Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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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 Medzhibozher 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: Medzhbozh], 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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Moyshe Eynhorn, one of those, who miraculously saved themselves from fascist hell, entrusted me with his notes on how the Jews of Medzhybizh perished. . . . Therefore, I decided to send Eynhorn’s notes to the editorial office of “Sovetish Heymland.” Avrom Vayner, Volgograd. 57

It is important to highlight that Avrom Vayner, the founder of a Holocaust commemoration activists’ group in his hometown Medzhybizh, was convinced that Sovetish Heymland was the right address for the Moshe Eynhorn’s survivor testimony he was entrusted with. In other words, Vayner understood the journal to be a partner in commemorating Jewish Holocaust victims. According to his letter, Vayner, a Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) resident, founded this group in order to initiate commemoration activities in Medzhybizh to specifically honor “Medzhybizher yidn.” 58 On September 22, 1967, the monument was unveiled and since then attracted many Jews from across the Soviet Union to participate in the annual memorial ceremony. But similar to Legudina’s account before, it is not so much the activities of Vayner’s group that are in the center of this account, but the survivor Moyshe Eynhorn, assuming the role of the survivor-as-witness, who by dint of his survival is obliged to speak for all victims.

In his account, “a reply from a living witness of the Medzhybizh Ghetto and the camp in Letychiv,” 59 Eynhorn retells his experiences during the Second World War starting with the German occupation of his hometown Medzhybizh on August 7, 1941. 60 He miraculously survived the “pogroms,” as he tellingly calls the (first) liquidation of the Ghetto’s inhabitants between August and November 1942, and was subsequently deported to the labor camp of Letychiv. He managed to escape the camp more than once, making his way back to Medzhybizh as well as other shtetlekh in the region. The imminent threat of more “pogroms” instigated by the Germans and the dire state of Jewish life in Ukraine convinced him to escape to Romanian occupied Transnistria since allegedly “there Jews live free,” but he ended up in the ghetto of Sharhorod. 61

58 Yad Vashem designates 1965 as the year in which the Jewish activists group decided to start their commemorative activities in Medzhybizh.
59 “Notitsn vegn Medzhibozher Geto,” 95.
60 Yad Vashem speaks of July 8, 1941, as the date when the Germans captured Medzhybizh, although different accounts give different dates “08.07.1941” vs. “07.08.1941.” Regarding all other dates, Eynhorn’s account is in agreement with Yad Vashem. See “Medzhibozh,” The Untold Stories, Yad Vashem, accessed November 10, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/index.asp?cid=497.
61 “Notitsn vegn Medzhibozher Geto,” 92.
We Pledge, as if It Was the Highest Sanctum, to Preserve the Memory

deed, due to international pressure and the poor state of the war effort, Germany’s ally Romania had changed its policy towards its Jews in the course of 1942 and distanced itself from the planned deportations of Jews to the Belżec death camp in the Lublin district.62 However, it was only on Yom Kippur in 1943, according to Eynhorn, almost a year after the matter of the scheduled deportations was supposedly put to rest, that rumors spread of a German order to deport all Jews in Transnistria to “Lublin.” Eynhorn does not elaborate further on what “Lublin” stood for, but obviously expects his readers to know that this was a region in which the extermination of Jews was carried out. But before these deportations could take place, the Jews in Sharhorod were “redeemed” by the Red Army.63 The city was liberated on March 20, 1944:

A lieutenant addressed us: “Dear friends! Please excuse our tardy arrival. We handed you over and now redeemed you. For the victory of the Red Army!” . . . None of us was happy about this. Crying with bloody tears, we remembered our parents, sisters and brothers, women and children, who had died innocently.64

Acknowledging the Red Army as the Jews’ savior, Eynhorn offers an explicit corrective to the grand Soviet narrative of the war against German fascism by framing the specific Soviet Jewish experience of the 1940s somewhat disconnected from the events of the Soviet-German war itself. The Soviet war narrative is inverted by making the “Great Patriotic War” into a war fought by the Red Army to liberate the Jews—the “redeemers” (oyseyzer) fought a Jewish war.

Yet, the Soviet victory was no compensation for the losses Ukrainian Jewry suffered. Indeed, Eynhorn’s testimony is filled with denunciations of Ukrai-

62 For more on Romania’s change of mind, see Bert Hoppe and Hildrun Glass, eds., Sowjetunion mit annek
tierten Gebieten I: Besetzte sowjetische Gebiete unter deutscher Militärverwaltung, Baltikum und Transn
strien [Soviet Union with annexed territories I: Occupied Soviet territories under German military adminis
tration, the Baltic States and Transnistria], vol. 7 of Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden
durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945 [The persecution and murder of European Jews by
National Socialist Germany, 1933–1945] (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2011), 69 ff.; International
Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, “Final Report of the International Commission on the Holo-
cast in Romania, Presented to Romanian President Ion Iliescu,” November 11, 2004, online, United States
Holocaust Memorial Museum, https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20080226-romania-commission-holo-
cast-history.pdf, 77ff.

