

SLAVIC JUDAICA REVISITED*

Zachary M. Baker
Stanford University Libraries

Description: Since 1991 there has been a veritable explosion of publications relating to Jews and Judaism, coming out in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Acquisition of these materials is complicated by the relative lack of reliable bibliographical information on them and by the radically diffuse publishing and distribution channels that have evolved in that region since the collapse of communism. Some suggestions aimed at facilitating identification and acquisition of these newly published works will be offered here. This presentation will highlight some of the most interesting and significant books to come out recently in Poland and the former Soviet republics, based both on Stanford's collecting activities and the experiences of other libraries.

Zachary Baker is the Reinhard Family Curator of Judaica and Hebraica Collections, 1999-present; Head Librarian, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1987-1999; Guest editor, "Judaica in the Slavic Realm, Slavica in the Judaic Realm: Repositories, Collections, Projects, Publications" (special issue of *Slavic and East European Information Resources*, forthcoming in Spring 2003).

Two years ago, in May 2001, I visited Jerusalem for the first time in over a decade, in order to attend the 20th biennial International Book Fair. Six months had passed since the onset of the Intifada, but

Jerusalem was still superficially calm and this lent an air of unreality to the event. Susan Sontag was on hand to be officially honored by the book fair's organizers, and her comments regarding political conditions in Israel and the territories were widely reported in the press. The number of overseas exhibitors and attendees at the book fair was much lower than in previous years, but the exhibition halls were packed with locals, who were admitted free of charge. Meanwhile, ordinary tourism had dried up; the hotels were practically empty; and civil defense drills directed at potential suicide bombers were taking place in full public view.

The Jerusalem book fair is aimed both at representatives of the Israeli and international book trade – publishers and booksellers – and at educators, librarians, and the general reader. The fair provides a window to developments in book publishing both in Israel and abroad. Booths representing many of the largest American and European publishers occupy much of the floor space.

I gravitated to the book fair's "hall of nations," where many of the Israeli visitors clustered around booths for their countries of origin – Russia, Romania, even Azerbaijan.

* Paper delivered at the 38th annual convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, Toronto, Ontario, June 15-18, 2003. The assistance of Karen Rondstvedt, Curator for Slavic and Eastern European Collections in the Stanford University Libraries, in preparing this paper is gratefully acknowledged. Author's e-mail address: zbaker@stanford.edu.

Rather jarringly, one of the largest of the “national” booths was the Polish pavilion. Someone in the Polish government had evidently made a strategic decision to commit tens of thousands of dollars for the extensive set-up, which included book displays, recordings, videos (which were being shown continuously on a VCR), living authors, and of course staff to monitor the booth. By contrast, with the conspicuous exception of Germany, the other national booths were considerably less lavish in their displays.

A twelve-page brochure, *Books from Poland*, was distributed at the fair. It includes an introduction about Polish-language Judaica, by Anka Grupińska, who has written several books about the Warsaw Ghetto along with a volume of reportage on contemporary Hasidic women in Israel, *It Is Most Difficult to Meet Lilith*.¹ In her introduction she addresses the question of market demand for that particular book. “Who needs a book like this in Poland?!” Grupińska’s Israeli interviewees asked her. “The publishers thought that 3,000 copies would more than satisfy Polish demand,” she comments. “But it turned out that many more copies were needed.” Her introduction is followed by a list of approximately 200 recent books in Polish, on Jewish history, culture, philosophy, and literature.² (Over the longer term, Stephen D. Corrsin’s bibliographies on Polish-Jewish studies, which appear in the *Gal-Ed* historical series, provide excellent coverage of books and journal articles in several languages, including Polish.³)

The continued popularity of Judaica books among the almost entirely non-Jewish readership of Poland confirms an observation that I made over a decade ago: “Given the obsession that so many Poles have with their country’s fate, the present-day rediscovery of the Jewish skeletons in their nation’s closet may mark only the beginning of a long voyage of self-exploration.”⁴ In other words, for the educated Polish reader the decision to buy and read, say, a translation of a novel by Isaac Bashevis Singer, a monograph about a Polish Jewish community, a collection of interviews with Hasidic women in Mea Shearim, or even a Jewish cookbook, reflects a desire to learn more about and even come to terms with the legacy of Polish Jewry, a historical presence in Polish society that was officially ignored during the decades of communism and not greatly appreciated by Polish Catholics while there was still a large and thriving Jewish community in that country.

