

Preface

Mark Jay Mirsky

This past year, I spoke about *The Jews of Pinsk* to a group of painters, sculptors, and intellectuals who meet to read the twentieth-century literature of Central and Eastern Europe. I was surprised by their enthusiasm about this exhaustive study of a small town in Eastern Europe. I might have expected it from academic historians of Europe or professors of Jewish Studies, but not contemporaries busy as creative artists. I explained my own fascination with Pinsk in a preface to *The Jews of Pinsk, 1506 to 1880*. My father was born there, in 1905 or 1906; the discrepancy in record keeping speaks to a drama of nationalities: Russian, Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, as well as religions and cultures. Its plot begins in 1506 on the first page of Mordechai Nadav's history of the Jews of Pinsk but does not end in 1941 when the last page of this second volume, Azriel Shohet's [also spelled Shohat, Shochat], is turned. The city's extinction as a vital Jewish community lies a year beyond.

Nadav's volume starts with a privilege signed by the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Prince Feodor Ivanovych Yaroslavich, in 1506, though there were Jews in Pinsk before. It grants permission to build a synagogue, establish a cemetery, and confirms their rights. The document corroborates the Jewish presence at this point of loading and unloading of goods. Pinsk lies at the juncture of a river system that stretches east and west, north and south. Long before 1506 its waters brought the goods of faraway worlds from the kingdoms of the Vikings to the courts of Byzantium through its muddy streets. The waters of the Pina and Pripet linked this small town to the Baltic and the Black Sea in an international trade that girded the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean. Pinsk seems to be in a forlorn backwater of Eastern Europe, stranded in the

swamps of southern Belarus, until one realizes that it lies along the trading routes that join the worlds of distant seas and countries. The record of Jews in Pinsk begins not in medieval Europe but in the Renaissance, yet Jews felt that they had lived there much longer. A bulky Yiddish town book, which preceded the two histories, was called *Toyzent Yor Pinsk* or in English, *Pinsk, a Thousand Years*. Before the Holocaust destroyed the Jewish character of Pinsk, the romance of its long existence as an important center where Jews were in the majority, generated affection even for the *blottes* or swamps, in which the city sits. The atmosphere of intellectual excitement and the civic generosity—despite the tumult and violence that often broke out among its factions—made it a point of pride to cite as a birthplace. In 1941—the year that the Pinsker Branch 210 of the Workmen’s Circle brought out *Toyzent Yor Pinsk*—emigrants from the city who had spread to the United States, Canada, Argentina, and Palestine must have hoped—despite the hostile attitude of the Polish state, a brutal Soviet occupation since 1939, and the imminent Nazi invasion—that the city of their childhood would rise, as it had for over half a millennium, would remain an important center of Jewish life. In a Messianic era a volume called *Pinsk, Two Thousand Years* might still include this town in Belarus as one of its mother cities.

The bustling Pinsk of crowded synagogues and Hebrew schools and speakers now lies in a storied past. Thanks to Nadav’s history, we can walk its streets in the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and much of the nineteenth centuries and imagine ourselves there: hear their rabbis, businessmen, teachers, and even secular “intellectuals,” the early proponents of a new Jewish culture and the first Zionists. Shohet’s history brings us closer to our own reality so that the voices of Pinsk’s tailors, factory workers, and revolutionaries are recorded—particularly those of the men and women who suffered through the violence of the late nineteenth and early and mid-twentieth century.

Moshe Rosman, in his introduction to Nadav’s volume, explains the importance of both these volumes in setting the historical record straight in regard to the truth of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Although surrounded by villages and backward hamlets, Pinsk was a vital urban center. Readers who wish to understand what is unique about the present volume from that perspective should refer to Rosman’s introduction where he discusses Shohet’s achievement and his career as a historian as

well. Moshe summed it up, however, in a few sentences for the present volume, “Shohet’s book carefully pieces together thousands of historical fragments, both published and unpublished, to create a holistic view of this important, and in many ways representative, Eastern European Jewish community. This is the most detailed, comprehensive study of a single Jewish community over several centuries. It empowers readers to arrive at a profound understanding of the structures, processes, and contexts of life in Eastern Europe—for Jews as well as their neighbors—in ways that are simply unavailable elsewhere.”

The Jews of Pinsk, 1881 to 1941 may seem at times like a welter of dry statistics about immigration, Zionism, Socialist factions, and town institutions, but jumping between endnotes and text, it rewards us with a glimpse into a Jewish world that is changing rapidly. Stories about averting cholera by avoiding vegetables and marrying couples in graveyards, are succeeded by struggles to modernize school curriculums, industrialize, and the pell-mell rush to immigrate, which spread Piskers to every corner of the world. If the array of strange names can bewilder those who are unfamiliar with the Zionist and labor movements in Eastern Europe, be assured that in the course of the book, you will learn the difference between Hovevei Zion, S.S., Poalei Zion, and the Bund. The Shohet and Nadav volumes, like Ferdinand Braudel’s majestic history of the Mediterranean, speak to broader issues than their impressive marshaling of details. They forced me to revise ideas about the world of my grandfathers and grandmothers.