63 On the ghetto in Sharhorod, see Iemima D. Ploscariu, “Institutions for Survival: The Shargorod Ghetto

64 “Notitsn vegn Medzhibozher Geto,” 95.
nian collaboration with the German occupying forces—a topic which was
strictly regulated by the authorities—writing extensively about actions of
“shutsmener” (security men), a Yiddish euphemism of that time for the Ukrai-
nian police, a force created specifically to carry out Germany’s plan to annihi-
late the Jews. For Eynhorn, this was a specifically Jewish catastrophe, which
happened independently of the war and with active support of the Ukrainian
“rotskhim” (murderers):

In August 1942, the waves of Jewish pogroms started anew.... They [the
Ukrainian police] forced him [the leader of the Jewish community] to go
around the houses and assemble the Jews of the Ghetto. Moyshe went and
screamed: “Jews! Speak Vidui and go to the slaughter!”... In the shtetl, ev-
erything was normal except for the Jews. ... A Jew was worth less than a dog.

Eynhorn does not refer to these events using the term (driter) khurbn (“destruc-
tion” or “the third destruction”), the common term among many Yiddish-speak-
ers for the Holocaust that draws a continuity between the tragedy of the Second
World War back to the pivotal Biblical events of the destruction of the first and
second temple in Jerusalem. Rather than use this terminology, Eynhorn, like
many other Soviet Yiddish-speakers, made sense of the Holocaust within the
context of distinctively Eastern European Jewish persecution and suffering of the
more recent past, a past that he himself had witnessed (as we can presume from
his age): the era of anti-Jewish pogroms. Roughly 20 years before the German oc-
cupation, Medzhybizh’s Jewish community had suffered heavily under the po-
groms during the Russian Civil War (1918–1921), a “forgotten genocide” of the
twentieth century that killed an estimated 50,000 Jews. Even though all con-
tending armies in the Civil War committed pogroms, Jews primarily identified
them with the Ukrainian national movement headed by Symon Petliura (respon-
sible “only” for approximately 40 percent of recorded pogroms). Returning to

65 See Blumental, Verter, 160, 313.
66 Ritual term for the confession of sins, made both collectively on Yom Kippur and individually before dying.
67 “Notitsn vegn Medzhibozher Geto,” 86 f.
68 See Benjamin Harshav, “Introduction,” in Herman Kruk, The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chroni-
cles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939–1944 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xx–
lii, xxiii.
69 The 1926 assassination of Petliura in Paris is testament to his alleged overall culpability for the pogroms held
in Jewish circles, see David Engel, ed., The Assassination of Symon Petliura and the Trial of Scholom Schwar-
Eynhorn’s *Notitsn*, the “genocidal behavior”\(^70\) of Ukrainian collaborators under German occupation in the 1940s mirrored their alleged behavior during the Russian Civil War. Thus, his interpretative framework is not the “Holocaust” as one commonly understands it today, but the “pogroms” the community had last endured between 1918 and 1921, also perpetrated by their Ukrainian neighbors.

Eynhorn’s testimony is interlaced with photographs documenting the process of monumentalization in situ—from marking and ordering the mass grave to memorial gatherings at the erected monument (see figure 11.1). Initially, the activists around Vayner intended two plaques for the monument—one in Yiddish, one in Russian. The local authorities hampered the Yiddish inscription, however, and additionally ordered the replacement of the word “Jew” with the ubiquitous euphemism “Soviet citizens.” Vainer’s group was able to add the words “prisoners of the Medzhybizh ghetto.”71 This unpleasant backstory is (naturally) not included in Sovetish Heymland. Instead, the text-photograph-interplay tells a narrative of return, taking root, and rebirth by turning neglected mass graves into sanctified spaces of Jewish memorial rituals (see figure 11.2). And while the monument itself was, on the surface, part of the Soviet monumentalization efforts honoring the “Great Patriotic War” with no particular space for Jews, Sovetish Heymland’s coverage clearly serves as a means to making this ethnically objective monument Jewish. The picture-text-interplay is a testament not only to the tragic past, but—despite or perhaps because of that past—to a vital and durable present and future of the Jewish community in their “Soviet Homeland,” which after all liberated them from the Nazi onslaught.

Conclusion

Close readings of these three accounts allow for several conclusions to be drawn regarding Holocaust memory as represented in Sovetish Heymland. On the most basic level, the previous pages demonstrated that a variety of ritual Holocaust commemoration activities and interpretative frameworks in different parts of the Soviet Union existed. Sovetish Heymland offered an outlet for a great variety of Yiddish voices to report about these activities by offering different interpretations and opinions about the meaning of the Holocaust and the significance of its collective commemoration. Though manifestly different in detail, the examples exhibit a number of shared characteristics and suggest a reciprocal influence between Soviet memories of the “Great Patriotic War” and Jewish reckonings with the Holocaust. While the Soviet war cult was intended by the authorities to subsume the Holocaust—which was to a certain degree