Judaica publications in other Slavic languages represent a somewhat different phenomenon – unlike the case with Polish works – since many of these are produced for a Jewish readership in the former Soviet Union, Israel, Western Europe, and North America. Nikolai Borodulin recently compiled a selective bibliography of “Slavic Judaica in the YIVO Library: Acquisitions from 1991-2001,” which is to appear in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Slavic and East European Information Resources*.⁵ The focus of Borodulin’s bibliography is on works relating to Eastern European Jewry – reference books, history, the Holocaust, Yiddish culture, and conference proceedings. The bibliography includes approximately 350 citations for books, mostly in Russian but also in Ukrainian, Belorussian, Yiddish, Lithuanian, and English. With few exceptions the works cited here were originally written in these languages. Almost all of the items came out in the former Soviet Union (including the Baltic republics); thus, Israeli and American imprints are omitted.⁶ Plus, Borodulin explicitly does not cover a vast

literature of works on other Judaic topics in Russian – original works and translations. Antisemitica (a genre in and of itself) are excluded as well.

Whereas in Poland the intended audience of contemporary Judaica publications is the educated Polish Catholic reader, Russian and Ukrainian-language Judaica reach several different audiences, both within those countries and abroad. An observation that John Bushnell, of the Russian Press Service, made in 1995 about the post-Soviet Russian book trade has validity for Russian-language books of Jewish interest as well. According to Bushnell, “Thriving firms have capitalized on the Russian public’s huge pent-up demand for previously unavailable ‘pulp literature,’ émigré authors’ works, foreign authors’ works, and religious literature.”⁷ All of these genres are represented among the Russian-language Judaica publications that come out in the former Soviet republics.

A wide variety of religious publications is now available in Russian. Many are produced by specific movements (Chabad-Lubavitch is especially active on this front), and among them are a large number of translations from Hebrew and English – most of which are published in Israel.⁸ Belles-lettres – originally written in Russian and works translated into that language – also abound. Jewish readers in Israel, North America, and the CIS are the target audience of these types of books.

Books on local Jewish history and the Holocaust have proliferated. These are in large part aimed at the general reader, especially the Jewish reader in their countries of publication, for whom these books represent an attempt to fill in the many “blank spots” that are the sad legacy of Soviet historiography.

In addition, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, academic programs in Jewish Studies have been established in Moscow and St. Petersburg – often in cooperation with partner institutions in Israel and the U.S. – and a steady stream of scholarly publications has resulted. Their target audience may be presumed to include academic specialists of whatever background.

Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern has identified another publication genre in his native Ukraine, which he describes as a “revisionist trend [that] should be understood against the backdrop of the Ukrainian-Jewish and Ukrainian-Israeli political dialogue that [he has] called ‘A Ukrainian-Jewish Utopia’.”⁹ The main intention of these apologetic works is to reassure non-Jewish readers of the close ties that once existed – and might yet be re-established – between Jews and Ukrainians.

An array of newspapers, magazines, and bulletins has also emerged to serve the Russian-Jewish market. As Nikolai Borodulin observes:

The rise of national consciousness in the former Soviet Union led to the establishment of hundreds of Jewish cultural, religious, social, academic and sport organizations throughout the entire CIS and Baltic states. Many of them publish their own periodicals, and the number of newspapers and journals that have come out in the last ten years is almost impossible to register. The daily, and especially the weekly and monthly press record the current vibrant life of numerous Jewish communities, including instances of anti-Semitism; they trace the past of East European Jews and relate it to the present and future.¹⁰

The periodicals that are appearing in the former Soviet Union run the gamut from school bulletins, organs of Jewish communities and religious organizations, to sophisticated scholarly journals. Some runs are of brief duration; others have been coming out for years, without interruption. Many are subsidized by organizations in the U.S. (for example, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Chabad-Lubavitch), Western Europe (for example, World ORT), or Israel (for example, the Jewish Agency.). Russian-language Jewish serials aimed at émigré readers in Israel and North America still await their bibliographer; Vladimir Karasik fulfills that function for the Russian-Jewish press in the former Soviet Union.¹¹