In my preface to the earlier volume, I spoke about events that might properly introduce Shohet’s pages. Born within the time span of this second volume, my father’s stories of Pinsk (recorded in my unpublished manuscript *From Pinsk to Beacon Hill*) reached back into the 1820s and 1830s of Nadav’s history. Sulya, my father’s great-grandmother, in her mid-eighties, was still alive when he was a boy, and literally was holding the keys to his mother’s family wealth in her hands. Her husband, my great-great-grandfather Baruch, lived on into the storm of the First World War. My father was domiciled in his mother’s grandparents’ house and lived to an extent in the world of the early nineteenth century. His father had fled to America in 1910, leaving a pregnant wife and two children, dependent on an irascible father-in-law’s munificence or perhaps the charity of my father’s great-grandmother Sulya. Among

my father's first memories is this powerful matriarch born in 1825 and still active. Known as Sulya the Shopkeeper, she sold brides trousseaus, advised dressmakers, quoting an extensive knowledge of Bible and Talmud in her business dealings.

Sulya had hidden Jewish boys in the monastery yard across the street when the authorities of Nicholas I, in the early 1800s, corralled children as young as ten years old for service in the Tsar's army. . . . [Her room was] the mysterious center of the strength of the household. . . . Nine feet in width, fifteen in depth, it was small yet crammed with stuff, Sulya's bed, cabinets, boxes in the corner filled with brasses, candlesticks, silver, coins. . . . When I was in there, it was just for a moment because I was immediately rushed out. . . . just allowed to say hello to great-grandmother and not allowed to fiddle around with the content. . . .

My father's voice continued to wax rhapsodic as he began to recall his childhood at my request.

All the wealth of the Liebermans [his mother's family] seemed to be in that corner . . . silver of all kinds, pieces, Napoleonic coins, silver spoons, silver cups in abundance with carvings and inscriptions. Such would be given in turn in Pinsk to the children upon marriage. It came out of an inexhaustible supply in that room. Some of the cups bedecked the big table in the parlor on Friday nights. There was a different cup for Elijah every Passover. The Lieberman family believed in never having the same dishes or cups for the Passover seder. Hanging on the wall were silver pointers used to follow the words in the holy scrolls, and in a little cabinet above the large closet, which went three-quarters of the way up the wall, was a Torah scroll, which meant that services could be held in the house. In Sulya's room was a closet with linens of all kinds, silk kerchiefs, blankets—moth-eaten and otherwise—sheets, pillowcases. None of the children or grandchildren was allowed in. Sulya, confined to her bed most of the time, supervised the distribution of linens and monies, paper, silver, and gold coins.

For critical years of Shohet's history, 1910 to 1920, I have a separate track running through my head—memories I gathered from my family. It is enriched by the story Shohet tells here. His narrative is not always easy to follow for a layman. Shohet interrupts his history's drama with detailed lists: board members of institutions; visiting dignitaries of left-wing labor unions; and the Bund, Communists, and Zionist factions

with their leading personalities. We are given the specifics of monies expended for the schools that offered classes in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, and Polish. Contributions during the First World War from America and Russia and what the Polish authorities allotted to institutions are reckoned up alongside funds collected from the townspeople. One reaches the violent events of 1905 in Chapter 2, but the history does not return to its strikes and tumult until Chapter 7. I would not surrender this wealth of detail, however, for it buttresses the whole in the narrative's march to its grim finale in 1941. Shohet's lists, tables, figures, and sometimes bewildering number of names passing on and off committees are not quite the same as Melville's chapters on whaling statistics in *Moby-Dick*, another text carrying such a freight of technical detail that the plot goes wandering at times. In the case of both writers, however, attention to detail is integral to the work's machinery. When Shohet chooses to write the drama of Pinsk: the emigration at the turn of the century, the passion for reform and revolution that leads up to the violence in 1905–07 with riots in the city streets, the great rout of the Russian armies in 1915, refugees fleeing through the city eastward, the entry of the Germans, and the awful starvation through the First World War—we are in the presence of a skilled story teller. His detective work uncovers the conspiracy that led to the massacre of the thirty-five innocent Jewish town leaders by the Poles in 1919, an event that shook the Versailles conference. His pages crackle with anger at the cruelty of the Polish military in the aftermath. In Chapter 10, the historian reconstructing the world of the city in the 1920s and 1930s, gives us a plethora of statistics but makes vivid its struggle to modernize in a Polish state more and more hostile to its Jewish population. In the final chapter, as Poland collapses under the twin invasions of Russia and Germany, every moment is chilling.

Many unexpected details of life in Pinsk caught my attention. The Rabbi of Pinsk, Elazar Moshe Horowitz, about whom Nadav speaks of at some length, passed away in 1890. In his first chapter, Shohet records a religious ruling whose intelligence and humor speaks to how these characteristics were often embodied in the meeting of the modern and traditional in Pinsk. Rabbi Horowitz, whose scholarly reputation was legendary, tried to lighten the anxieties of parents and soldiers about observance under exigent circumstances. One of the nightmares for Jews under the Tsars was the military service law, which discriminated

against them. In 1880, rather than serving close to their homes, Jewish recruits were sent to the Russian interior, to places far from other Jews.

