Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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Political Censorship

The books discussed in this article did not extensively discuss politics or the armed ghetto underground. With some exceptions, they did not focus on “class warfare in the ghetto.”¹⁵ Unlike the ghetto diaries of Emanuel Ringelblum, published at the same time, they devoted little interest to the situation outside the ghetto walls. They rather focused more extensively on what was happening in the ghetto. Moreover, as research on Polish and Yiddish editions of Ringelblum’s “Notes” clearly demonstrate, works published in Yiddish were aimed at the Yiddish-reading public in and outside of Poland and were of much less interest to the state censors than Polish publications of documents relating to the Holocaust.¹⁶ Yet, even for Yiddish-language publications, their editors had to make sure that their content did not conflict with the prevailing historiography and the Stalinist vision of Polish-Jewish history.

Jehuda Feld’s *In di tsaytn fun Homen dem tsveytn* was one of the first book publications of materials from the Ringelblum Archive. Its author, Jehuda Feld (Feldwurm) (1906–1942), was a prewar member of the Communist Party and an activist in TOZ (Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia Ludności Żydowskiej, or The Society for the Protection of the Health of the Jewish Population). He was also an aspiring writer, though his debut novel *Mekhl Kuliks lebn* (Mekhl Kulik’s life) gained him no recognition. In the Warsaw Ghetto he was a collaborator with Oneg Shabat and a cultural and political activist in the underground. Feld was one of the co-founders of the Antifascist Block, an underground organization of Jewish parties, and also an organizer and editor of the underground communist press, the clandestine periodical *Morgen Fray* (The free tomorrow), later under the name *Morgen-Frayheyt* (The dawn of freedom). In the early spring of 1943, he was arrested and murdered by the Gestapo at Aleja Szucha in Warsaw.

The publishing of Feld’s work seemed to be a natural choice in the newly socialist Poland. As Ber Mark wrote in the introduction to his work “we believe that the idea of freedom-fighting humanism, which is the cornerstone of Jehuda Feld’s work, will be a building block in the great edifice of peace and

socialism.” Yet, Feld’s political affiliation and martyrdom did not safeguard his ghetto works from significant cuts and alterations. The editors of the volume, Ber Mark and Leyb Olitski, did not hide the fact that they introduced some changes, explaining that the author himself was still planning to refine his manuscript. They based this claim on a note by Feld that read “to be re-written,” which was left attached to one of the stories (they did not however question the note’s authorship nor when it was written). As they explained: “As many other writers in the ghetto, Feld was writing in a constant hurry and did not have time to reflect on editing, polishing, or re-writing his texts. Fulfilling the wish of the deceased author, the editors found it necessary to partly polish his work, without intruding into the essence, concept, or construction of his writings.” The fact that such an indication is present in the introduction is important; we can assume that the editors wanted the reader to know that such changes took place. We can also assume that at this stage, the readers were already attuned to such remarks and could easily read into their true meaning.

The “polishing” of Feld’s work was not surprisingly much more concerned with the content of his work than with its style. Despite the editor’s declaration, the changes they introduced clearly affected the integrity of the book’s message. They formulated new claims, while erasing others.

Among the most interesting changes introduced in accordance with the main features of Stalinist propaganda were those, which were aimed at safeguarding the image of members of the Communist Party. Such is the case of a story entitled Sorele Grober. The story’s protagonist is a Jewish communist. Sorele (Sara) has all the qualities of an ideal party activist—education, intelligence, and beauty—but she also has one considerable fault: she stutters and is thus unable to speak persuasively at party gatherings. This information has been removed from the 1954 edition as the editors decided to present the reader with a communist devoid of any blemishes.

