

Review of the Felshtin Yizkor Book

By Borekh Glazman

The following review appeared *di yidishe landsmanshaftn fun nyu york* (*The Jewish Landsmanschaften of New York*) prepared by the Yiddish Writers' Group of the Federal Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration of the City of New York, published by I.L. Peretz Yiddish Writers' Union, New York, 1938. Translation by Hershl Hartman.

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(*Anthology in memory of the Felshtin martyrs, edited by a Book Committee, Jonas Baum, Secretary; Alef Katz, Technical Editor; Drawings by Notte Kozlovsky, Published by the First Felshtener Progressive Benevolent Association, New York, 1937. 673 pp. – 23 in English – photos and drawings on separate, full pages.*)

Felshtin is a small shtetl in the Proskurov area, Podolia Region, Ukraine, near the former Austro-Galician border. In 1919, right after the World War, it experienced – one can hardly say “lived through” or “survived,” because it was almost totally destroyed – a terrible slaughter “that is unparalleled in the entire martyr-history of our people ... of suckling infants and the aged, of men and women alike.” Five hundred corpses littered the Felshtin earth until they were gathered up and hidden in one huge common grave, in on Stygian trench, without any tombstone, bare of monument ...

But those of their townfolk – quite small in number – who had managed to find refuge in America, could not rest until they had erected a monument to those 500 martyred corpses – the “Felshtin Book.” And there can be no doubt that it is an honorable, durable monument. The book is the collective creation of a score of townfolk – just like that common grave there, where nature gradually creates commonality over the past-flowing years – a blood-stained commemoration of a collective murder ...

The largest part of the book – about 32 essays – does actually consist of pogrom-memories, which read like a great *megile takh v'tat*¹ in a new, modern edition in contemporary orthography. This is not the place to dwell on this matter, just as we cannot pause too long on the second part of the book (35 essays written in mostly literary style), “In the Old Home,” which consists of very valuable, warm and heartfelt descriptions and sketches of the landscape, history, mode of life, economy, social relations, etc. of Felshtin. These are materials that will be available and mandatory for use by not only the future historian of “a once-Jewish shtetl in Ukraine,” but by writers of historical fiction ...

¹The Scroll of 5408-09; i.e., the record of the Cossack uprising of 1648 C.E that resulted in the destruction of many Jewish in Ukraine and the death of an estimated 200,000 – 400,000 . Although aimed at winning independence from their Polish warlords, the uprising was deflected into attacks on Jews, many of whom served as agents for the absentee feudal owners. It was the greatest tragedy prior to the *khurbn* – holocaust.

The third and final part of the book – “In the New Home,” six essays -- takes us to American soil. The first Felstiner immigrant, beginning of emigration, with what Felstiners were economically engaged in America, the “Felstiner Alliance,” the “Felstiner Club,” the “Felstiner Relief,” and what it accomplished. The inner workings of the organization and all of its committees – all of this is related in a lively, story-telling form. It provides us with a portrait of not only the “Felstiner Alliance,” but of landsmanshaft “societies” in generally, in their most positive form.

The book was published in an extraordinarily pleasing form both in appearance and content – a universe apart from the run-of-the-mill landsmanshaft publications. Huge congratulations are due both the initiator and editor of this honorable record, the well-known social activist Dr. I. Kling, and the book committee that made its publication possible.

Translator’s Note

The book from which this review is taken is a vital and near-forgotten chapter in American Jewish history, both in terms of its subject matter and in the story of its creation and publication. The *landmanshaftn* – the myriad home-town “societies” of Eastern European Jewish immigrants -- were formed in the four decades between 1881 and 1921, when the gates of the U.S. were slammed shut to “inferior” Eastern and Southern Europeans. They were an important part of the process of “Americanization” and of the concept of mutual aid both among fellow immigrants and to the relatives left behind. Many of the archives of these groups have been lost. *The Jewish Landsmanschaften of New York* remains one of the most accurate records, since it was written during the period of their most intense activities.

When the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was formed under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal to combat the 25 percent unemployment of the Great Depression, it established the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) that produced many great literary works and research into American folk culture at the same minimal weekly wage as that of WPA manual laborers. Yiddish writers, previously employed in the array of Yiddish newspapers and theaters in New York, formed the Yiddish Writers’ Group under the supervision of the FWP Racial Group Survey and received funding for a study of the home-town societies. The list of writers in this volume includes many outstanding Yiddish poets, novelists, essayists and journalists. When a red-baiting (anti-communist) Congressional backlash against the WPA – especially, its Writers’ and Theater projects – prevailed in 1937-38, the almost-completed work of the Yiddish Writers’ Group was left without funding. Its publication was due to the heroic efforts of the editor, Yiddish poet Isaac Elkhonen Rontch, who enlisted the I.L. Peretz Yiddish Writers’ Union and its supporters in the community to raise the costs of printing and distribution.,

I.L. Peretz was one of the classicists of Yiddish literature. The attack on the WPA is depicted in the film “Cradle Will Rock.”

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