The soldiers' parents approached the rabbi and informed him that they wished to send *matzot* for Pesah to their sons. They wanted to bake the *matzot* approximately two months in advance and asked that Rabbi Horowitz take charge of the ritual preparation of the mill at this time. [Rabbi Horowitz answered] "Why send just *matzot*? Why not send clothing, too—don't they wear *shatnez* [a prohibited combination of wool and linen]? And why not send food all year round—are you so sure that they do not eat *pigul* [food considered unfit for eating]? Don't bother me with nonsense! Right now your sons are slaves of the Tsar. They must obey his orders regarding clothing and food. When they complete their years of service, they will be able to be observant Jews." (Chapter 1)

In the twentieth century, the traditional and the modern, more often come into violent opposition. A former Zionist enthusiast, the rabbi of Karlin David Friedman, an important supporter of the first settlers who came to work the land of Israel in settlements like Petah Tikvah, turns away from the movement (and finds his windows broken). Secular Zionists emerge; new battle lines will be drawn. Some wish to assimilate into the wider world of Russia and insist that their children be taught its language. Others want Yiddish, the common tongue spoken by Jews in Russia and Poland, to be the language of instruction in the schools being established. Yiddish will find a home in the militant Jewish labor movement, the Bund, as its members begin to organize Pinsk's factories, but the Bund will find itself battling the left-wing Zionists and, eventually, the Communists for the workers' allegiance. The Zionists will insist that Hebrew is the real language of the Jews and its instruction the paramount duty of Jewish schools.

The first six chapters chart the efforts of the city's wealthy to employ the poor buffeted by economic ups and downs by industrializing and innovating, trying to maintain charitable and educational institutions and create new ones as old sources of the city's prosperity disappeared. In the opening chapter, Chaim Weizmann, in 1904, seeing the hopeless multiplication of small shopkeepers, exclaims:

Whenever I walk in the city streets I return home dejected. There are no happy faces, not a single smile—all around the people are lifeless,

and I wonder what they live on. Here is a tiny shop with merchandise worth three rubles, and a family must subsist on the income from this “business” . . . and I am certain that most of Pinsk’s Jewish population does not know what to use in place of the Passover bread which ran out today. The poverty never struck me as blatantly as today.

On another page, however, one reads about the increase in factory jobs, the plywood factories, corking facilities, and a new class of wealthy middle-class citizens. Pinsk is in pain, the ratio of its Jewish population to its non-Jewish, shrinking, but its actual size growing. It is in the seventh chapter with the Russo-Japanese War that Pinsk explodes. No one circumstance can explain the mood of riot and murder in its streets, but the reader can find events in Shoet’s pages that have a resonance throughout Russia, particularly for the Jews, who had to serve in the army of a government that treated them as second-class citizens: denied them places in the university, promotion in the military, and rights of residence. It fueled a constant emigration to Western Europe and to America. Between Shoet’s columns of statistics, the city’s intellectuals cry out in despair.

A reader who is not interested in the fine points of Zionist ideology at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century might imagine that some pages of Chapter 2, which begins with these materials, could be skipped. One would miss, however, the struggles as violence breaks out in Pinsk among Jewish factions, some based on class and wealth, others on ideology. Zionism leaves its conservative leadership behind, finding new ideologies in the twentieth century. The Socialist parties, espousing or not espousing Zionism, attack each other with beatings, then pistol shots. What began as a tale of meetings becomes an epic of revolutionary warfare: informers assassinated in the forest, attacks on Jewish factory owners and policemen, and the Russian police chief trying to ward off his own murder—one of the bombs intended for him exploding in the hands of his assailants. The Socialist parties teeter back and forth. They act as guardians of the Jewish population in the face of attempts by the government to foment anti-Jewish riots, then terrorize their own. Shoet catalogues a “horrible incident” in the Pinsk of 1905. “Bundists led by a bricklayer named Tzavke, broke into an S.S. committee meeting. Hana Sokolovsky was shot dead on the spot; H. Friedman was struck on the hand with an iron bar.” The

historian quotes with a sardonic sense of the issues that “the Tsar was considered to be the private property of each party and the struggle against him—each party’s sole prerogative.”

Chapter 7, which begins with Cossacks galloping through the streets, initiates a narrative that will not stop to catch its breath until Chapter 10.

Pinsk was beset by continuous tension starting late in 1905. On December 22, Governor Korlov imposed “the strictest level of control.” Cossacks galloped through the city, raining murderous blows on anyone who crossed their path. A long series of searches and arrests began. Forty people were arrested that first week of “strictest control.” Hardly any of the seven Jews among them belonged to any radical party. They were either Zionists or liberals, members of The Society for Full Civil Rights for Jews. . . . In the final days of 1905, there was “chaos in the city and many young people fled.” Searches and arrests persisted. A letter sent to America by the Bund (apparently early in January) reports that “more than fifty of our people were arrested.”

