

David E. Fishman, *The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis. The True Story of the Paper Brigade of Vilna* (Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, 2017), 322 p. ISBN 978-1-5123-0330-9

Everyone in Lithuanian society is familiar with the term ‘book smuggler’ (*knygnešys*), which is unambiguously related to the second half of the 19th and the early 20th century in Lithuanian culture, when the tsarist government banned the printing of publications in Lithuanian using Latin letters. These publications were printed by the Lithuanian intelligentsia in Prussia (and later in the German Empire), and were transported into the Russian Empire as contraband. That is why, having read the title of David Fishman’s book, but not the subtitle, Lithuanian readers would be wrong in thinking that the book is about Lithuanians in the Russian Empire. This book is about a completely different period, and even though most of the action takes place in the historic capital of Lithuania, the book’s main protagonists are Jews who saved cultural treasures during the Second World War.

Until now, David Fishman has been known mostly in the academic community as a specialist in East European Jewish history in the ‘long 19th century’ and the first half of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> This book is about a different period. Even though the title suggests that it analyses the epoch when the Nazis were in power, it is in fact misleading. The story begins in 1941, and finishes around the end of the 20th century. The main story is about how prisoners in the Vilnius Ghetto not only carried out a task given to them by the Nazis, to select valuable Jewish cultural artefacts to be taken away to Germany, but also tried to save the most valuable examples. This group soon acquired the name ‘the Paper Brigade’. To the surprise of the group’s members who survived the Holocaust, the defeat of the Nazis and the re-occupation of Vilnius and the rest of Lithuania by the Soviet Union raised the same problem again: how could the Jewish cultural heritage, primarily books, be protected from the government, only this time the Soviet government? At the

<sup>1</sup> See his *Russia’s First Modern Jews: the Jews of Shklov* (New York University Press, 1995), and *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

end of the book, Fishman describes how, at the very end of the Soviet period, some of these treasures were discovered in the Book Chamber in Vilnius, and how the government of independent Lithuania and the YIVO (Institute for Jewish Research in New York) negotiated the fate of these books in the 1990s.

In the most general sense, this book is about how the individual always has a choice. The Paper Brigade, like the surviving prisoners from the Vilnius and other ghettos, were expecting death, but still decided to save Jewish cultural treasures. Among the rescued items, we can mention the diary of Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, and the records of the Vilnius Gaon's *kloyz* (synagogue). The book under review is also about other choices, ones whose outcomes were hard to determine. Two of the brigade's members, Herman Kruk and Zelig Kalmanovitch, could not agree on how more books could be saved: try to transport as many as possible to Germany in the hope that they might be recovered after the war (Kalmanovitch), or try to keep as many of them in Vilnius in various ways (Kruk) (p. 67).

Fishman has written a book in which the first part is about a side of the Holocaust that is rarely the topic of written work. It is about how the Nazis not only tried to physically eliminate the Jews, but also about the elimination of Jewish culture. In the many quotes from journals and memoirs by members of the Paper Brigade, and in the author's narrative, when writing about the elimination of Jewish books, the same terminology appears that is often used when speaking about the physical elimination of Jews: 'Shmerke Kacerginski [...] works in the Auschwitz of Jewish culture', 'Kruk's book *malina* (hiding place) continued to grow', 'Ponar of books', 'Everything destroyed, as if sent to the crematorium' (Kacerginski) (pp. 1, 59, 67, 176). The Paper Brigade's members thought that by saving books and other Jewish cultural assets, they would ensure the continuation of the Jewish community even after the war.

These activities brought together figures from various Jewish political streams, and sometimes led to rather paradoxical situations. Kacerginski, one of the book's protagonists, was not just a member of the Communist Party, but also a hardline atheist who had not been to a synagogue since he was a child. Regardless of his views, he was very active in saving Jewish religious artefacts (p. 2).

Books, not those that were saved but those more appropriate for leisure reading, as the book under review shows, were like medicine to the inhabitants of the ghetto. Kruk recorded in his journal a situation that at first glance appears paradoxical: after the Germans had killed a

large number of Jews, the number of books borrowed from the ghetto library would immediately increase (p. 42). Based on Kruk's journals, Fishman states: 'Reading, Kruk observed, was a narcotic, a form of intoxication, a device by which to avoid thinking' (p. 43).

The narrative in this book is highly personalised. At the centre of the plot are members of the Paper Brigade (Shmerke Kaczerginski, Abraham Sutzkever, Kruk, Rachela Krinsky), and also Nazis who were accountable for selecting Jewish property (Johannes Pohl). As the book is not written in a purely academic style, the author sometimes allows himself to imagine how a situation might have been experienced emotionally by the characters he describes. This circumstance, the fact that Fishman uses many ego-documents of the brigade's members, and the whole story itself, allows the reader to see events through the eyes of these protagonists. This kind of narrative style makes the book interesting to a wide circle of readers.<sup>2</sup>

As Fishman's research shows, the book's protagonists faced a very harsh environment. They had to struggle against their main enemy, the Nazis, but apart from a few exceptions, would also have to deal with opposition from other communities and political regimes. When they ended up in the midst of Soviet partisans, former prisoners from the ghetto had to face anti-Semitism; and their disappointment with the Soviet government grew even more after the war, when it started to restrict Jewish cultural, educational and religious activities practically from its very first days in power. A member of the Polish underground refused to provide ghetto prisoners with weapons, because he doubted their loyalty to the Republic of Poland (p. 94), while the Karaite cleric (*hakham*) of Vilnius, Seraya Szapszal, not only managed to prove to the Nazis that Karaites were not Jews, but also denounced Jews who tried to pretend to the occupiers to be Karaites (p. 108).

As has already been mentioned, the second subject of this book is the Soviet period, in which the most important part is the Jewish Museum in Vilnius, probably the first museum in the world to organise a Holocaust exhibition, and the only such institution in the Soviet Union (pp. 145–152). However, its life, along with that of other Jewish cultural, educational and religious institutions under the Soviets, was very short. The part of the book devoted to the Soviet period, like earlier sections, reads more like a narrative; the story is related mostly from the position

<sup>2</sup> In this sense, it is basically the opposite to the major study by Christoph Dieckmann about the Holocaust in Lithuania.

of the books' protagonists, former members of the Paper Brigade. A historian reading this book might bemoan the lack of more analytical insights, for example, about the policies of the government of the Soviet Union regarding Jewish culture, and the attitudes of local communists in Lithuania to this matter. It would be important to know how the author of the book explains this discrimination against Jewish culture. Especially since, as is shown in the book, there were senior officials both in Vilnius and in Moscow who had different views on these policies.

At the very end of the book, Fishman describes how difficult the negotiations were between Lithuanian institutions and the YIVO over the Jewish cultural assets discovered at the end of the Soviet period. The author clearly identifies with the YIVO's position on this point, i.e., he believes clearly that these items had to be transferred to the YIVO, whereas he treats the desire of the Lithuanian representatives to leave the original books in Vilnius as the result of political calculation, and generally does not see any rational argument why the printed material saved in the Book Chamber during the Soviet period had to stay in Lithuania's capital (p. 252).

This book is one of the best examples I know, perhaps even the best, of how a historic study can be presented in a way that makes it interesting not only to scholars, but also to readers without a background in professional history.

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