There is one Russian-Jewish periodical that is absolutely indispensable to librarians who are interested in tracking Jewish book production in the former Soviet Union (especially the Russian Federation and Ukraine): *Narod knigi v mire knig* (its English title is *The People of the Book in the World of Books*). The Jewish Library Association of the CIS publishes this bimonthly magazine, which has been coming out in St. Petersburg since August 1995, with support from the Joint Distribution Committee and the St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Jewish Congress. The editor-in-chief, Alexander Frenkel, who is the chairman of the Jewish Community Center of St. Petersburg, compiles a list of several dozen newly released books for each issue – for a total of between 300 and 400 titles per year, all of them published in the former Soviet Union and Baltic states. The lists are typically subdivided into the following subject categories:

- Judaism and philosophy;
- Jewish history;
- Anti-Semitism;
- Directories and reference books;
- Lives of famous Jews;
- Jewish art;
- Belles-lettres.

Borodulin takes note of specialized bibliographies that have also appeared within issues of *Narod knigi v mire knig*, for example, a two-part bibliography of publications on the Holocaust (in issues no. 27 and 28). In addition, in 2000 this journal published a supplement, *Evreiskie obshchinnye biblioteki stran SNG I Baltii* (Jewish Community Libraries in the CIS and Baltic States), which “provides information on 178 Jewish libraries in 113 cities of 13 former Soviet Republics.”¹²

The Polish and Russian booklists are excellent selection tools for librarians, but as the Yiddish saying goes, “*Vi kumt di kats ibern vaser?*” How does one go about acquiring Judaica books from Eastern Europe?

The end of communist rule in Eastern Europe opened up opportunities to publish on subjects that were completely taboo until the late 1980s. That epic event also resulted in the breakdown of centralized distribution channels and the “fragmentation and chaos” of the book trade.¹³ Libraries both within Eastern Europe and abroad encountered tremendous difficulties in keeping up with developments, and for several years it became all but impossible to acquire many essential publications. Even now it is not easy to obtain books and periodicals that appear outside of these countries’ largest cities.

Where state enterprises such as *Ars Polona*, in Warsaw, or *Mezhdunarodnaia Kniga*, in Moscow, once monopolized the export book trade for their countries, now a bewildering plethora of private vendors in and outside of Eastern Europe cover the field as comprehensively as is possible under the circumstances.¹⁴ As Karen Rondestvedt noted a decade ago, "...It is no longer possible to rely on only one source for anywhere near complete coverage of either country" (that is, Poland and Russia), and the same observation applies to other countries in the region.¹⁵ Since 1993, as political and economic conditions in Eastern Europe have stabilized somewhat, distribution channels have become more predictable and reliable. Nevertheless, a mix of strategies is required in order to maintain a reasonably ambitious collecting program for Slavic Judaica.

While exchanges with other libraries play less of a role than they did during the communist era they have not become completely irrelevant. Indeed, Stanford continues to maintain active exchanges with a number of institutions, such as national and university libraries, in the former Eastern Bloc countries.

In the absence of up-to-date national bibliographical bulletins, vendors' lists assume great importance as selection tools and as sources for specific titles. (A list of several vendors offering a generous selection of contemporary Eastern European Slavic – and Baltic – Judaica is attached.) Some of these vendors also offer approval plans. Many of Stanford's current Polish Judaica books, for example, are received as part of a more general approval plan that the university library maintains with the Warsaw dealer Maciej Woliński.

Sometimes, direct contact with publishers offers the best avenue for the acquisition of their publications. As one example of this we may perhaps cite the Jewish Museum in Prague, which disseminates its own books through its Web site.¹⁶ Finally, the important role that personal contacts can play, in obtaining scarce and ephemeral publications, must not be overlooked.

In the late 1980s a former co-worker of mine at YIVO – himself once a Polish-Jewish refugee – commented that the flurry of Judaica books coming out in his native country back then was a mere flash in the pan. "He predict[ed] that interest in Jewish matters will soon dissipate, that it amounts to a temporary intellectual fad."¹⁷ Now, almost fifteen years later, it is clear that this viewpoint greatly underestimated the level of popular interest in things Jewish on the part of the Polish reading public. And, as developments soon demonstrated, a robust market in the former Soviet republics for Russian-language Judaica was about to emerge as well. In the longer run, today's proliferation of Slavic Judaica publications may indeed mark a transitional phase, as readers' interests change and as the number of Russian-speaking Jews declines, due to internal demographic factors, emigration, and linguistic assimilation in Israel and the West. For the time being, however, librarians seeking to acquire Slavic-language publications on Jewish topics need to keep their eyes peeled, and they must be flexible in the methods that they employ to acquire these materials.

