Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

Stach, Stephan, Hallama, Peter, Bohus, Kata

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Stach, Stephan, et al.

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Warsaw ghetto to Babyn Yar with his own pen, Vergelis radically re-interpreted the events in Kyiv in late September 1941. In accordance with the communist interpretation of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as a long-planned, self-sacrificing contribution by Warsaw’s Jews to the heroic struggle of the Red Army, in Vergelis’s narrative the large-scale massacre of Kyiv’s Jews becomes part of this struggle as well. Without “red-washing” the immense suffering, Babyn Yar became a redemptive sacrifice and symbolized the longed-for overcoming of Jewish powerlessness and the final emergence of the New Soviet Jew. In this vein, the inseparable link between death and life translates as a metaphor of Jewish continuity in the Soviet here and now, intrinsically tied to the sacrifice and endurance of the Jewish catastrophe on Soviet soil. So much for the major Soviet lieu de mémoire of the Holocaust, but how did matters stand on the periphery?

**Commemoration Activities in Popervāle, Latvia**

Irine Legudina’s report “Keyner iz nit fargesn” (No one is forgotten) in *Sovetish Heymland*’s May issue of 1977 covers Popervāle (Yiddish: Popervol), the site of the Poperwahlen labor camp established in 1943 specifically for Jews brought over from the Latvian concentration camp of Riga-Kaiserwald. Legudina, a secretary of the village council, was not a Popervāle native. She was sent there as a teacher and was told by the local (ostensibly non-Jewish) population of what had happened during the Nazi occupation in “one of the most horrific death-camps.” Together with her pupils, the report tells us, she investigated “whether anyone of the former KZ-lers was still alive” (*tsi es iz geblibn lebn emetser fun di gevezene katsetler*). As it turned out, only six of the approximately 1,000 prisoners could “save themselves from dying” (*geratevet zikh fun toyt*) and survive the camp’s liquidation on May 9, 1944. Every year since the erection of the monument in 1968, the town’s residents and the camp’s survivors would assemble around the erected obelisk on May 9, which was also celebrated in the Soviet Union as Victory Day. The obelisk, the report and embedded photographs relate, bears an inscription in Latvian: “Ļaudis! Mums nav tiesibu aizmirst kas ir fašisms” (“People! We have no right to forget what fascism really is!”). Legudina’s report, interestingly, transforms the Latvian “categorical imperative” into a

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42 Legudina, “Keyner iz nit fargesn,” 23.
43 Legudina, “Keyner iz nit fargesn,” 23.
44 Legudina, “Keyner iz nit fargesn,” 23.
text that, if anything, speaks to a tendency of forgetting: it does not reproduce
the inscription, but transposes it with the faulty Yiddish translation “Gornisht
iz nit fargesn, keyner iz nit fargesn” (“Nothing is forgotten, no one is forgotten”).
The transposition renders the idea of forgetting into something that is beyond
human capacity. This “translation error” is telling. The term rendered by Sove-
tish Heymland in Yiddish echoes the inscription on a granite wall behind a
bronze sculpture of “the Motherland” in the Leningrad Piskaryovskoye Memo-
rial Cemetery, unveiled in 1960 and dedicated to the victims of the Siege of Len-
ingrad, one of the most appalling war crimes committed by Nazi Germany. The
inscription is from a poem by Olga Berggolts (1910–1975), a verse from which
became a catchphrase in Soviet memory politics.45

Like Vergelis before her, Legudina’s report abides by that specific Soviet eti-
quette: it highlights the solidarity among the Soviet people, how the non-Jewish
population of Popervâle helped the entrapped Jews under life-threatening cir-
cumstances during the war and now annually commemorated the victims to-
gether with the survivors. The echo of Berggolts’s words in Popervâle ostensibly
further reproduces the dominant Soviet narrative that the Holocaust was but a
part of German War crimes during the “Great Patriotic War.” Both could be
read as mere lip-service to Soviet guidelines, but the context matters. Rather
than subsume the memory of Holocaust victims under that of “mere” war casual-
ties, I argue that—thanks to Sovevish Heymland—the reproduction of (a part
of) Berggolts’ poem on the Popervâle Holocaust memorial recasts the original
poem itself into a “Holocaust dirge”: the original Leningrad inscription re-
 mains—Popervâle’s inscription can be read as its “Jewish transposition.”46 The
same is true of the commemoration services, led by survivors, held at the monu-
ment, where an oath is pledged by Jewish and non-Jewish participants: “We
pledge . . . to preserve the memory of all captives in death camps—the memory
of all murdered and tortured human beings.”47 The oath expresses the universal
in a concrete context. This concrete universality, as it were, is reinforced by a
Holocaust-specific language used in the report.