The vengeful and repressive impulses of the “guardians of law and order” were intensified as a result of several episodes. On Saturday, January 7, following an exchange of shots, officials of the government bank were robbed of a satchel containing 1,100 rubles in cash and 3,400 rubles in securities. A rumor spread that Bundists were responsible. On January 8, an attempt was made on the life of a police officer. . . . [The Russian authorities] were distributing circulars among the peasants that called upon them to beat up the Jews and the intelligentsia on May 14, the anniversary of the coronation of [Isar] Nicholas II]. . . . The peasants were being called upon to arm themselves with “home-made arms” for any eventuality and to come into the city on May 14. Local hooligans known as *laboznikes* (apparently a reference to Jewish informers) were “cooperating” with the “Real Russians.” The entire population—the Poles included—was terrified, and many of the Jews and the intelligentsia were leaving the city.

Wealthy Jewish factory owners in the city were threatened with violence unless they yielded to workers’ demands. Radical factions among the union organizers, some of them former criminals, extorted money as well. The government planted informers among Bundists and Communists. Once discovered, they were lured to meetings in the forest and shot. According to family rumor, my grandmother Devorah’s cousin Yette was one of the execution squad and had to escape to America.

Shohet's volume truly grips me as "story" with the epic that begins with the First World War and the German invasion of Poland, gathering force from vivid narratives left by first-hand witnesses. It continues with starvation of the city and a massacre in 1919, extending into the last invasion of Pinsk by the criminal gangs of Balakhovich in 1920. Here I must fulfill a promise I made to Azriel Shohet when he winked at me mischievously in his dark living room, shades drawn against the bright light of northern Israel, inviting me to add to his history from materials I gleaned from my own family.

My father recalled the flood of refugees streaming by his house during the retreat of the Russian army in 1915:

A detachment of Cossacks came into town. Horses, gear, and all! They were immediately quartered in the center of the town. They helped themselves to free vodka in the monopoly store and instead of maintaining peace or going along en route to fight the Germans, they began to cause trouble in town. . . . Day by day the town's population was alienated more and more. Meanwhile along the city's streets toward Russia came streaming thousands and thousands of peasants, loaded, with cattle following. The peasants were begging to sell the cattle for fifty cents or a dollar apiece. Grandfather had a yard full of cows, sheep, horses, chickens, and geese. Food was plenty. The old little cube of one inch of meat that used to be fed to us once or twice a week gave way to large hunks of meat and chicken twice a day. Cheese and butter were in abundance for the first time in my lifetime. It seemed to me that it was like the seven years of plenty. It was Pharaoh's day in Egypt.

The hours went into days; the days went into weeks. The Cossacks kept driving the peasants with their horses, their cows, their possessions, into the heart of Russia. With these cows, chickens, and horses came lice and vermin. Children on the peasants' carts became sick. You could see the children lying on top of the carts, rolling in pain. They were wrapped in white flaxen blankets—not even bark shoes on their feet. Typhoid fever spread through the town, and I was sick for two weeks. People were dying like flies and from flies. People were dying despite the cool weather, which by that time had set in. The black funeral hearse, which was dragged by a horse and onto which the bodies were laid could only get to the cemetery by the side streets because the main streets were covered by the peasants and their litter. In front of 26 Lahishinergasse, the sight was extremely pretty whenever the Marshal went out of his house and entered his touring car. His chauffeur

cranked the motor and got it started. The horses would go mad, jump over the carts, breaking carts, killing children and women and causing a tie-up that would last for several hours. The Cossacks, who never looked for a reason but with their whips beat the peasants as often as not and drew their sabers to cut up a peasant who would give them lip, came on horseback. It took time but the caravan moved on.

The scene remained vivid for my father's younger sister Hilda, as well.

"Twas a wild period. There were so many pounds of butter around, you know, just bucketsful. Animals were being slaughtered in our backyard. . . . They had a *shochet*, a kosher slaughterer, there and rabbis coming to supervise. I remember tremendous pieces of meat being hung. . . . Oh, that period we had plenty. . . . They used to butter their boots because there was so much of it around. There were no refrigerators. And eggs, and milk, there was just so much. That was the period of greatest plenty. But it just lasted a few weeks. The Germans came and then it was all over.

The Germans' orderly arrival and quick dispatch of the drunken, chaotic vanguard of Russians impressed Pinsk. My father rushed to follow the parades: "—those German bands were really something, I marched miles and miles following those bands!" His voice tingled with the awe he had felt, watching General August von Mackensen, who had "broken the back of the Russian army," on a white horse, reviewing his troops in the market square, squads of soldiers in dress uniforms galloping up to salute. Yiddish, the first language of the Jewish majority and German were close enough for the occupied and the occupiers to quickly understand each other.

