawned a rainbow that embraced dancing Lithuanian Hasidism in the far east of Jewish Lithuania (the Chabad movement in the Vilnius and Mohilov regions) and the said-said stern self-improving ethicism (the Musar movement) at its far west. In the classic spirit of East European Jewry, small and otherwise insignificant towns — fiefdoms — became world famous. For Chabad in the east, it was Lyady (now Ledniki in Belarus) and Lubavitch (now Lubavitch, Russia). For Musar in the west, it was Salant (now Szalatyn, Lithuania). One backwater estate, these little Lithuanian towns were transformed from geographic dots into durable international symbols.

Nowadays the word “genocide” is sometimes trivialized for political advantage by certain states, and by their critics alike. Real genocide, however, leaves a toxic residue: an extinct race. It is no disrespect to the small Jewish community of Vilnius and a few other cities today to note that nearly all of the erstwhile significant towns — shtetlakh — became world-famous. For Chabad in the east, it was Lyadi (now Lyady in modern Belarus) and Viski (now Viski, Russia). For Musar in the west, it was Salant (now Szalatyn, Lithuania). Its writings were in Hebrew and Aramaic, and its vernacular was a singular Lithuanian Yiddish that became the most prestigious form of Yiddish in Europe. In later times it came to form the basis, internationally, of the modern standard literary language. Cultural counterstreams within traditional orthodoxy spawned a rainbow that embraced dancing Lithuanian Hasidism in the far east of Jewish Lithuania (the Chabad movement in the Vilnius and Mohilov regions) and the said-said stern self-improving ethicism (the Musar movement) at its far west. In the classic spirit of East European Jewry, small and otherwise insignificant towns — fiefdoms — became world famous. For Chabad in the east, it was Lyady (now Ledniki in Belarus) and Lubavitch (now Lubavitch, Russia). For Musar in the west, it was Salant (now Szalatyn, Lithuania). One backwater estate, these little Lithuanian towns were transformed from geographic dots into durable international symbols.

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But people and peoples, tribes and nations, leave something of themselves in their children and in other people whose lives they impact, and in the collective culture they bequeath, be it oral or written, or otherwise passed on. The ongoing collective is somehow immune to death in the normal course of things. The “self-preserving culture gene” can be as tenacious as its biological prototypes.

But all of that is obliterated when there is genocide, when a people, from newborns to the most aged, is utterly wiped out.

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Lithuania, which is called in Yiddish, in Lithuanian Hebrew, and in Lithuanian (in Hebrew), Nahum Slouschz comments: “We are in the Jewish country, perhaps the only Jewish country in the world.”

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Nowadays the word “genocide” is sometimes trivialized for political advantage by certain states, and by their critics alike. Real genocide, however, leaves a toxic residue: an extinct race. It is no disrespect to the small and vibrant Jewish community of Vilnius and a few other cities today to note that nearly all of the erstwhile 239 Jewish communities on the territory of the Republic of Lithuania are now Jewish ghost towns. This book brings the reader the names of 176 of those places, and images from 74, in a stark collection of compellingly haunting photographs, mostly from the realm of traditional Lithuanian Jewish religious culture: cemeteries, studyhouses, synagogues, shtetl scenes.

Jewish legend is rich in accounts of the souls of the departed rising up in old graveyards into the nightglo mist above their bones. In some places, there was a custom of going to the cemetery to invite the souls of the departed to a wedding or other joyous occasion.
The eminently remarkable Lithuanian Hebrew inscriptions on old gravestones evoke a query. They are not only reminders-in-stone of people who once were, but of a people — Lithuanian Jewry — that once was. As clearly as if it was crafted today, a stone in Malalá (Molėtai) bemoans the loss of “our mother, the esteemed woman, Shafli daughter of Chaim, on the second day of the new-month festival of Elul.” The Jewish town hall just beneath the grass or earthline, hiding coryp from the camera, and our eye (p. 21).

Another beloved mother, Mira (Misė), is lamented in the inscription on a leaning stone adorned with a menorah, in Hlydvaitstutsk (Ančiukai) (p. 22).

A stone lying face-up on the ground in Lapygynė (Linkmenys) reads: “Marker for a Living Soul! Here is the place of rest of a dear and honorable man, honest and upright, God fearing, our teacher the rabbi Yehiel-Michl, son of our teacher the rabbi Rabbi Yosef (Yosef) the Cohen. And his soul departed in purity on the fifth day of the week, the 25th day of Iyar [5]647 according to the abbreviated reckoning [ = Thursday 19 May 1887]. May his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life. God have mercy on him [or: on us]” (p. 25)

There is an intoxicating symbolism about old cemeteries where nature herself has redesigned the rows of upright stones into unfeltted, unrefrained shapes and designs. A Finger-of-God effect that turns a human work into an integral part of a landscape.

The art photographer’s eye adds a new dimension by abstracting a chosen segment. In Seirey (Seirijai), we glimpse a vertical row of three stones (p. 78). The first is rounded, the one behind is pointed with a birch tree by its side, and the last is quadrilateral, playfully hinting at a trapezoid. The rounded name atop the first is clearly visible, and rings out in a silent voice, in biblical cadence, that once upon a time there lived in Seirey a certain man named Shabsai-Shetl, the son of Meir, of the house of Hurvitz.

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The wordless verse of abandoned graveyards is a poetry of the incomplete. Here, a stone gateway into a cemetery stands tall, but there is almost nothing within it, for the gravestones were taken for foundation stones, and as ballast for roads and other local jobs. There, a rounded stone crowned by the wintery branches of a low-encroaching tree almost disappears into the earth, to join the bones it was placed to mark (p. 194).

A forsaken graveyard discovered in a forest, in a field, on a hilltop, arouses some poignant romanticism, akin to an archaeological thrill, about a people long gone. That it has been uncared-for usually means that it to use in a manner that simultaneously honors the memory of the people who made it and inhabited it before their destruction.

At many a studyhouse in the Lithuanian shtetl, the melody of Talmudic study wafted out of candle-lit windows deep into the night. They were places where Jewish people met to pray and learn, and to exchange news and views. Where the rich Lithuanian Yiddish of their speech harmonized with the Hebrew and Aramaic of the prayers, and with the ancient and more recent tomas studied.

The prayer and studyhouse images in this book span a spectrum, from the heart of the big city to the remote little shtetl. In present-day Vilnius, the famed Zal Shul (Zarl Synagogue) is an eerie ruin situated at the confluence of two streets: Būrūnas-gat (now Gėlūs) and Sudokų (Sudzo), in a rough neighborhood from a moment from the railway and bus stations (pp. 172, 173). Its entrance via a courtyard, where one can still see the cylindrical mini-tower attached to the building to encircle in splendor its sacred ark housing the scrolls of the Torah.

In faraway Pokroy (Pakruojis), the ruin of a wooden synagogue that now looks like any old barn (p. 40), was once famous for its interior wall paintings. One wall had a portrait of a nesting lark above a line from the prophetic Amos: “The lion hath roared, who will not fear!” (Amos 3:8). The people of Pokroy needed no reminder of the second half of the verse: “God Almighty hath spoken, who will not go and prophesy?” Another wall had a painting of a train pulling into the town’s newly built station. The Jewish townspeople were so proud of their Pokroy getting its own station, that they celebrated with a painting on the wall of their wooden synagogue.

May the current and future neighbors of these stones and structures find the wisdom and energy to discover and cherish what once existed in their own hometown. And to foster ideas for restoring a forlorn ruin and putting it to use in a manner that simultaneously honors the memory of the people who made it and inhabited it before their destruction.