45 For the original Russian poem, see Olga Berggolts, “Zdes’ lezhat leningradtsy” [Here lie Leningraders], Rus-
46 James Young notes the fluctuation of these kinds of memorial icons in regard to the Warsaw Ghetto Mon-
James E. Young, The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning (New Haven: Yale University
47 Legudina, “Keyner iz nit fargesn,” 25.
Terms like *toyt-lager* (death camp) and *katsetler* (concentration camp inmate), or the mention of Riga-Kaiserwald without further explanation, demonstrate a certain familiarity on the part of the journal’s audience with the jargon specific to the Holocaust, even if somewhat confused.48 Furthermore, the report contains a nuanced conceptualization of the camp’s survivors.49 While “lebn geblibene” emphasizes stamina and continuity, a term that was also ubiquitous amongst the *sheyres hapleyte,* the reflexive “geratevet zikh fun toyt” highlights the agency of survivors to save themselves and corresponded much more to the Soviet ideal of survival through resistance. Just like in Vergelis’s article, tragedy and heroism here coalesce. Legudina gives agency back to the survivors and lets the survivors speak for themselves as surviving witnesses. By acknowledging their heroism by “simply” surviving hell, universal Soviet suffering turns into individual heroic Jewish suffering. It is striking how much Legudina’s choice of terminologies in 1977 resembles the evolution of the concept of “Holocaust survivor” in Western discourse, which moved steadily from the monolith of the passive survivor to the survivor as a *secular saint* in the 1970s.51 It was in the “era of the witness” when an array of oral history projects slowly but surely established the importance of survivor testimonies and spotlighted the survivor-witness as a superior kind of individual by dint of his/her survival.52

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48 Death camps were a specific subgroup of the Nazi concentration camp system. In the narrowest sense, they comprised the camps of *Aktion Reinhard* designed and established solely for the purpose of efficient mass murder starting in late 1941. Blumental’s dictionary *Verter un vertlekh fun der khurbn-tkufe* also distinguishes between *toyt-lager* and *katset*, suggesting that the distinction was known already during/right after the war. Nakhmen Blumental, *Verter un vertlekh fun der khurbn-tkufe* [Words and idioms from the Holocaust period] (Tel Aviv: Farlag Y.L. Perets, 1981), 121, 276.

49 Bothe and Nesselrodt provided a first step towards the conceptualization of the transnational concept of the “Holocaust survivor.” My analysis may function as an addendum to their findings, which unfortunately did not include Soviet Jewish conceptualizations. See Alina Bothe and Markus Nesselrodt, “Survivor: Towards a Conceptual History,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 61, no. 1 (November 2016): 57–82.

50 *Sheyres hapleyte* is of biblical origin and entered Yiddish through its Semitic component. It can be translated as the “saved remnant” or “survivors of a catastrophe.” Among Jewish Holocaust survivors in DP camps in liberated Europe it was a self-designation that demarcate them as having collectively experienced a specifically Jewish catastrophe. They used the term to actively distance themselves from the bureaucratic label “Displaced Person” used by the Allies to classify any person who resided outside of his/her home country on account of the Second World War. See Bothe and Nesselrodt, “Survivor,” 61 ff.; Zeev Mankowitz, *Life between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Dan Michman, *Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective: Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches, and Fundamental Issues* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), 129–32.


“We Pledge, as if It Was the Highest Sanctum, to Preserve the Memory”

The oath sworn at the Popervāle commemoration ceremony, which expands the victim group at Popervāle to include all human beings who were killed or tortured under Nazi occupation, did not transgress the Soviet protocol. Yet, more than Vergelis in his article, the Jewishness of the victims is clearly highlighted and Popervāle demarcated as a locality of Jewish torment while retaining universal significance. Read in light of the shift in Western Holocaust commemoration, when the transition from “provisional to authorized memory” made Holocaust survivors into authoritative voices of history and the “Holocaust” itself into a didactic instrument to teach “fundamental values” especially in the Americanized Western hemisphere, Popervāle’s oath comes along like the very common “Never Again” à la Emil Fackenheim and Elie Wiesel, which understands Jews as the embodiment of humanity itself and the Holocaust thereby as an assault on all humanity.

Commemoration Activities in Medzhybizh, Ukraine

In the April issue of 1981, *Sovetish Heymland* covered another example of commemoration activity on the grassroots level. The account *Notitsn vegn Medzhibozer Geto* (Notes about the Ghetto in Medzhybizh) includes both a letter to the journal’s editorial staff and a detailed survivor’s account. Medzhybizh, located in Central Ukraine, is known today as the birthplace of Hasidism because its founder Israel ben Eliezer Ba’al Shem Tov took residence there in 1740. It remains an important pilgrimage site to this day. Under German occupation, the Jews of Medzhybizh were herded into a ghetto and most perished in an “Aktion” on September 21, 1942.

I was born in the *shtetl* Medzhybizh [Yiddish: Medzhibozh], in the region of Khmelnytskyi. In 1968, I visited my birthplace as the leader of a group of activists in order to immortalize the memory of the victims in the ghetto of Medzhybizh. When we built the memorial and put the mass grave in order,

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