The lines of combat, however, between the opposing armies, remained close to Pinsk; its streets were subject to shelling. All of my great-grandfather's stores went up in flames in one bombardment. When a sympathetic commander was replaced by a harsh one, the good will of the inhabitants evaporated. As the German war effort stalled, almost everything useful to the army was confiscated; not only gold, silver, and valuables but food stocks. The city was reduced to starvation. In Chapter 8 Shohet quotes A. A. Feinstein, who recalls that in 1916, "Hundreds of people began to pick nettles and other such plants from along the fences: they would cook them and eat them. . . . The numbers of the starving multiplied and epidemics broke out. . . . You would

meet a person whose face and hands were thick and full: he looked robust and hearty. . . . [Actually] he was swollen with hunger and on the verge of death. . . . Several times I found myself on the verge of fainting from weakness.” My father’s anecdotes of his “swollen belly” are verified in the text’s specifics. “The annual mortality rate was approximately three thousand people, or one-third of the population, as opposed to the normal mortality, which was approximately five hundred people annually out of a population of more than twenty thousand.” Shohet catalogues an even more ominous development, “a new term was coined in Pinsk, *Freiwillige Zwangsarbeiter* (volunteers for forced labor).” This oxymoron was the euphemism of a military command that formed labor gangs of young men and women, subjecting them to starvation wages. It seems to forebode the slogan over the gates of Nazi death camps, “*Arbeit macht frei*, Work makes free.” The German occupation remains paradoxical. Jewish soldiers among the Germans were at liberty to associate with Pinsk’s Jews. The Germans encouraged schools and allowed a lively intellectual life to continue, but the population was exploited as a source of labor, starved, and at one point the authorities tried to conscript the young women of Pinsk to service the troops as prostitutes. When the Tsar’s regime collapsed, shelling stopped; but its occupiers remained, turning the city over to a government formed in Ukraine only in December of 1918. In February, it gave way to the Bolsheviks; and in March, troops of the new Poland entered Pinsk.

At this point Shohet’s narrative begins to tick day by day. The forces of Ukraine and Germany retreat, but the random murders and robbery of opposing armies turns into a campaign of deliberate intimidation.

On the fifth of April, 1919, the Polish commander in the city, Major Luczynski, orders thirty-five Jewish men to be shot, relying on the testimony of two Jewish renegades with criminal records among the Polish troops. Some victims are dragged from their houses or seized in the street, but most of them had gathered in the Jewish Community House to arrange for the distribution of baskets of Passover food to the poor. The claim will be made that they were communists plotting a conspiracy against Polish authority. Shohet makes clear that there is not a shred of evidence in this regard.

One of the murdered was my great-uncle Menachem Lieberman, who had served as my father and his sisters’ guardian for nine years

because their father, Israel, had fled to the United States in 1910. The violent death threw their home into an agony of grief. It still agitated my father forty years later, and Jewish Pinsk never forgot that “mas-sacre.” I gathered details from firsthand witnesses who always recalled it with pain. They remembered how the victims, just before they were shot, recited the “Shema” (Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is One) and that the sound of the voices echoed through the nearby streets, then the rattle of machine guns. Moshe Kol, an Israeli cabinet minister, told me he could still hear their patter. Men in their seventies and eighties burst into tears as they relived it. Yeruham Meshel, head of Israel’s labor organization, the Histadrut, fixed a smile on his face, belied by his words. One of the murdered, Fishman, was in business with Yeruham’s father.

Suddenly there were rumors. Something had happened in the *Beit Ha’am*. . . . Then, we heard a great storm, marching on the street, cries and running. And Fishman’s wife was very anxious. We didn’t know what happened. Suddenly one man is running, near us, “*Osher*,” my father’s name is Asher, “*Osher, metich menshen tsu deb kir* [they are taking men to the wall]. There is something wrong. They were arrested in *Beit Ha’am*. And they are moving them. They will be killed perhaps.”

My father didn’t want to explain to Fishman’s wife. But she had a strong feeling that something would happen. It was too late for him not to have come back. . . . Around our house were people running. His wife started to cry, “He is there.” He was in the *Beit Ha’am*. And we see people moving together with soldiers to this wall . . . moving step by step to this wall of the *monastyr* [monastery]. . . . And then we see that automobiles are running, and we see a very strong light in this place near the *monastyr*, and we heard shooting, shooting and crying, and this was the end. . . .

“You saw the lights?”

“Yes. I saw the lights.”

“And you heard the machine guns?”

Afterward, we realized the extent of the tragedy. Some of them were taken to the prison. The prison was also in the same street, but far away from us. And you cannot imagine what it was like to listen: the cries and the pistols and the hand grenades. . . . But I can never forget this. . . . I was five years old. . . . I can [still] hear it. . . . It happened as we started whispering. When she was—her husband was not back in

time. And all the time we were talking, and she was also very agitated and then she whispered and suddenly when she heard shooting—she started crying hysterically.

My aunt Hilda tells me, “It’s always been with me. . . . Oh, it was a terrible night. It’s as if everything just went black. . . . [My sister] Sonya said there was crying and I have the feeling there was an awful lot of that prayer, the *Shema Yisroel*, Hear O Israel. And whenever that came up it was a terrible thing. Then we knew that the worst. . . .” My father, the last of the family to see his uncle alive, whacked away with a rifle butt, makes light of the blow but adds, “Next morning is when you saw the wagons with the bodies all pushed together, eight, ten . . . on top [of each other]. Ordinary wagons, you know—Russian wagons with sticks. Bodies—still in their clothing were taken not along Lahishiner-gasse, but the first street to the right, Zavalnya, from the market square and then through a side street to the cemetery . . . instead of going down the main street. . . . And even then our family didn’t believe it. Why in the world would the Poles take Lieberman’s son?”

