

## Noah Prylucki and the Yiddish Nation

Data opublikowania: 16.08.2016

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*This review was first published as:* Sean Martin. Review of Weiser, Kalman, *Jewish People, Yiddish Nation: Noah Prylucki and the Folkists in Poland*. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. January, 2015.

A native of Berdichev, Ukraine, Noah Prylucki (1882-1941) studied law in Warsaw and St. Petersburg. He wrote widely for the Warsaw Yiddish press, including journalism and literature, and was a published poet. He also published in Hebrew and Russian. He was present in 1908 at the Czernowitz Conference, where he argued for Yiddish as the national language of the Jewish people. He was an advocate of Zionist socialism before he became a cofounder of the Diaspora Nationalist Folksparty during World War I. His career in Yiddish-language scholarship, especially in linguistics and folklore, competes with his political work for our attention. Those interested in national minority politics in Russia and Poland, the history of the Yiddish language, the development of Yiddish folklore, or private Jewish education will find him a fascinating figure.

Kalman Weiser's decision to approach the history of national minority politics primarily through the career of one individual is to be lauded. *Jewish People, Yiddish Nation: Noah Prylucki and the Folkists in Poland*, an important and impressively researched political biography, contributes greatly to our understanding of the lives of east European nationalist leaders and the issues they championed. The biographical approach allows Weiser to explain Prylucki's responses to some of the most vexing issues facing east European Jewry. Should they stay or should they go? Should Jews work to build their community in the Diaspora or take up the Zionist cause? Should they pursue their nationalist goals in Yiddish or Hebrew or accept the growing use of non-Jewish languages by Jews? How might they unite a fractious community in order to improve the desperate circumstances in which so many Jews of the region lived?

Prylucki, the son of the journalist and editor Tsevi Prylucki, answered these questions by turning to Yiddish as a replacement for religion as the force binding the Jewish people. Weiser's title, *Jewish People, Yiddish Nation*, intentionally uses the word "Yiddish" as Prylucki would have preferred, to describe the nation to which the Jewish people belonged. A more accurate rendering of the goal of individuals like Prylucki, "Yiddish nation" reflects both linguistic and cultural fealty even as it distinguishes these Jewish leaders from others in their community. Scholarship and politics were simply the tools Prylucki used to pursue his goal of the development

of the Yiddish nation. Among other achievements, Prylucki explored new literary styles in Yiddish, including erotic poetry; pioneered theater criticism in Yiddish; worked to build Yiddish secular schools; collected songs, stories, prayers, and jokes; and took part in the language standardization debates.

Weiser explains in great detail how Prylucki and the Folkists fought for cultural autonomy in Poland, through the support of Yiddish secular education and economic initiatives for artisans and merchants. The fight for collective rights for the Jews, not just individual rights, was a constant struggle, one that was difficult for Poles to understand. Compromise was at the heart of Prylucki's conception of nationalism. Weiser cites Prylucki's work, *Nationalizm un demokratizm* (1907): "ethical nationalism refuses to tolerate serving the interests of one nation at the expense of another. Instead, it relies upon compromise to resolve national problems" (p. 53). The initial support for the Folkist party declined in the early 1920s. The ideology of secular Yiddishism and the idea of "national personal autonomy" was not enough to attract Jews who were religiously observant and/or those who felt, understandably, the pull of Palestine. The party could not appeal to workers as effectively as the Jewish socialists. In addition, Polish Jews were attracted to both Polish and Hebrew as well. The party splintered in 1926 and never recovered "as a viable political option" (p. 226).

Prylucki continued his research and writing, spending much time abroad. Though affiliated with the philological section of YIVO, Prylucki never commanded the intellectual respect of other scholars at YIVO, such as Maks Weinreich and Zelig Kalmanovitch. He was dismissed as an autodidact and collector. Yet Prylucki was talented and astute enough to be considered one of the leading scholars of Yiddish culture. He arrived in Vilnius in October 1939 as a refugee from Warsaw. By late 1940 he was appointed chair of Yiddish at the University of Vilnius and in January 1941 he was appointed director of YIVO. Weiser's recounting of the convoluted academic and cultural politics of these appointments in the early war years makes for compelling reading. As Weiser writes, "Prylucki's academic star rose along with the red star over Vilnius" (p. 259). Prylucki was dismissed from his position in late June 1941 and killed by the Germans in August 1941.

This lengthy study is especially remarkable, because, as Weiser writes, "the Folksparty left no political heirs to record its history, its archives have been destroyed by war, and none of its leaders survived the Holocaust to commemorate it" (p. xviii). The primary source for this study was the interwar Jewish press, not least of which was *Der moment*, the newspaper founded by Prylucki in Warsaw in 1910. The paper served as the official organ of the Folkist party, but, under the editorship of Prylucki's father Tsevi, was pro-Zionist. Prylucki was a principled man dedicated to his goals, but he was not an extremist. Weiser shows us the range of his opinions, the full extent of his scholarly and political activities, and the difficult social and political circumstances of his time. Weiser's work is especially significant because he gives us a life that spans the rule of the Russian Empire, World War I, the period between the wars, and World War II. He shows us how important it is to break out of our easy periodization of Russian and east European history and to consider the lives of individuals and nations more comprehensively.

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**Sposób cytowania:**

dr Sean Martin: Recenzja: Kalman Weiser: Jewish People, Yiddish Nation: Noah Prylucki and the Folkists in Poland, 2011, w: <https://www.pol-int.org/pl/node/4683#r4844>.

<https://www.pol-int.org/pl/node/4683?j5Q6rewycZ5HtUDXTWpx7UZE=1&r=4844>