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Déjà Jew all over again

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Reviews:

Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *From that Place and Time. A Memoir 1938-1947*. New York: Norton, 1989.

Nancy Sinkoff. *From Left to Right. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, the New York Intellectuals, and the Politics of Jewish History*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020.

In the final weeks of my Senior year in college I asked my German tutor what about Yiddish? “Oh,” she answered, idly, “Yiddish is how the dirty people talk.” It’s taken me decades to see the truth in that, though not the truth you might expect.

It was a struggle, too, for Lucy Dawidowicz, the historian of the Holocaust best known for *The War against the Jews*. Then again, *From that Place and Time* is a commonplace of Jewish fiction and non-fiction in the Age of Modernity, the Coming-to-Terms narrative. In this instance the ostensible narrative is the author’s involvement with YIVO, the *Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*, (Institute for Yiddish Knowledge) founded in Vilna, Lithuania in 1925 and now tellingly titled the *YIVO Institute for Jewish Research* in its spanking New York headquarters. Between the two titles and institutions lies a gap the author doesn’t care to bridge: “Knowledge” is what’s shared; “Research” is for the elites.

In 1938, as a footloose graduate student at Columbia University, Dawidowicz took on an overseas research project at the Vilna YIVO, and this provides the first half of her book. After the War she returned, to Germany where she labored to identify over 400 crates of books and documents confiscated by the Nazis and had them shipped to the YIVO Institute in America, a kind of Yiddische Monuments Woman.

Franz Kafka might have been addressing Dawidowicz in his 1912 *Lecture on the Yiddish Language (Rede über die jiddische Sprache)*:

“Wenn Sie nun nicht einmal imstande sind, Jargon zu verstehen, kann Ihnen keine Augenblickserklärung helfen. Sie werden im besten Fall die Erklärung verstehen und merken, daß etwas Schwieriges kommen wird.”

“Now if you’re not even prepared to understand Yiddish no quick explanation can help you. In the best case you’ll understand the explanation and realize that something weighty is about to happen.”

From that Place and Time is long on factoids and data and interesting vignettes that illuminate the place of Yiddishkeit in European interwar culture: the grinding poverty of life in Vilna, its provincialism, the corrosive anti-Semitism of the political establishment and its academic allies at the University, the intellectual and cultural life that surrounded the Institute itself, the radical politics. There’s some good gossip concerning the writer Avrohom Sutzkever, addressing his dual personality as a poet in the High Aesthetic Line and a future hero of the Vilna Ghetto Resistance: according to Dawidowicz Sutzkever was partly influenced by the *Inzichists*, a group of Yiddish formalist poets designated by the Great Soviet Encyclopedia of 1979 as “Bourgeois Jewish writers in the USA [...], an introspectivist group whose members [...] advocated avoidance of social questions.” But why should the two be mutually exclusive, the political and the introspective? Isn’t it the objective condition of Yiddishkeit to be both at once to the extent that being inner-directed becomes a struggle with the externally imposed definition of the self? That’s the part Dawidowicz doesn’t get:

“[Sutzkever] was not so much a modernist as an aesthete.” [125]

And why not both, and a Jew to boot? Dawidowicz is trapped in the conundrum Steven Beller calls the “Jewish bargain with Modernity:” Can one still be a Jew and be modern? Can one still remain a Jew and get with the program? Of Max Weinreich, YIVO’s founder and director, Dawidowicz writes:

“It was his ambition to demonstrate to educated American Jews and to the community of American scholars that Yiddish was not just [*sic*] a vernacular of plain folk and women [...] but was a tongue fit for scholars and intellectuals.”
[235]

That’s certainly true of Columbia professors; it’s demonstrably false of the Vilna YIVO, and Dawidowicz shows it. *From that Place and Time* falls into the category of red-washing, the active denial of the incontrovertible fact that a vast number among the intellectual immigrants to America after World War Two abandoned their radical political beliefs out of fear and not conviction — it’s sometimes hard to tell those two apart.

