

Article published in:

Björn Siegel, Markus Kraß, Oskar Czendze (Eds.)

“They Took to the Sea”: Jewish History and Culture in Maritime Perspective(s)

PaRDeS : Journal of the Association for Jewish Studies in Germany, Vol. 28

2023 – 153 pages

ISBN 978-3-86956-552-1

DOI <https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-57347>



Suggested citation:

Allison Schachter: Barry Trachtenberg, *The Holocaust & the Exile of Yiddish: A History of the Algemeyne Entsiklopedye* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022), 336 pp., \$ 37.50. PaRDeS 28 (2022), S. 121–125.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-58583>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License Attribution 4.0

This does not apply to quoted content from other authors. To view a copy of this license visit:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Barry Trachtenberg, *The Holocaust & the Exile of Yiddish: A History of the Algemeyne Entsiklopedye* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022), 336 pp., \$ 37.50.

In 1931, a group of prominent Yiddish cultural activists, including the eminent Jewish historian Simon Dubnow, convened in Berlin to hatch plans for a Yiddish-language encyclopedia to serve the needs of Yiddish speakers across the globe. Dubnow implored those present to commit to the ambitious project of producing not a Jewish encyclopedia but an encyclopedia in Yiddish, proclaiming: “An encyclopedia is a people’s book, one that each nation must possess.” (p. 21) Dubnow and his vision of a Yiddish-language general encyclopedia captures the brash optimism of the interwar period, when Yiddish artists and cultural activists envisioned a bright future for Yiddish culture on the European continent. He would not live to see the realization of this dream, murdered at the hands of the Nazis in the Riga ghetto, but the dream would not entirely die with him either. As Barry Trachtenberg illuminates in his important and insightful history of the *Algemeyne entsiklopedye*, the Yiddish cultural nationalist dreams of the 1920s and 1930s would be utterly transformed by the throes of World War II and the annihilation of Jewish Europe, but not destroyed.

The work of the *Algemeyne entsiklopedye* began in Berlin of the 1930s, moved to Paris with Hitler’s rise to power, and ultimately landed in post-World War II America where it continued for two decades, into the 1960s. Its history wouldn’t be written until the twenty-first century, long after its contributors had passed and well after the disappearance of its imagined

audience. Envisioned as a ten-volume project, the encyclopedia would never be completed. The Yiddish cultural dream that flourished in the interwar period was reduced to a preservation project in the postwar moment. It is a story of the cultural heroism of a group of Yiddish writers and thinkers who firmly believed in the substance of the Yiddish cultural project, who understood the stakes of what was being lost, and selflessly dedicated themselves to rescuing the fragments of the stalled project of diaspora nationalism, even as they recognized its many failings. In *The Holocaust and the Exile of Yiddish*, Trachtenberg records the encyclopedia's epic journey through the devastation of war and genocide, tracing the fate of the volumes and the many hands who participated in it.

In telling the story of the *Algemeyne entsiklopedye*, Trachtenberg follows the long arc of Yiddish culture, offering one of the few glimpses of "the rare and frayed threads of continuity" (p. 30) of a cultural project that spanned the pre- and post-Holocaust eras. The book is divided into three long chapters each of which narrates the project in its different centers: Berlin, Paris, and New York. Trachtenberg weaves the history of the encyclopedia into the broader cultural history of Yiddish in the era under consideration. As Trachtenberg explains, the large majority of such endeavors were usually taken on by state institutions, but Yiddish had no national home, and no national language institute. There was only the YIVO Institute in Vilna, which sought to support Yiddish cultural life, and organizations like the Dubnow Fund in Berlin. Both began to collaborate on the project, however, for only a short time because of the difficulties of working across borders and the financial strain YIVO was facing after erecting a new building. The story would ultimately take off in Berlin, in a period of Yiddish cultural possibility that was short-lived for the city.

