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Dina Abramowicz

YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

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Gurardians of a Tragic Heritage: Reminiscences and Observations of an Eyewitness*

Dina Abramowicz

*YIVO Institute for Jewish Research
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Excerpts from the Introduction by Zachary M. Baker

It is an unusual honor for me to introduce the 1998 Myer and Rosaline Feinstein Foundation Lecturer, Dina Abramowicz. The Feinstein Lecture is a program of the Council of Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies and is sponsored by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture's Jewish Endowment for the Arts and Humanities. . . .

The Second World War ended more than half a century ago; nevertheless, it continues to cast a very long shadow. Much ink has been spilled of late, concerning dormant Swiss bank accounts, Nazi gold, plundered art treasures, and "trophy" libraries and archives that were wrested from their original owners and never returned. Since the end of the Cold War, new discoveries in the former Eastern Bloc have continually come to light. Some involve art objects, books, and archival documents that were removed from Germany en masse by the victorious Soviet Union in 1945; others concern collections that had long been given up for lost, having been shrouded in mystery during the long decades of official secrecy regarding their whereabouts.

Of the many Eastern European Jewish libraries and archives whose fates were

unknown until the late 1980's, we may cite two outstanding examples: The first is the famous An-ski archive, which was assembled before the First World War, during a fabled ethnographic expedition that was led by the famous Jewish writer (author of *The Dybbuk*) Shloyme-Zanvl Rapoport, or Sh An-ski. Amazingly, many of the materials in the An-ski archive - including wax-cylinder field recordings of Jewish folk music - are intact and in the hands of the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine. The second example should be familiar to this audience, since it was the object in March 1997 of a special CARLJS mission that was sponsored by the National Foundation for Jewish Culture, with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. I refer to the large collection of Hebrew and Yiddish books and newspapers that now resides within a former monastery in Vilnius, among the holdings of the National Library of Lithuania.

Dina Abramowicz was an eyewitness to the terrible events that are connected with the Jewish bibliographical treasures of Vilna. A native of the city that was once known far and wide as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania," she is the last surviving staff-member of the Vilna Ghetto Library, a tiny island of sanity in a world gone mad. For more than 50 years Miss Abramowicz has been a librarian at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, serving as head librarian for 25 of those years.

Dina Abramowicz's paper bears the title "The Guardians of a Tragic Heritage: Reminiscences and Observations of an Eyewitness." In it she calls our attention to the importance of the printed book to the Ghetto reader, and reminds us of the librarian's pivotal role as the standardbearer of civilization. She also discusses the miraculous recovery, after World War Two, of the books and documents that were hidden by Jewish forced laborers in Vilna who had been assigned the task of sorting through Jewish libraries and archives that were being plundered by the Third Reich. The story Dina Abramowicz relates here is a testimonial to those heroic book-lovers who were able to prevent these library and archival materials from becoming "Spoils of War." We are privileged indeed to hear it from someone who was actually there.

Zachary M. Baker was Head Librarian of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and President of the Council of Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies (CARLJS) at the time this lecture was delivered. He is now the Reinhard Family Curator of Judaica and Hebrew Collections at Stanford University Libraries.

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**Lecture by
Dina Abramowicz**

I understand this occasion as a symbolic gesture to pay respects to our colleagues who perished during the Holocaust. I will try to tell you about some of them whom I had the honor to meet during those horrible times.

It is not easy for a survivor to speak about memories of the period—the most horrible period in general history, and in my personal history as well. I think the names which the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century historians used for their tragic chronicles, *The Valley of Tears* and *The Abyss of Despair*, serve better to describe the feelings of a survivor than the term which has become somewhat dry—the Holocaust. It is easier, however, to speak about dry facts than about tears. I will use them here with the hope that they will serve as an introduction to the story.

One of the people I would like to remember today is Herman Kruk, the author of the *Diary of the Vilna Ghetto*. If Jews are called “the People of the Book,” Kruk was the man of the book in Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania, in the last tragic stages of Vilna’s life. But he also was a statistician, and in the *Diary*, under the date of May 7, 1942, we find an entry entitled “Statistics and Statistics of Sorrow.” It informs us that there were 56,000 Jewish residents in Vilna during the interwar period. In June 1941, their number swelled to 60,000, due to the influx of refugees from western Poland. But in May 1942, the statistician puts down—“with a trembling hand”—the figure 47,447: the number of those who disappeared from the face of the earth in the short period between July 1941 and January 1942.