The scope of the Holocaust twenty-five years later has blunted human capacity to respond. In 1919, however, the brazen lying and random brutality on the part of the new Polish leadership shocked Jews in Pinsk and abroad. And for a brief moment, the eyes of the world fastened on Pinsk.

Shohet clearly fixes the responsibility for the murders on Listowski, the commander of the Eastern Front in the area of Pinsk, and Major Luczynski, the commander of the local company, tracing evidence of a telephone call to Listowski just before the order was given. Brailsford, a British journalist, testifies to the attitude of the Polish commander in the city, just days before, and the cynical indifference of Marshal Pilsudski. Other historians, for instance, Pawel Korzec (*Juifs en Pologne*, Paris, 1980) catalogue a number of pogroms, as deliberate incitements of local populations to murder Jews by Polish army commanders. Some historians have offered the excuse of battlefield confusion to explain the shooting of the thirty-five. Just recently Caroline Fink, in *Defending the Rights of Others* (Cambridge, 2004) devotes an entire chapter to the massacre in Pinsk. She describes how the abrogation of the minority rights articles agreed upon in the borders set for the “new” nations, like Poland and Czechoslovakia, at Versailles led to tensions that helped set the stage

for the Second World War. She is amazed, however, that the killings on April 5, 1919, should have disrupted the Versailles Conference.

Why did the summary shooting of thirty-four Jews [thirty-five counting Moshe Gliberman, who was shot during the roundup at the *Beit Ha'am*] in an obscure town of Belorussia reverberate in Paris and outside? The event was scarcely unanticipated, and the loss of life was small compared with the 31,000 Jews killed in all the pogroms during and after World War I. What happened in Pinsk on April 5, 1919 was not literally a “pogrom”—an organized, officially tolerated or inspired massacre of a minority such as had occurred in Lemberg—but rather a military execution of a small, suspect group of civilians. To be sure, *all* these civilians were Jewish. The entry into the *Beit Am*, the capture of its occupants, and the order to shoot were done precisely because they were Jews, giving the incident its macabre slant.

The misnamed “Pinsk pogrom,” a plain, powerful alliterative phrase, entered history in April 1919. Its importance lay not only in its timing, during the tensest moments of the Paris Peace Conference and the most crucial deliberations over Poland’s political future: The reports of Pinsk once more demonstrated the swift transmission of local violence to world notice and the disfiguring process of rumor and prejudice on every level. (p. 185)

There was no “disfiguring process” on the part of the Jews in the city, or abroad, but rather a need to set the record straight before the military went on a worse rampage. There is a condescending coldness in language like “scarcely unanticipated.” Shohet explains why the cry went up. The murder *was* “organized” and “officially tolerated.” Having extended their borders to include many non-Poles, the government wanted to intimidate the large Jewish minority in the new territory. Contrasting what happened in Pinsk with Lemberg, it is obvious that the Polish military could not provoke a pogrom in Pinsk—the Polish population was too small and on the whole at peace with the Jewish majority. The Pole appointed as mayor and Pinsk’s Catholic priest would refuse to go along with the fiction of a Jewish conspiracy. Without the outcry and influence of representatives of the British and American Jewish communities present at Versailles, there might well have been a more widespread pogrom throughout Poland. The journals of Hugh Gibson, the first American consul to Warsaw (which Shohet did not have access

to), reveal the consul's ugly, anti-semitic views. They explain Gibson's sympathy for the anti-semitic right-wing Polish attitudes. Shohet quotes the cables of the acting American Secretary of State, William Phillips—Phillips, scolding Gibson for his dilatory replies as the American government tried to ascertain the truth of what was happening in Pinsk and throughout Poland. Gibson seems to have been an arch deceiver. In the fall of 1919, my father, with his mother, met the consul at the American embassy to receive monies forwarded to assist their coming to America. He recalled Gibson as kind and thoughtful. Boris Bogen, who had come to distribute Jewish aid in Poland, describes the American consul's playful side, with no suspicion of the double game he was engaged in.

The nightmare in Pinsk did not culminate on April 5, 1919. The Polish military continued to harass the city. On April 26, Pinsk's rabbis and civic leadership issued a "Plea to the Jewish World" cited by Shohet in Chapter 9.

The city is dying of starvation. Charitable institutions are closed for lack of funds. Those institutions still open will close down shortly.

There is no trade, the factories are shut; there is no work and no way to make a living. . . . People are shadow-like, half dead, bowed and bent. Dozens of people die every day. Disease stalks the city. Sick are found in every house. Do not let our city die of hunger. Pinsk was always at the forefront of charitable activity. Do not allow this venerable community to be destroyed.

Only with the arrival of Hans Morgenthau months later, as an emissary of President Wilson, did the situation improve.