The plan agreed upon by all in Berlin was to publish ten volumes on general topics, and a supplemental volume on Jewish subjects, at a rate of two volumes a year. A fundraising tour ensued, with an emissary sent as far as the United States. In the absence of a state authorizing body, this fragile enterprise attracted both praise and criticism, for its politics and its cultural ambitions. Ben Zion Goldberg, the New York editor of the *Der tog* (*The day*), described the encyclopedia as "momentous," but to the unknown H. Yulski, writing for a Bundist literary journal, the editors of the project all in Berlin were situated at too great a distance from their Eastern European brethren to provide

a meaningful project. Yosef Yashunsky in the pages of *YIVO bleter* wrote that the encyclopedists were “attempting to produce a work of general reference, which rested outside the area of their expertise and experiences.” (p. 63) The encyclopedia would be haunted by the tension between the dream of a Yiddish-language general reference work and a Yiddish-language encyclopedia of eastern European Jewish life. Indeed, the authors would struggle to create an encyclopedia of knowledge for a language that lacked a university or formal academic body. Moreover, struggling to work in the wake of the financial crises that unfolded across Europe, the Berlin based editors managed to publish a sample volume to attract subscriptions in 1932, which Trachtenberg describes as “one of the last expressions of Jewish optimism about the future of European Jewry.” (p. 57) It is hard not to see the doom approaching in the narrative.

The first volume of the Encyclopedia would appear in 1934 in Paris, where many of the Berlin editors fled after Hitler’s rise to power. Its poignant that for the next seven years a group of refugees continued so tirelessly to work towards the encyclopedia in a France that no longer welcomed refugees with open arms. The editors had to find new contributors, raise funds, and locate amenable printers for the project. It took time to establish the locations of many scattered contributors. Simon Dubnow, for instance, would make the fatal choice to emigrate to Latvia in this period. Editors had to rely on correspondence to gather the volumes, which delayed the project considerably. The first volume, when it finally appeared, was celebrated internationally. Trachtenberg observes here that entries on pre-modern Jewish life were connected to religion, while the ones on modern Jewry were secular, many on leftist politics, reflecting the ideological worldview of the editors. Paris was also the printing place for the next three volumes of the general encyclopedia and two volumes of the Jewish supplement, *Yidn alef and beys*. These volumes continued the spirit in which the *Encyclopedia* was imagined in the 1930s, envisioning a cosmopolitan world that Jews could participate in, in Yiddish.

Trachtenberg’s chapter on the Paris era of the encyclopedia captures the desperation, pathos, and bravery of its editors and authors as they faced the precarity of their own circumstances. Towards the end of the chapter, Trachtenberg describes a frenzied escape to the South of France and desperate attempts to immigrate. The barriers to immigration were enormous. The U.S.

demanded a series of visas almost impossible to obtain. The Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC) in New York petitioned the U.S. government for emergency visas as did the Jewish Labor Committee, which ultimately persuaded the U.S. to issue visas to Raphael Abramovitch and other leftist Jewish activists who were working on the encyclopedia. The JLC executive director, Isaiah Minkoff, the AFL Labor President, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union President, and the *Forverts* general manager met with then Secretary of State Cordell Hull. The pull of Jewish and labor organizations might be hard to fathom today but attests to the stature of the Jewish left in the U.S. at the time. Many of the *Encyclopedia* staff were granted safe passage to the U.S., where they set about picking up the pieces of their cultural project. It was their connections to the U.S. labor movement that ensured that survival.

Once in New York, the project faced new obstacles. On the one hand, the editors were safe and living in a city with numerous Jewish cultural institutions willing to support them. On the other hand, their imagined audience who might have turned to a Yiddish encyclopedia for general knowledge had all but disappeared, as had the eastern European Jewish world they came from. The editors were aging, and their numbers were further diminished. They had arrived in a new country with many contradictions, as Trachtenberg observes. The Jewish community was affluent but lacking in political pull needed to upend restrictive immigration laws. Granted entry to the U.S. on the condition that they wouldn't take up political activity, their work on the encyclopedia and other cultural endeavors was one through which they might fight fascism. It was in New York that they completed volume five of the general encyclopedia, and it was in New York that they came to understand their once vibrant vision of the project was to become a memorial to a language and culture now endangered. After volume five, the project continued Jewish topics alone, a monument to the lost communities and a reckoning with the new shape of contemporary Jewry.

This group of self-taught Jewish immigrant intellectuals was ultimately followed by a new generation of American-born scholars and writers who continued the work of documenting an eastern European Jewish past, grappling with the face and meaning of Jewish life in post-Holocaust America. It would be interesting for the book to think more not only about the project that died but also the ways it contributed to an American cultural life in which Yiddish was no longer the lingua franca. Ultimately, the book tells the story

of a burgeoning moment in Yiddish culture, and of the fate of that culture in post-war America, a story waiting to be heard, and one that is accessible to students and scholars alike.

Allison Schachter, Nashville/Tennessee (USA)