The remainder was an official count of 12,000, plus several thousand “illegals.” We know now that this was not the final count. But the statistician who put down the numbers “with a trembling hand” knew it as well: the specter of the “Final Solution” hung over the ghetto during the entire short period of its two-year existence, and the premonition of doom alternated with short periods of hope, which were always deceiving.

May we add another group of relevant statistics that we find in the entry of May 6 of the same year? In the pre-war period, the population of the area designated as Ghetto No. 1 numbered 4,000 residents, mostly Jews. In the beginning of September

1941, the original residents were cleared from the area to make room for 29,000 Jews resettled from larger Vilna areas to the ghetto. The result of this move was that the space that was previously occupied by one resident had to be shared by seven people, or—as the statistician tells us elsewhere—each ghetto resident had not quite two square meters of space at his disposal.

I thought that this statistical introduction might perhaps give you some insight into what life in the ghetto was like. It took extraordinary courage and dedication to public service to rise above these conditions, and to maintain the struggle for survival that was needed to endure in these inhuman circumstances. Herman Kruk was one of these extraordinary people.

In the incredible chaos of the first days in the ghetto, when people literally could not find a place to put down their bundles, in the human cage allotted for 29,000 homeless bewildered people, Kruk did not waste much time to secure some *Lebensraum* for himself. As soon as he found a hole in the basement of a building and slept through the first night, he headed for the library known as Hevrah Mefitse Haskalah Library, which, by lucky accident, happened to be in the territory of the ghetto. He knew the library from the pre-ghetto period, when as a refugee from Warsaw, he visited it frequently. As the former head of the central Yiddish library in Warsaw, he immediately decided that he would take care of and restore to life this abandoned and devastated institution.

After the first quick survey, he already knew that the library, which contained 45,000 volumes in the pre-war years, had been robbed of at least 9,000 volumes. He started to recruit help and succeeded in finding some professional staff and volunteers to restore the place. The temporary Jewish authorities of the ghetto had enough presence of mind to support his efforts. The books scattered on the floor were put back on the shelves, the floors cleaned and swept, the torn, hand-written catalogs were repaired and replaced where needed. I was one of those Kruk recruited to work in the library and can testify that I felt lucky and privileged to be there. The library was a real oasis of peace, order, and civilization in the turmoil of the ghetto. Kruk was proud that he had created a place for the intellectual remnants of the Vilna Jewish community.

Unfortunately, as was the case with every other establishment in the ghetto, this intel-

lectual refuge was not very secure. The library had lost many of its staff members and customers to several selections and deportations, which took place in the last three months of 1941. But it endured, and at the end of a three-month period Kruk was able to prepare a report on its activities. It included all the normal library functions: acquisitions, cataloging, preservation and restoration, and attendance. At the end of a year he prepared an annual report, and on November 13, 1942, he arranged a big event for the ghetto—the celebration of the Library on the occasion of the 100,000 books that it circulated during the past year. The event was reported in his *Diary* in the following words:

On the occasion of 100,000 books, the library will arrange a big cultural matinee. It will take place in the ghetto theater Sunday, November 13, at 12 o’clock. The program will include: opening words by G. Jaszunski, greetings by the ghetto chief, the staff, the scholars’ circle, teachers and the youth club. After that will follow a lecture under the title “The Book and *Kiddush Hashem*” delivered by Dr. Cemach Feldstein, and after that a paper by H. Kruk, “100,000 Books in the Ghetto.” The second part of the program will consist of a concert of music and poetry.

This celebration, with the ghetto theater as its stage and representatives of the ghetto administration and intellectual elite as participants, would indicate that the library played an important role in ghetto life. But what role? Unfortunately, Kruk’s paper was not preserved, or at least not discovered yet among the recovered papers of Vilna. But Kruk’s annual report is there, and in the forward to the report we find his answer. He poses the natural question: in the inhuman conditions of ghetto life, where people were deprived of basic elements of life—security, privacy, and food—who would want to read books? Books, asserted Kruk, are read for cultural enrichment, entertainment, self-education and insight into one’s own soul. But who would indulge in these things in the ghetto? And yet, surprisingly enough, the readership of the library, in relation to the number of registered members, increased. How can one explain it? Kruk has an answer: books were narcotics, a way to get away, to escape the unbearable reality. Books were taken out during the most tragic events of ghetto life, immediately after selections and deportations, and read in crowded rooms, where people slept on their bundles instead of their beds.