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17 Ber Mark, “Jehude Feld: Der revolutsyoner un shrayber” [Jehude Feld: revolutionary and writer], in In di tsaytn fun Homen dem tsveytn, 10.
18 Leyb Olitski (1894–1975) was a Yiddish-language writer and translator. Before the war he published poetry and worked as a teacher. He survived the Holocaust in the USSR. After the war he was an activist in Jewish organizations in postwar Poland and an editor for Yidish Bukh. He emigrated to Israel in 1959. On Olitski, see Magdalena Sitarz, “The Image of Postwar Poland in the Works of Leyb Olitski,” in Under the Red Banner, 185–202.
**Original version:**

She did not speak well, on the contrary she often stuttered and it made him very concerned. It might have been caused by the fact that he always liked her speeches and because he had friendly feelings towards her—he wanted her words to be falling smoothly and fluently...\(^{21}\)

**Edited version:**

She did not speak well, on the contrary, he often felt differently about it, and it made him very concerned. It might have been caused by the fact that he always liked her speeches and because he had friendly feelings towards her—he wanted her words to be falling smoothly and fluently...\(^{22}\)

Similarly, the editors removed a passage in which Sorele Grober speaks in German to a Wehrmacht soldier. It was, we can assume, considered inappropriate that a Jew, moreover a communist, should speak in the language of the enemy. Further on, censorship removed the soldier’s warm reaction towards Sorele, and thus precluded any connection which was being established between them.

**Original version:**

Sara smiled to the soldiers with her big, shining eyes and answered in the soldier’s language, in German:

– Es macht nichts aus. Es wird wahrscheinlich gut sein... When she spoke, it was as if the soldier’s face began to smile. The sun lit it with its rays, and from his lips came warm sounds, with a heartfelt intonation, he asked: Are you Jewish?\(^{23}\)

**Edited version:**

Sara smiled to the soldiers with her big, shining eyes and answered that it will probably be all right... Suddenly, when she spoke, the soldier’s face changed:

– Are you Jewish?\(^{24}\)

\(^{21}\) Jewish Historical Institute, Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto (Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego, Archiwum Ringelbluma, hereafter AŻIH, ARG) I 1215, 50.

\(^{22}\) Feld, *In di tsaytn fun Homen*, 20.

\(^{23}\) AŻIH, ARG I 1215, 4.

In the next paragraph, editors carefully cut out reference to a “previously unknown, delicate feeling which took over his [soldier’s] heart”\(^\text{25}\) when in conversation with Sorele.

The second topic, which underwent serious changes on political grounds, is that of Polish-Jewish relations. This was particularly the case with various aspects of Polish complicity in the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust. While these changes can be traced in all of the above-mentioned works, they are particularly visible in a collection of stories by Peretz Opoczynski (1892–1943), edited by Ber Mark and David Sfard.\(^\text{26}\) A prewar journalist and Zionist activist from Łódź, Opoczynski was one of the key members of the Oneg Shabat. It was probably thanks to support from his colleagues in the Underground Archive that he managed to obtain a highly coveted job of ghetto postman. His encounters with the poorest of ghetto inhabitants, taking place when delivering letters and parcels, formed the basis for masterful literary reportages which he prepared for the Archive.\(^\text{27}\) However, the editors of the 1954 edition of his work, clearly questioning their literary merit, wrote: “Since the author tends to repeat himself, the editors found it necessary to shorten the text here and there, where it has no particular meaning.”\(^\text{28}\) Here again, the reader could ascribe his or her own meaning to those words.

Probably the greatest number of changed passages appears in Opoczynski’s reportage entitled *Megiles *Paruvke* (*The book of Paruvke*). The story describes Poles participating in “Paruvke,” the disinfection steaming of belongings of inhabitants of ghetto buildings with suspected outbreaks of typhus. In Opoczynski’s stories, “Paruvke” usually resulted in the looting or destruction of disinfected belongings, which he compared to the torture taking place in the con-

\(^{25}\) AZIH, ARG I 1215, 4.