Appendix: Selected list of vendors of Eastern European Judaica.

Bouchal Export-Import Ltd. Erdökerülő u. 16, H-1157 Budapest, Hungary. Fax: + 36-1-418 48 84. E-mail: bouchal@mail.inext.hu (<http://www.bouchal.hu/book.htm>). Hungarian books; occasionally issues Judaica lists.

East View Information Services. 3020 Harbor Lane North, Minneapolis, MN 55447. US Toll-free: (800) 477-1005; fax: (763) 559-2931. E-mail: eastview@eastview.com (<http://www.eastview.com/>). Russian-language books and periodicals; Judaica listed on its Web site.

Derex. Aleea Tebea 2B, bl. 101, sc. A, ap.15, Sector 4, Bucuresti 753852, Romania. Fax: +40-21-410.51.43. E-mail: derex@consultant.com. Contact person: Doina Niculescu (doinicu@yahoo.com). Romanian books, including publications of Hasefer.

Księgarnia Wysylkowa "Lexicon." P.O. Box 957, 00-950 Warszawa 1, Poland. Fax: + 48-22 461744. E-mail: Lexicon@medianet.com.pl. Contact person: Maciej Woliński. Polish books, including Judaica.

Kubon & Sagner Buchexport-Import GmbH. D-80328 München, Germany. Fax +49-89-54 218-218. E-mail: postmaster@kubon-sagner.de (http://www.kubon-sagner.de/index_englisch.html). Contact persons: Otto Sagner und Sabine Sagner-Weigl. Books and journals from throughout Central and Eastern Europe and the CIS states (very good for Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic); occasionally issues Judaica lists.

MIPP International. POB 189, Minsk 220131, BELARUS. Phone/Fax: +375 172 346834. E-mail: custserv@mipp.msk.ru (<http://80.94.226.241/books/>). Russian, Ukrainian, Baltic-language books and periodicals. Based in Minsk, with offices in Brooklyn and Vilnius; occasionally issues Judaica lists.

Szwede Slavic Books. Mailing address: P. O. Box 1214, Palo Alto, CA 94302. Phone: 650-780-0966. Fax: 650-780-0967. Street Address: 1629 Main St., Redwood City, CA 94063. E-mail: slavicbooks@szwedoslavibooks.com (<http://www.szwedoslavibooks.com>). Especially Russian, Polish, and Czech books, including Judaica.

Notes.

¹ Anka Grupińska, *Najtrudniej jest spotkać Lilit: opowieści chasydek* (Warszawa: Twój Styl, 1999).

² According to Grupińska, “Every year approximately 100 new books published in Poland and generally classified as ‘Judaica’ appear in bookstores of Poland.” See her introduction, “Poles and Jews – A History Preserved in Books,” in *Books from Poland* (Kraków: Polish Chamber of Books, 2001), p. 2. Though contemporary Polish publications of a general character were represented in the Jerusalem International Book Fair display, the overwhelming emphasis was on works of specifically Jewish interest.

³ Corrsin has published several installments of “Works on Polish Jewry: A Bibliography,” in *Gal-Ed*, starting with vol. 14 (1995). Corrsin’s overview of “Bibliographical Projects in Polish Jewish Studies since 1989” will appear in *Slavic and East European Information Resources*, vol. 4, no. 2/3 (2003), in press.

⁴ Zachary M. Baker, “Reinventing the Jew in Absentia: Recent Judaica Publishing Trends in Poland,” in *Judaica Librarianship*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 1989-Winter 1990), p.65.

⁵ Nikolai Borodulin, “Slavic Judaica in the YIVO Library: Acquisitions from 1991-2001,” in *Slavic and East European Information Resources*, vol. 4, no. 2/3 (2003), in press.