A poignant illustration of this point of view are the slogans with which the Library appealed to its readers, fearing the deterioration of its impoverished book stock by intensive use. They are as follows:

Your only comfort in the ghetto is the book.

The book lets you forget the sad reality.

The book transports you into worlds that are far away from the ghetto.

The book can still your hunger when you have nothing to eat.

The book remained true to you; you, on your part, should be true to the book. (Balberiski, p. 440)

The librarian-statistician who classified his material in five major groups—fiction, children's literature, science, history and sociology, and periodicals—found out that the largest circulation was in fiction—80 percent or more—and that the cheapest kind of fiction, detective stories and romances (what we would call soap operas), constituted the bulk of the requested books. But if this was the case, why would a ghetto library be such a great achievement in ghetto life? Kruk does not pose this question. For him, as a public servant, the answer is clear. These were the demands of the time and place, and the book solution, the book therapy, was still better than suicide or madness. As an ideologically committed librarian—he was a Yiddishist and a Bundist (that is, a socialist)—he noted with disappointment that the majority of the library books were in non-Jewish languages and that the demands of even the better readers, especially the young ones, were not in the field of Judaica. But these were the facts of life, the results of assimilation and secularization.

In the free world of pre-war Poland the librarian could do something about it, and he did. But in the ghetto conditions, he felt that all he could do was to make the unbearable life in the ghetto a little less unbearable if the book could contribute to it—after all what he was trying to do was to provide the book the reader was asking for.

However, as the ghetto life continued, the librarian noticed a positive development: a greater demand for books in Yiddish and Hebrew, and also an interest in general and Jewish history. The better, more serious reader started to look for an explanation of the unbelievable catastrophe in analogous historical events that had befallen him, trying to learn the lessons of history and find a glimpse of hope that evil cannot be everlasting. The librarian also

noted another very important function the library had to fulfill in the ghetto: it was supplying the school population with books. There were no special children's libraries, and the children constituted the liveliest and most demanding part of the library clientele.

The companion of the circulating library in the ghetto was the Reading Room. This was a pet project of Kruk's, his own creation, because the pre-Holocaust Hevrah Mefitse Haskalah Library had discontinued its reading room for lack of funds a long time ago. Kruk reclaimed the storage room of the library, equipped it with book shelves and book closets, decorated it with pictures, sculptures and objects of ceremonial art. He reserved for this room important reference books, such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, multi-volume histories, editions of classics, and rare books. It was meant for the serious reader and for scholars who had privileges not available to others such as book reservations and borrowing possibilities for overnight and weekend use, although the library was open long hours and on weekends. Children were restricted to morning hours and were not allowed to bring homework there, as space was at a premium.

To complete the picture, Haykl Lunski, the former librarian of the famous Strashun Library, was appointed supervisor and head of the Reading Room. The Reading Room and the Library may have been the only institutions in the ghetto that preserved the semblance of institutions in normal pre-ghetto life. It is quite possible that for non-ghetto residents, it is hard to perceive how great this achievement was.

But saving the Hevrah Mefitse Haskalah Library and serving its readers were not the only responsibility Kruk was compelled to assume. It turned out that Jewish books were not only in the Hevrah Mefitse Haskalah Library, but everywhere: in the apartments cleared of their residents to make room for the ghetto population, in the apartments cleared of Jews in other parts of the city, and in abandoned Jewish institutions and organizations all over town. Especially rich in books was the so-called Ghetto No. 2, which was liquidated in the late fall of 1941. Close to the area was the famous Strashun Library, the valuable library of Rabbi Chaim Oyzer Grodzenski, and numerous private libraries of residents, many of them rabbis, scholars and people involved in the life of the community.

This situation required immediate intervention, lest all these treasures be wasted.

