Beyond Violence. Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944-48

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Anna Cichopek-Gajraj's recent book offers valuable insight into the efforts of Holocaust survivors to rebuild their lives in Poland and Slovakia immediately after the Second World War. Despite the growing scholarship on Holocaust survivors, little attention has been given to survivors' everyday lives in the postwar period. Cichopek-Gajraj is not exaggerating when she states that most of the scholarship has focused on either violence or emigration as far as the Holocaust survivors' experience in Eastern Europe is concerned. The author challenges the dominating narratives. Her book offers insight "beyond violence" into survivors' daily interactions with non-Jewish Poles, Jewish organizations and the Polish or Slovak state administration.

With her study on Poland and Slovakia, Anna Cichopek-Gajraj advocates for a comparative approach to post-Holocaust studies. As she argues, it allows for elaborating causal explanations, separating unique phenomena from common ones, and offering a different perspective on events "which remain obscure or ambiguous when examined in the context of a single nation-state" (p. 2). Both Poland and Slovakia witnessed outbreaks of post-war anti-Jewish violence but these countries had also very different pre-war and wartime histories, as well as political settings (p. 3). By comparing Poland and Slovakia, the author studies similar phenomena created under different political and social circumstances. According to the author's own statement, her work situates itself in the middle between public and private (p. 8).

Cichopek-Gajraj's approach is facilitated by the use of a wide range of archival sources. The majority of these documents are held in the archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint), YIVO Institute for Jewish Research - both in New York, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC (USHMM), and the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (JHI), as well as collections of the Polish and Slovak central and regional state archives. By focusing her interest on the cross section of the lives of survivors and various Jewish as well as state institutions, the author tells the story through the prism of official reports, mainly those written by the Joint (American Jewish JOINT Distribution Committee, a Jewish relief organization), local Jewish representatives and administrative staff. Such an approach sheds light on the Jewish survivors' communal life in both countries, as well as their place in the social and political landscapes of post-war Poland and Slovakia. However, Cichopek-Gajraj's focus is on the social groups and institutions rather than on the experiences of the individual returnees. The author attempts to provide a more human perspective by using oral history interviews from the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, JHI, and USHMM testimonies, as well as some published memoirs. Nevertheless, the use of such personal sources is
limited and only illustrates the author's argumentation.

The book consists of seven analytical chapters. Three of them examine the situation in both countries. The remaining four chapters are focused on either Poland or Slovakia. The conclusion of the book is followed by five appendices containing texts of official Polish and Czechoslovak state documents from 1945 and 1946. Cichopek-Gajraj begins her analysis by drawing a picture of the return of Jewish survivors' to "no home". She points out the diversity of the group collectively labelled "Holocaust survivors" and attempts to describe the complexity of these people's return. The author believes "that in such circumstances – on the road – human interactions were not marked exclusively by fear, but also sometimes by compassion, sometimes curiosity or, more often, utter indifference (p. 40)." The foci in the first chapter are the journeys home, the events upon return of the Jews to the cities and villages throughout Poland and Slovakia and the conditions in which the returnees found themselves.

The majority of the survivors returned to find their homes occupied. Hence, the second analytical part of the book inquires into property restitution. According to Cichopek-Gajraj, the Polish and Slovak governments were reluctant to deal with the matter of restitution of Jewish property for several reasons. First, they were afraid that a large-scale recovery of Jewish property could cause social unrest. Second, restitution of private property was against the general trend towards nationalization. Third, neither the Polish nor the Slovak administration believed dealing with the restitution of Jewish property was their moral obligation or something that the respective government owed to its citizens who were former victims of racial persecution (p. 112).

Jewish efforts to regain their property threatened the safety of survivors in both countries, which is examined in the next part of Cichopek-Gajraj's book on anti-Jewish violence in Poland and Slovakia. Acts of anti-Jewish violence in Poland coincided with ethnic violence against Ukrainians and Germans and an on-going civil war in large parts of the country (p. 114), whereas Jews in post-war Slovakia were the only ethnic minority to fall victim to physical assaults. The scale of anti-Jewish violence in both countries was different, too. Cichopek-Gajraj estimates that 650 to 1,200 Jewish survivors lost their lives in Poland between 1944 and 1946. She also speculates that at least 36 Jews were killed in Slovakia between 1945 and 1948 (p. 117). Nevertheless, the author notes that the same factors, though possibly to different degrees, triggered anti-Jewish violence in both countries. She points out that anti-Semitic myths, stereotypes and prejudices, a will to protect wartime material gains, post-war devastation and poverty, as well as the legacy of war, namely desensitization to violence, motivated attacks against Jews (p. 140-141). The reader is offered a closer look at these processes through the case studies of two anti-Jewish pogroms: in Kraków and Topoľčany. As Cichopek-Gajraj argues, violence played an important role in both countries: "By solidifying social boundaries along highly exclusionary ethnic lines, violence turned out to be an important means of delineating the limits of belonging to a national and ethnic community" (p. 145).

The last two parts of the book are dedicated to the issues of citizenship and a return to "normality". They both contain interesting, well-researched analyses, although some conclusions might also be questioned. The author examines citizenship and its role in strengthening the divisions between "us" and "them" in post-war Polish and Slovak societies. Unlike the other parts of the book, this one focuses on particular sections of the survivor population: German speaking Jews in western Poland and Hungarian speaking Jews in southern Slovakia. Both
groups were most often seen as being part of the enemy nation and little consideration was given to the fact of their Jewishness. Thus, it is not surprising that members of both groups tried to avoid persecution by emphasizing their Jewish background and their suffering during the war. One may find it difficult to agree with the author’s argument that working to exclude themselves from German or Magyar populations signified that these Jews wanted to settle in Poland or Slovakia (p. 178). While the last analytical part provides a valuable picture of the survivors’ attempts to return to their “normal” lives (employment, family, education, community), one may question Cichopek-Gajraj’s conclusion that a “return to normality” was an option for Jewish survivors (p. 233). The author challenges this observation herself by showing the temporariness and fragmentation of this “normality”. Since normality usually involves basic stabilization and assurance, it seems legitimate to ask: “How normal was the normality to which the author refers?”

The study under review could possibly benefit from a stronger engagement with the secondary literature based on personal documents and interviews, such as Małgorzata Melchior’s book on survivors’ identity, Karen Auerbach’s work on the Jewish survivors’ families in Warsaw, and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska's article on patterns of return [1]. The reality, which is meticulously reconstructed by the author on the basis of the Joint's, as well as other institutions' documents could be compared with the works by Alina Skibińska and Ewa Kożmińska-Frejlak [2]. Such exercise would be particularly valuable since the two researchers and Cichopek-Gajraj share their research foci, while they base their studies on almost completely different sources. Despite that, there is no doubt that “Beyond Violence” is a brilliantly documented piece of cutting edge research. The author benefits from works on post-Holocaust Poland such as “Fear” by Jan T. Gross and “Wielka trwoga” by Marcin Zaremba but chooses her own perspective of inquiry – “beyond violence”. Anna Cichopek-Gajraj is a thorough historian and a pioneer. In the year 2000 she published the first, and so far the only monograph of the 1945 Kraków pogrom. With her recent book she contributes to creating a new research approach towards studying the lives of Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe immediately after the war.

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