As I go over the catalogue of the recovery, each time different facts strike me. Material on the struggle to form Jewish banks, since the Polish ones were closed to Jews, anticipates the idea of micro-banking in stimulating an economy. The narrative is not as dramatic as in previous chapters, but the statistics of poverty through the 1920s and early 1930s are. There is an underlying pathos as Jewish Pinsk tries to return to normal. Jewish workers in the city struggle to find work and feed their families. Many Jews try to assimilate. Chapter 10 records:

A 1928 article states that children of all social classes were rushing to the government schools "because of the need to know Polish." In line with its policy of Polonization of the eastern border areas, the government spared no expense and set up a school wherever there were pupils to

fill it. In 1929, a new government school was opened; by late February 1928, seventy Jewish children had registered to study there.

As the economic situation improves, increased pressure from the Polish government with its policy of discrimination against Jewish businesses drains resources, jobs, and opportunities from the Jews of Pinsk.

A new Polish constitution was published in 1935; sections guaranteeing equal rights to national minorities had been excised, and anti-semitism became the official policy of the central government. The gains that had been made in the municipal government by the Jews were effectively wiped out; now it was no longer necessary to find excuses for depriving them. (Chapter 10)

Shohet sums up the period between the wars in Chapter 10:

All over Poland, circumstances were becoming more tragic as Jews became trapped, politically and economically. The Jews in Pinsk were forced to demonstrate patriotism for a state whose chief spokesmen considered them “superfluous” and disastrous to the Polish people. Jews had no choice but to be good citizens because they considered their situation in Poland a lesser evil than the circumstances of the German Jews under Hitler. They could not hope for aid from Soviet Russia as they were aware of its persecution of Zionists, nor were they, or the majority of Polish Jews, attracted to the prospect of life under Soviet rule.

Despite the growing prejudice, there are Jewish deputies in Poland’s parliament, Jewish intellectual life and culture is not inhibited, and nothing resembles the purges to the east, some of which specifically target its Yiddish speaking elite. Jewish officers serve in the Polish army. During this period, Bruno Schulz, a Jew, writes one brilliant story after another in Polish and corresponds with Warsaw’s intellectuals. In Pinsk, at least, attempts to implement the boycott against Jewish businesses seem to have fallen flat.

However, one can feel the horror approaching. It overwhelms the statistics. In Chapter 10 Shohet quotes a letter of May 20, 1939:

Recent world events [the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia and Danzig] and especially our own troubles and misery, have deprived us . . . of interest in anything. . . . You are fortunate in blessed America, you are secure for tomorrow at least . . . and we know what is in store for us here. The Middle Ages are returning. They want to purify the world

with our blood. . . . We are filled with despair and resignation. . . . The main concern is for the future of the children. Our son is fifteen and our daughter is twelve; they both study at the Tarbut gymnasium. One doesn't even consider pursuing studies in Poland. You probably read the newspapers and know what is going on in the Polish universities.

*

Nachman Tamir Mirski was my guide to interviews with the men and women who had become prominent in Israel after their emigration from Pinsk: Moshe Kol, who was in the Israeli cabinet; Yeruham Meshel; and Fanny Solomian-Loc, who fought as partisans in the forests against the Nazis. Nachman hoped that there would be a whole shelf of books on Pinsk in the libraries of the English-speaking world. The two histories of the city, Nadav's and Shohef's, are massive, but they are only a portion of the three Yizkor volumes, poems, photographs, reminiscences, and the detailed histories of prominent families and the Lithuanian Hasidic dynasties of Pinsk. In turn, beyond these pages, there are books of poetry, memoirs, and original rabbinic scholarship to be translated if the world that was lost is to be recovered and understood. Many books and manuscripts have deepened my understanding of Pinsk. Nadav, for instance, drew heavily on Miriam Shomer Zunser's *Yesterday* for details of life in a wealthy Pinsk household in the middle of the nineteenth century. Some of the most powerful pages, including the description of the sadness that arranged marriages caused and what happened to the emigrants when they came to the United States, are not part of the general histories; the story of the city's emigrants begs another volume. When, over thirty years ago, I began this project, in the wake of the manuscript about my father and grandfather's emigration to Boston, I became aware of two organizations in New York City. One had lapsed into a burial society but was extremely helpful to me. The other had absorbed Pinskners who came to the United States after the Second World War. It had annual meetings and I began to attend them, meeting a few of the pre-war generation. One Pinsker, Doctor Hrushovsky, burst into tears as he returned to his memories of the massacre in 1919. A retired Hebrew teacher from upstate New York had known my great-grandfather's brother Alter Mirsky, a blind man who played the flute and who won the Russian lottery. He told me how Alter had taken back

the ticket when the wife of his customer begged him to refund its price. The Hebrew teacher laughed about Rabbi Borukh Epstein, the author of *Torah Temimah*, on a bench, merrily reading the socialist newspapers. From others, I heard eyewitness accounts of the murders in Belarus and tales of escape. Marianne Lourie Goldstick, translated the memoirs of her father, Paul Lourie, whose uncle Alexander Luria, the Pinsk plutocrat, had moved to Vienna. Marianne read us pages of Lourie's portrait of aristocratic Polesie.