⁶ One Israeli supplier of Russian-language Judaica is Judaic Kiosk, which disseminates its lists via the Internet (www.judaickiosk.com). Many publications on these lists are of a religious nature, including translations of traditional Jewish texts (Bible, Mishnah, Talmud, liturgy) and commentaries. Secular publications – also including many history texts and literary translations – are found in Judaic Kiosk’s catalogs as well.

⁷ As reported by Lydia W. Wasylenko, “Librarians Riding the Bear: Keeping Pace with Russian Publishing,” in *Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1996), p. 202.

⁸ See for example the JudaicKiosk Web site: www.judaickiosk.com. JudaicKiosk is a publisher and book distributor in Jerusalem, and most of the new books that are listed on its Web site were published in Israel.

⁹ Yonahan Petrovsky-Shtern, “Academic Studies of Judaica in Independent Ukraine,” in *Jewish Life after the USSR*, edited by Zvi Gitelman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 156.

¹⁰ Nikolai Borodulin, “Slavic Judaica in the YIVO Library: Acquisitions from 1991-2001,” in *Slavic and East European Information Resources*, vol. 4, no. 2/3 (2003), in press.

¹¹ See the following bibliographies compiled by Vladimir Karasik: *Evreiskaia pressa na russkom iazyke: Rossiia, 1986-1992: bibliograficheskii spravochnik = Jewish Press in Russian: Russia, 1986-1992: Bibliographic Register* (Moscow: N. I. Krotov, 1992); *Evreiskie periodicheskie izdaniia, Rossiia, 1960-1994 = Jewish Periodicals in Russia, 1960-1994 = 'Itonim, kitve 'et u-firsumim Yehudiyim, Rusyah, 1960-1994* (Tel-Aviv: Universitat Tel-Aviv, ha-Makhon le-heker ha-'Itonut ha-Yehudit, 1994); *Evreiskie periodicheskie izdaniia na territorii byvshego SSSR, 1988-1994 = Jewish Periodicals in the Former U.S.S.R., 1988-1994 = 'Itonim, kitve-'et u-firsumim Yehudiyim bi-Verit ha-Mo'etsot li-she'avar, 1988-1994* (Tel Aviv: Universitat Tel Aviv, ha-Makhon le-heker ha-'itonut ha-Yehudit, 1995). Karasik's latest bibliography, "Jewish Periodicals of Ukraine in the Russian and Ukrainian Languages (1860-2000)" – which includes listings for almost 200 Jewish serial titles that have been published in Ukraine since 1988 – will appear in *Slavic and East European Information Resources*, vol. 4, no. 2/3 (2003), in press.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Karen Rondestvedt, "Acquisitions Problems from Poland and Russia: Update on Causes and Potential Solutions," in *Library Resources & Technical Services*, vol. 37, no. 2 (April 1993), p. 214.

¹⁴ Karen Rondestvedt, the Stanford University Libraries' Curator for Slavic and Eastern European Collections (since 2001), has closely tracked developments in the book trade in the post-communist era. In addition to the above-cited article "Acquisitions Problems from Poland and Russia," see the following (listed in chronological order): "Serials Acquisitions and Recent Changes in Poland and the Soviet Union," in *Serials Review*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1991), pp. 15-20; "Bibliographic Control of Current Publications Under the New Order (Poland, Romania, Bulgaria)," in *Solanus: International Journal for Russian & East European Bibliographic, Library & Publishing Studies*, new series vol. 9 (1995), pp. [3]-14; "Organizing Chaos: Keeping Track of Current Publications Under the New Order in Poland," in *The Polish Review*, vol. 41, no. 2 (1996), pp. 157-171. For an overview of the ways in which Western libraries attempted to cope with the demise of the traditional distribution network for Eastern European publications, see Margaret S. Olsen, "The End of the Cold War and Its Effects on Slavic and East European Collections in the West," in *International Information & Library Review*, vol. 27, no. 1 (March 1995), pp. 89-112. In the first several years after the fall of the communist regimes, Olsen notes, book receipts were down, prices were up, and "considerable inconsistency is the only consistency" in the book trade.

¹⁵ Rondestvedt, "Acquisitions Problems from Poland and Russia," p. 218.

¹⁶ The URL for the Jewish Museum in Prague's shop is:

<http://www.jewishmuseum.cz/shop/ashop.htm>. As of April 2003, customers provided payment by check rather than electronically.

¹⁷ Baker, "Reinventing the Jew in Absentia," p. 65.