The effort to collect and preserve books whose owners had disappeared started as soon as the situation in the ghetto was somewhat stabilized. On November 27, 1941, after the ghetto lost one-third of its population, the head of the Judenrat, A. Fried, issued an appeal to the population to preserve the cultural treasures that remained in the ghetto. Homeless books and other cultural artifacts, objects of ritual and art, should be turned in to the Library, which would be their depository (Balberiski, p. 439). It is very possible that this request was inspired by Kruk. In the entry to the *Diary* of January 7, 1942 (pp. 126-128), there is an inventory of ritual objects and *pinkasim* rescued from Ghetto No.2. With the help of dedicated people, among them Dr. Daniel Feinstein, Kruk managed to bring from Ghetto No. 2 a considerable number of books, including some from the Strashun Library.

The situation changed drastically when the emissaries of the Rosenberg Einsatzstab reappeared in the ghetto. They were in charge of cultural affairs, which meant in charge of looting and requisitioning the cultural treasures in the occupied territories. They had advanced knowledge of some outstanding collections, such as the Strashun Library and the library of the "Yiddish Scientific Institute-YIVO" in Vilna.

The emissaries of the Rosenberg Einsatzstab had already appeared in the city in July 1941 and had carried away with them five incunabula from the Strashun Library. The two Judaica experts, Noah Priłutski and J. E. Goldschmidt, who resisted their demands, were imprisoned and tortured to death. These two would illustrate very well the lecture "The Book and *Kiddush Hashem*," which was delivered at the ceremony "One Hundred Thousand Books in the Ghetto." It may even have inspired the lecture, but was certainly not mentioned, for ghetto censors could not have allowed it.

The German Judaica experts appeared the second time in Vilna after the horrible months of October, November, and December 1941, which were followed by a period of relative tranquility. This period lasted about a year and a half. It seemed that they needed all this time to complete their job. Herman Kruk, whose activities in the ghetto were already known to the Germans, was called in for consultation by the "Rosenberg Gentlemen," as he ironically called them. After one of these consultations, it became clear to him that he would have to manage, on behalf of the Germans, the enormous book riches of Vilna.

In the entry of February 28, 1942 (p. 188), Kruk lists all of them: YIVO, the Ansky Ethnographic Museum, the children's library, all the libraries of the Vilna Jewish high schools, the stock of the Kleckin Publishing House, and others. Part of the book treasures, the Strashun Library and the libraries of numerous local synagogues, were already transferred to the large space reserved for them in the University Library.

On March 1, 1942, Kruk received an official notification that he was in charge of all the Jewish books in the city. It gave him considerable freedom of movement, and he used it to inspect various abandoned sites where books were accumulated. In the entry of March 7, 1942, entitled "Vilna is not to be exhausted," we read: "There are still scores of thousands of books to be removed—work for weeks. We (viz. he and Zelig Kalmanovicz, who was named his associate) are testifying again that Vilna is a city of Torah, an ocean which cannot be exhausted."

One of the sites that shocked Kruk most was YIVO. The entry is one of the most moving descriptions of a library devastated by the Nazis:

It is difficult to report on my first visit to YIVO. Viewed independently from my own relations with the institution—and leaving aside the days and weeks that I spent under the YIVO Institute's roof—the scene that I saw yesterday was shattering indeed.

We have already written about the disposition of a portion of the YIVO collection. The remaining portions sit in the basement. To enter the basement is virtually impossible; the basement is stuffed from floor to ceiling. I stepped over the magnificent card catalog of the central Bibliographical Office. The cards are stacked on the floor half a meter high. The cards from the catalog of the YIVO library and the press collection are strewn about among them. Underneath are picture, artworks, the painting of Yankel Adler's "Two Solders," etc. The books (that were removed) from the library shelves installed in this same basement, are strewn and scattered one meter high. Dispersed between the empty closets are letters, documents, photographs, pictures, etc. (*Diary*, March 12, 1942, p. 200)

YIVO became headquarters for the team which the Judenrat was allowed to give Kruk to help in his work. It included both transportation workers and intellectuals.