There are strong suggestions throughout the book that this fear is a concern of Dawidowicz alone, not of the Yiddish speakers of Vilna — not even, most likely, for Weinreich. The work of the Vilna YIVO was not so much an affirmation of the value of Yiddish as a language (an affirmation that needed, presumably, no reinforcement from the community of Yiddish-speakers itself) but an attempt to apply the scientific approaches and techniques of progressive or “modern” research and education to all facets of Yiddishkeit as lived, in other terms a commitment to the Yiddish-speaking collective, the “plain folk and women,” the *prostye Yidn*, the common Jews, the dirty ones, as opposed to the *shayne Yidn*, the nice ones in the Yiddish Department. My tutor’s comment might as well have been addressed to working-class Viennese, who speak a dialect not at all dissimilar to Yiddish, with plenty of Yiddish words thrown in. After all, the linguistic power structure in Austria today is not so different from where it was between the wars, in Vienna or Vilna. Dawidowicz herself offers tantalizing suggestions that the Vilna YIVO and its staff were committed to a

program of *Erziehung*, a raising up of the intellectual, cultural and political powers of the Jewish proletariat on the terms of the proletariat. There are precious indications of a mingling of Psychoanalysis and educational theory towards a progressive if not a revolutionary end, a mingling one might expect in Red Vienna. Could it be that YIVO developed Yiddish, not as an academic or literary project but because that's where its target audience lay? Could it be, despite the insistence of recent apologists, that Yiddishkeit and Left-wing radicalism are so deeply intertwined that all efforts to isolate them one from the other fail? I recently acquired a copy of a booklet by the Viennese Marxist Max Adler, translated into Hebrew and published in Warsaw in 1933. The only other copy in existence, so far as I know, is the one now in the YIVO collection in New York.

Too dirty for you? My reaction to my German tutor was to join the Graduate Program in Yiddish at Columbia. I left after one term, I couldn't handle the rage directed by teachers and lecturers at myself and other students at the time. Now I remember a very large Black woman I saw shepherding her very small boys in New York one day, shouting at them like that. I now know it wasn't rage or hatred, just fear for her children and for herself. It's the same fear described by Kafka in 1912, in his address to the Jewish bourgeoisie:

“Wenn Sie aber einmal Jargon ergriffen hat - und Jargon ist alles [...], dann werden Sie Ihre frühere Ruhe nicht mehr wiedererkennen. Dann werden Sie die wahre Einheit des Jargon zu spüren bekommen, so stark, daß Sie sich fürchten werden, aber nicht mehr vor dem Jargon, sondern vor sich.”

“Only once Yiddish has taken hold of you — and by Yiddish I mean everything [...] then you will no longer recognize your previous peace of mind. Then you

will feel the true uniqueness of Yiddish so powerfully that you will be afraid, though no longer of Yiddish, but of yourselves.”

Fear of not being modern enough; not clean enough, not white enough, a loser. My best moment at Columbia came when one lecturer surveyed us haughtily: “Are you all Jewish?” I blinked my eyes in mock confusion: “Am I all Jewish?” ‘Course not, *shtupneygl*. I’m a Jew and a Leftie and a guy and...

The moral landscape of the author of *From that Place and Time* is summed up in a few comments:

“It didn’t take long before the ugly realities of poverty among the Jews in Vilna shattered my sentimental notions about the viability of the realm of Yiddish. Everything I loved in Vilna rested upon a rotten crumbling foundation.” [144]

“I was benumbed by the primitiveness and backwardness, depressed that Vilna had not yet been brought into the modern world...”

“Years later, on my first visit to Jerusalem... I came upon... a market near Jaffa Street. The stalls and carts were dense, the crowd was hard to penetrate, the products were not of the best quality. Buyers and sellers were speaking Yiddish.” [147]

By page 245 Dawidowicz is fearful still: “There was no real escape from the Jewish coil in which I was firmly held.” By book’s end at last she’s had her epiphany:

“I knew that I had completed the mission I’d imposed on myself...” [324]

“I felt that I had laid to rest those ghosts of Vilna... I was ready now to move ahead. I was ready to start a new life.” [326].

She sounds like a student graduating.

From that Place and Time suggests a futile effort on the author’s part to clear herself of her class self-hatred, an effort in which poverty and Left-wing politics and the failure to modernize are inextricably linked, alongside Being Jewish. This is the survivor guilt of the *allrightnik*: guilt about class, not ethnicity. Or both.

Adorno was right. The Revolution will abolish fear.

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