\(^{28}\) Ber Mark, “Perets Opotshinski,” in *Reportazhn fun varshever geta*, 8. Writing Polish blackmailers out of the Holocaust narrative also meant writing out those Poles who behaved heroically. This is the fate of Waclav, who appears in Skalov’s novel. Waclav is executed by the Germans (we assume for openly criticizing Poles blackmailling Jews), but as his story deals mainly with the criticism of other Poles’ behavior it had to be removed. See AZIH, ARG I 67.
centration camps. In his description, Polish men and women participating in “Paruvke” did not differ in their cruelty and greediness from Germans who oversee the work. In the original document they are described using words with clearly negative, or even derogatory, connotations, such as: “Polish cad,” “goy” (non-Jew), “shiksa” (non-Jewish girl or young woman), and “sheygets” (plural: shkotsim) (non-Jewish boy or young man). In the 1954 edition these were replaced by more neutral words, which did not allow for clear national or ethnic identification, such as “hooligans” or “young hooligans.”

Such is the case in the following passages describing the work of disinfection squads:

*Original:
These are shkotsim and shiksas, wearing airmen uniforms, a type of yellow khaki. Their step is steady, as if they were going to war, they look around with commanding eyes, they do not speak to anyone, severe like the angels of destruction.*

In the edited version, “shkotsim and shiksas”—which Opoczynski clearly used to describe non-Jewish Poles—are replaced by “young hooligans.”

*Original:
They like a shot-glass, they like a bribe . . . and they hate a Jew. There is no lesson that a Polish cad, an average sheygets, learned quicker and better than a German’s teaching that one should not be ashamed of anything in front of a Jew, that there are no obstructions, no laws and considerations, on the contrary—the more cruel, the more disgustingly and despicably one treats him, the more just it is.*

30 Peretz Opoczynski, *Reportaże z warszawskiego getta* [Reportages from the Warsaw Ghetto], ed. and transl. Monika Polit (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, ŻIH, 2009), 68. This edition will be our basis for comparison with the 1953 publication.

31 Opotshinski, *Reportaże z warszawskiego getto*, 33.

32 Opoczynski, *Reportaże z warszawskiego getta*, 70.
In the edited version, the “Polish cad” is, again, replaced by “a hooligan.” These are only two examples of several similar changes.

These seemingly small interventions altered the meaning of both the passages and of Opoczynski’s reportage in its entirety. They very clearly disguised the Polish nationality of perpetrators, putting the blame mainly on the Germans. Probably for the same reason, the most controversial reportage, Goyim in getto (Goyim in the ghetto), focusing on the greediness of Poles who conducted illegal trade with Jews in the ghetto, was left out of the anthology. The editors explained that their decision not to publish this and some other pieces by Opoczynski was based on artistic merit, which was not fulfilled by works of a strictly journalistic character. Their explanations however are (probably on purpose) hardly convincing, as they admitted that as an exception, they also included those pieces of work, which fitted into the “non-artistic” category.

Editors were even prepared to safeguard the image of Poles by compromising Jewish victims. Such was a case in Zalmen Skalov’s novel Der haknkrayts (discussed below), where a passage describing participation of Poles in ghetto disinfection actions was changed from: “Disinfectors (Polish) were stealing. Doctors (Polish) were stuffing their pockets with bribes” into: “Disinfectors (Polish and Jewish) were stealing. Doctors were stuffing their pockets with bribes.”

Editorial Changes as Internal Censorship?

Not all changes carried out in the aforementioned books can be defined as enforced by state censorship. The editors and publishers almost certainly made changes on their own personal initiative as well. Their aim was to portray the Holocaust in the way they saw fit, both for the sake of commemorating the victims as well as providing a sound structure for the rebuilding of Jewish life in Poland. This type of editorial changes dealt mainly with the conflicts within the Jewish community during the Holocaust.

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33 Opotshinski, Reportazhn fun varshever geto, 35.
34 Other examples are a “barber” replacing “a sheygets” and shkotsim, shiksas, and goyim replaced by “hooligans.” Opoczynski, Reportaże z warszawskiego getta, 76, 80; Opotshinski, Reportazhn fun varshever geto, 40, 44.
36 AŻIH, ARG I 1233, 80.
37 Skalov, Der haknkrayts, 124.