The first group, directed by Kruk, supplied the material. The others sorted out and described the materials. The group became known in the ghetto as "The Paper Brigade," a nickname for workers who dealt with materials not very essential for the survival of the ghetto—the main concern of everybody. But it was very essential for the intellectual group, which included, among others, Zelig Kalmanovicz, a leading scholar of the Vilna YIVO and an expert in languages, Jewish history, Hebrew and religious literature, and also the poets Abraham Sutzkever and Shmerke Kaczerginski.

Abraham Sutzkever is one of the very few members of the team who is still alive. He is a recognized Yiddish poet, perhaps the last great Yiddish poet, as a scholar of Yiddish literature has suggested. To his pen belong the unforgettable lines written on July 6, 1941, which may be one of the most poignant, immediate responses to a national catastrophe fast approaching. To quote Sutzkever:

...And overnight our thoughts grew gray.
The sun sowed poison salt on open wounds.
We choke. White doves turn into owls.
They're poking fun, mocking our dreams that disappeared in smoke.

Kaczerginski, who retained the diminutive Shmerke (from Shmaryohu) as part of his pen-name, was a real folk poet. Some of his ghetto poems were put to music and he managed to collect and publish the first Yiddish collection of songs from ghettos and concentration camps.

The spirit of the group was highly idealistic: their purpose was to save as much of the national treasure as possible. They did not hesitate to "steal" and conceal whatever they found valuable and risked their lives to carry their packages through Jewish and often German ghetto guards posted at the entrance to the walled ghetto. The YIVO building, where the Rosenberg people established their headquarters, was outside the ghetto territory.

You can read about the activities of the Paper Brigade in several publications, the most important of which are Abraham Sutzkever's *The Vilna Ghetto*, still not translated into English; in Rokhl Pupko-Krinsky's memoir, which is included in Leo Schwarz's anthology *The Root and the Bough*; and lately in the bilingual brochure by Professor David Fishman entitled *Embers Plucked from the Fire*.

All members of the Paper Brigade deserve

our grateful memory. Most of them perished at the hands of the Nazis. Zelig Kalmanovicz and Herman Kruk were deported to the concentration camp Klooga in Estonia, and they were shot and their bodies burned a few days before the arrival of the Soviet army. They were the ones to wonder whether they were "gravediggers or saviours."

No matter what were the results of their activities, for us they will always remain saviors, because this is what they wanted and tried to be.

Part of the collections Kruk and Kalmanovicz were processing in the YIVO center were recovered in Germany after the war and, under the auspices of the American occupying powers, were returned to YIVO in New York. But part of the materials remained in Vilna, and the first thing the two surviving members of the team, Sutzkever and Kaczerginski, undertook after their return to the liberated city was to dig them out from their hiding places. Not all of the hiding places were accessible, not all of the materials were saved, but some of them were, and the two poets, together with a group of friends, tried to collect them and establish a Jewish Museum. But to their great surprise and disappointment, they encountered indifference, and later even open hostility, on the part of Lithuanian and Soviet authorities. It became clear to them that they had to save the remaining treasures again, this time smuggling them out of Vilna. The story is told, as mentioned previously, by David Fishman.

It is obvious that Sutzkever and Kaczerginski could smuggle out only that part of the material that they could carry as their personal baggage, that is only less bulky books, and, very exceptionally, the heavier ones.

The majority of their material consisted of archival items, such as documents, letters, photographs, and the like. The surviving Jewish books left in Vilna after the liquidation of the ghetto remained behind. Their present condition and fate has been described by the three-member delegation of professional librarians of the Council of Archives and Research Libraries in Jewish Studies who visited Vilna on March 19, 1997, on behalf of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. Among other things, the delegation observed "that these books and papers are survivors as compared with the scores of thousands that were destroyed altogether during the Nazi and Soviet periods of control over Lithuania."

If this presentation should be concluded with a message it could, perhaps, be this:

The "inexhaustible" book treasures of Vilna—the Jerusalem of Lithuania—and hundreds of other Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, were depleted and dispersed during the years of the Holocaust. But some of these treasures survived. The lucky post-Holocaust generations ought to remember these courageous and dedicated individuals, who struggled against incredible odds to save the spiritual riches of their people accumulated during the centuries. Let us hope that their struggle and sacrifice were not in vain.

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Dina Abramowicz was the Reference Librarian and former Head Librarian of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.