Just before Hitler came to Austria, I made one of my frequent visits to Pinsk. For the first time I accepted an invitation from Prince Karol Radziwill to visit his estates on which were some of our most important timber sources. Before the Russian Revolution his holdings had covered an area as large as Holland. Two-thirds of his former lands were now on the Russian side; the remainder were in Poland where the prince lived.

When I visited him in February 1938, I took the train to the tiny railway depot near the Russian border. A princely sleigh awaited me and took me on a ride of several hours, through primeval forests and swamps to the castle. Here they enjoyed the good life, with liveried servants, silk tapestries, antique furniture and thick carpets—an intriguing contrast to the world outside. This was where the prince lived. The princess, a cousin of the last Spanish king, Alphonso XIII, was rarely there, preferring Paris. The prince's companions were his elderly, unmarried daughter, an old gentleman who was said to be Tsar Alexander II's illegitimate son, and a one-armed, one-eyed English general, Carton de Wiart . . . there for the hunt, [who] would later play a colorful role in the Second World War.

Waiting for me at the castle was the prince's *Hausjude* who ran the prince's businesses. He was the one I dealt with. When the prince sat down with me in one of the drawing rooms, the *Hausjude* respectfully withdrew. I felt as if I had been transported back into the eighteenth century.

The prince had no idea about our business and left it to his *Hausjude* to make all arrangements. With me he wanted to discuss Vienna. He invited me to dinner and wanted to put me up for the night. I felt very much out of place and preferred to go to the little village of Stolin to spend the night at the Jewish inn there. Stolin had a famous *Wunderrabbi* whom the prince often consulted as he might have consulted an oracle.

The next morning when we left Stolin, we ran into a long caravan of sleighs. The prince was sitting in the first sleigh taking the large group to the hunt. The *Hausjude* who was sitting with me, looked at me and smiled. “One of my business deals,” he said. I did not understand right away. “These are paying guests. They pay for the honor of being permitted to hunt with the prince.” It didn’t seem very princely to me.

The Pinskens who commissioned the Shoet and Nadav histories wanted to memorialize the town that they had grown up in and loved. They were proud of their industrialists—the Levins, Lurias, and Eisenbergs, just as they were of their poets, rabbis, labor leaders, and those who made a mark in world politics, such as Chaim Weizmann and Golda Meir. They also wanted the details of how the Nazis exterminated the Jewish population never to be forgotten. Nahum Boneh’s “The Holocaust and the Revolt” is a companion to the Shoet and Nadav histories. A story of how some who escaped fought back can be read in Fanny Solomian-Loc’s *Woman Facing the Gallows*. At my request, Zvi Gitelman, the distinguished scholar of Soviet Jewry, has added a few pages as an afterword that briefly take us through the nightmares of the Second World War and its aftermath and brings us closer to contemporary Pinsk.

In my father’s voice, I heard his admiration for the rabbinic learning of my grandfather Israel. I heard my father dissolve the Massachusetts House of Representatives in laughter with the wit of the Talmud when he served there. I wanted to know more about the generation who gave this tradition new life in America. I wrote in the preface to *The Jews of Pinsk, 1506 to 1880* of two great rabbis of Pinsk. When I interviewed Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (the Rav) at Yeshiva University, asking him about my grandfather, he remarked on what a good listener Israel was, how as a boy he had listened to these scholars, Lazar Horowitz and Friedman, and could detail their disagreements. I leave the task of editing the two histories with a sense of what still remains to be done. The dictum of the rabbis in regard to one’s way through life is, “It’s not given to you to complete the work. Neither are you free to desist from it” (Pirkei Avot, chapter 2).

Here, two names not usually associated with one another come to mind. The first is Charles Dickens, who was a favorite of my father. He observed: “Memory, however sad, is the best and purest link between

this world and a better.” The second is Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who said about my grandfather: “Many people came from abroad. They did not cherish their memories. Israel did cherish his memory of Pinsk. Whenever he told me these stories, his face would shine.”

In my preface to the first volume, I thanked many individuals who made these volumes possible, but I must mention two former deans of The City College of New York, Fred Reynolds and Geraldine Murphy. I correct here an error in the spelling of the philanthropist Shepard Broad’s name. Looking over the photographs, I recall how my kinsman Nachman Tamir solicited them for me, tireless in his support of the project. Yana Joseph and Rosaymi Santos, of the English Department at The City College of New York, without stint gave of their time and skills. Without the constant encouragement of my wife, Inger, I would have long ago thrown up my hands.

In addition, I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for providing a translation matching grant that facilitated the first stages of this project, translating both Pinsk volumes, back in 1984.

Finally, my father, Wilfred S. Mirsky, and his father, Israel Mirsky, both proud of being born in Pinsk have been “affable familiar” spirits at my elbow throughout my work on the two volumes of this history. This translation is dedicated to the author of the original text, Professor Azriel Shohet, as well as to my own Pinsk grandparents, Moshe Rosman’s Pinsk grandparents and Faigie Tropper’s grandparents from Dubiecko.