

Review

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YIVO Annual. Volume 21: Going Home, edited by Jack Kugelmass. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1993. 463 pp. \$45.95.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Empire it has become much easier to travel to its former subject lands like Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Lithuania and less of a bother and ordeal to get around in them once there. A consequence of this, little noticed, is that Jews in increasing numbers have been visiting the Old Country seeking out the *shtetlekh* and towns where parents and (now mostly) grandparents and great aunts and uncles once lived and died and dreamed of escaping from; and going not only to ancestral homes like Cracow and Lodz but to Auschwitz and other death places of the Holocaust.

Jews are a “heavy” people, a people who carry the weight of their history around with them. The Yiddish language renders this as *a pekl tsores*, “a pack of sorrows,” and part of the weight of that *pekl* derives from an accumulation of yearnings and senses of loss, of unfulfilled desires—for Deliverance, for the waters of Jordan, for Return, for “Next Year in Jerusalem.” And since not every American Jew who drinks to “Next Year in Jerusalem” at Passover actually wants to live there next year, it isn’t really very surprising that other variants of Return sometimes displace Israel in the stirrings of the memory of the folk. That is what this handsomely produced and unusually readable, well edited Volume 21 of the YIVO Annual (*Going Home*) is about.

Jack Kugelmass has assembled thirteen essays on the theme of Return understood in its widest sense: Lucjan Dobroszycki on the painful, impossible return of Polish Jews to Poland in the postwar period; Ronald Webster on German Jews who returned to Germany or tried to after 1945; Suzanne Vromen on nostalgia in general and Jeffrey Shandler on nostalgia in the German/Yiddish silent film *Ost und West* from 1923; a moving account by Marc Kaminsky of his Bessarabia-born grandmother for whom “Yiddish was a motherland”; the Return motif among Sephardim (Joëlle Bahloul, Harvey E. Goldberg); a pair of superb photographic essays on the Lower East Side (Aviva Weintraub) and a return in the 1920s to a *shtetl* in Lithuania (Roberta Newman); Daniel Soyer on a Lodz-born New York travel agent, a *makher* one wouldn’t have minded knowing, who in the interwar period facilitated trips back to Poland of Jewish immigrants; an interesting comparative account of ethnic identity of Jewish and Slavic representations (Ewa Morawska); a nice memoir (nice because composed equally of both

personal and academic perspectives) of a pilgrimage far afield in search of the emanations of a place/region in the Old Country called Maramarosh by Susan Slyomovics: and finally a piece by the editor, Jack Kugelmass, on the meaning of Poland for American Jewish tourists (“Rites of the Tribe”). The essays are all a pleasure to read, almost completely free of postmodern jargon; I cannot recall even a single occurrence of “hegemony” or “simulacrum.”

The idea of Return, of Going Back, of Homeland, pulls powerfully on the folk memory, the *Volksggeist*, of all displaced peoples who remain attached to their histories. Jawaharlal Nehru thought of Kashmir as his homeland even though his grandfather, the last Nehru to actually live there, had come down generations before from that mountain-ringed valley so fabled in the imagination and spiritual history of the Indian subcontinent. The theme—Return—deserves a collection. Nostalgia can easily become sentimentality (nostalgia and Return go hand in hand), but the editor and the contributors to this volume have resisted the slide into sentimentality.

Nostalgia I understand very well. I respond to the resonance of “Ziftn fun der alter heym” (“Sighs from the Old Country”) a feature of the Yiddish-language newspaper *Der Tog* shortly after the turn of the century (as I learned from the Morawska essay). But how curious it is, really, when you think about it, that very many Jews would ever want to go back to Poland, or to Germany, or to any of a half dozen wretched east European countries where their ancestors suffered poverty and dodged pogroms and Cossacks and heard “Zhid, Zhid” or “Juda verrecke” shouted at them all the time and scrambled to gain a precious berth on that boat to America; where Hitler’s madness and his evil minions sent the Six Million to miserable deaths that still today evoke horror unmitigated by more recent holocausts. I’m afraid I’ll never quite get used to the idea of groups of Jewish travelers booking tours of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Yet there it is.

Something there is that makes home-seekers of us all. A friend of mine since childhood asked me to decipher his grandfather’s passport issued “Im Namen Seiner Majestät Franz Josef” in 1893, in anticipation of a visit to Hungary and the possibility of visiting the ancestral hometown Jassy (now Iasi, and in Romania). These places in what was the Austro-Hungarian Empire, *frants yozefs medine*, slip readily between the boundaries of its modern successor statés, the political geography as ambivalent as the memories. Susan Slyomovics in her contribution to the collection under review relates the joke: “I was born in Austro-Hungary, I grew up in Czechoslovakia, I have lived in Romania and Hungary, and now I reside in

the Soviet Union.” “You must have traveled a great deal,” says the listener. “No,” the man answers, “I have never moved, I’m from Maramarosh.”

Return is a good and timely theme which can be treated differently but not better than here. *Going Home* (Volume 21 of the *YIVO Annual*) has analysis and anecdotes, history and sociology; it has sad and funny stories and memorable photographs. There is resolution and fulfillment, but also something, sometimes, that feels more like a communion of damaged souls. That, I suppose, is what it means to be a “heavy” people, a people whose history will not leave them alone.

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Revolution and Genocide: On the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust, by Robert Melson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 363 pp. \$59.95.

The uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust continues to be an issue generating both intellectual and emotional conflict. Melson, a political scientist at Purdue University, attempts in this work to establish a comparative model using revolution as a matrix. He offers the hypothesis that the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire and the Jews of Germany were victims of a common phenomenon. In each case the socio-political system in which these minorities were involved was characterized by late, incomplete modernization. Industrialism, bureaucracy, citizenship—these and similar concepts challenged traditional systems, stressing them to the breaking point. Both the German and the Ottoman Empires prior to 1914 manifested increasing tension between defenders of an old order whose inviability was still not self-evident and revolutionaries who wished to reconstruct their societies along ideological, syncretic lines.

Armenians and Jews alike were caught in the middle—literally as well as metaphorically. Both ethnic groups were strongly represented among the facilitators of their respective empires. As merchants, businessmen, and intellectuals, they were at once highly visible and highly vulnerable. But while conservatives tended to accept Jews and Armenians as part of the existing order, albeit often an unpleasant part, revolutionaries saw no place for these “upwardly mobile pariahs” in the brave new worlds they proposed to create.