Not Waving but Drowning

Pre-Holocaust Photographs of East European Jewry

The nearly 1,500-km (940-mile) route south from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from the Latvian capital Riga via Vilnius in Lithuania, Slonim and Kobrin in Belarus, Lvov (once Lemberg), and Cernovsty (Czernowitz) in the Ukraine, and through Romania to Radauti, Suceava, Bacau, and the port of Constanza, traverses what was once the heartland of the East European Jew. But of the dozens of former shtetls that lay along this route, there are only the faintest traces: a cemetery here, a synagogue or two there, and save for Riga, with nearly 10,000 Jews, and Lvov, with 8,000, there are few living Jews to be found at all. The Nazis murdered most of them. Many of the survivors chose not to stay to watch the communists strip the communities of their remaining assets, nationalize Jewish shops, and either demolish the synagogues or convert them into warehouses, libraries, or fire stations.

Well before the Holocaust, the world of the shtetl was fast disappearing. Massive emigration to America, as well as the big cities of Austria-Hungary and Germany, before the First World War depleted many of the smaller communities. Then came the modernization of inter-war Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Sovietization of Jewish life in the Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia.

By the turn of the century, several ethnographers—we would now call them documentary photographers—set out to capture this vanishing world. Not surprisingly, perhaps, they concentrated on the pious and the impoverished. Best known of the early chroniclers was Solomon Zainwil Rapaport (1863–1920). Born in a small town in Belarus, he lived in St Petersburg before fleeing to Paris, where he changed his name to An-Ski. Dedicated to recording and championing Yiddish culture and folklore, An-Ski wrote the play of Jewish possession, *The Dybbuk*, which is still performed today. He and several colleagues spent the years 1911–14 travelling through Volhynia and Podolia photographing and making sound recordings of Jews at home, in the market place, at work, and at prayer. The expeditions were financed by Baron Horace Guenzburg. The photographs, several hundred of which found their way to the Hebrew University and the Yiddish Institute for Jewish Culture (YIVO), are impressive, even if they reveal more interest in ethnography than in individuals.

Some twenty years younger than An-Ski was Alter Kacyzne, who sometimes collaborated with him. Like his mentor, Kacyzne was deeply involved with Yiddish culture and worked as a writer and photographer. In 1920 the American Yiddish newspaper *Forverts* asked him to document Polish Jewry, which he did with obvious love for his subjects. Kacyzne remained in Warsaw until the Nazis came, fled to Tarnopol, and was murdered in the Jewish cemetery. In 1999 YIVO, working with his daughter, published a selection of his photographs as *Polyn*, a poignant, lovingly made study divided by theme: Beginning the Day, The Market Place, At Work, At Home, and lastly On the Way, photographs of Jews leaving for the New World.

But the leading photographer of Jews in Eastern Europe was Roman Vishniac, whose reputation is based on *A Vanished World*, published in 1983. It is an impressive work, although not without certain puzzles. In it, Vishniac states that he was driven to capture the life of the East European Jew because 'the world was about to be cast into the mad shadow of Nazism', resulting in 'the annihilation of a people who had no spokesman to record their plight'. Considering that the vast majority of the pictures in the book were taken between 1935 and 1937, before the German onslaught, that statement seems suspect. Vishniac continues: 'none of my colleagues was ready to join me', suggesting that he was unaware of An-Ski and Kacyzne. This is unlikely. Claiming to have been jailed eleven times while taking the photographs, Vishniac writes, 'I was forced to use a hidden camera.' Be that as it may, in at least half the photographs people are staring directly into the lens. But none of this detracts from the intensity of the images. The book has remained in print for over two decades because of its remarkable, heartbreaking portraits.

Yet all of the above studies share a particular failing. An-Ski, Kacyzne, and Vishniac all had to walk past, turn away from, or edit out of their pictures a great number of Jews who were neither pious nor impoverished. In the 1930s, Vishniac lived in Berlin, surrounded by 175,000 other Jews. If he really was so prescient about the Nazis' murderous intent, why go all the way to Poland? If Vishniac took pictures of secular-looking Jews motoring down the Friedrichstrasse, working at the KaDeWe department store, or as waitresses or bus conductors, they have not been published. The point is that by this time hundreds of thousands of Jews in Sofia, Vilnius, Riga, Kiev, Warsaw, Prague, Zagreb, and scores of other cities were dressing like everyone else, and were running banks or working as lawyers, doctors, accountants, or academics—or, indeed, as clerks, cleaners, tailors, or prostitutes. Yet they were destined for destruction just as surely as their bearded, sidelocked co-religionists living in picturesque ethnic squalor.

However, there are studies of this other Jewish world. The forerunner, *Image before my Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864–1939* (1977), edited by Lucjan Dobroszychi and Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, pays homage to Polish Jewry in all its aspects. Both Vishniac's and Kacyzne's photographs are used throughout, as well as those of lesser- or unknown photographers. Here we find secular-looking Jews in the Austrian and Polish armies, Jews at civil weddings, in the workplace, or on the stage. And many of them are clean-shaven, besuited, middle-class, assimilated people.

Two decades later, two other remarkable books appeared. Yaffa Eliach's *There Was Once a World* (1998) does not qualify as a photography book at all. Eliach, a history professor in Brooklyn, spent seventeen years seeking out as many former Jewish residents of the

Polish town of Eishyshok as she could find, collected their pictures and their stories, and assembled them in book form. She herself was born in Eishyshok. Although the book's reproductions are poor and the text seems interminable this is an incomparable study: a chronicle of an entire Jewish town as told by those who lived in it. Nevertheless, it is in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, that Eliach's work really comes alive. Here stands a five-storey, square-sided tower with several catwalks across it. Inside, blown-up photographs from Eishyshok cover nearly every inch of wall-space. They soar above the visitor and recede below, out of sight. Here are six shirtless teenage boys showing off their muscles; two young girls stuffed into their overcoats on a snowy day; two men standing in a garden grinning impishly behind a statue of the Eiffel Tower; and portraits everywhere, of families at home, in the photographer's studio, reclining in a grassy park, standing on a ship, wearing army uniforms.

Today, not a Jew lives in Eishyshok. There is a mass grave outside the town. But in the single most emotionally compelling exhibit in Washington's Holocaust Museum, this Jewish town, its poor and its rich, its religious and its secular, stares out at us.

What the museum accomplishes so brilliantly in an exhibition, *And I Still See their Faces*, compiled by Golda Tencer and friends involved with the Shalom Foundation in Warsaw, does in a book. This organization, according to Tencer (an actress in the Warsaw Yiddish Theatre), launched appeals in Poland and Israel for everyone (non-Jews and Jews) to send in any Jewish-related photographs they might have. Many people responded. We see snapshots, group portraits, brothers and sisters in the studio, at a summer camp, a blurry snapshot of a market place, three fat women in the street, a gaggle of gnarled-looking rabbis, even images of Jews in the Nazi-era ghetto being herded onto transports to their deaths. The pictures are reproduced exactly as they were received, with torn edges, yellowed, crumbling, faded: altogether 450 photographs.

As we look at pictures from both these remarkable projects, we gain a more balanced understanding of the world that was destroyed, and of the people who met unspeakable, grotesque deaths. Watching them, frozen in the Eishyshok Tower in Washington, where they look down on millions of visitors each year, or in the pictures of Golda Tencer's tender study, we see their smiles, their hugs, their pride. And we know what they do not: they are not waving but drowning. ESE