

## Jewish Political Studies Review

place to understand why he did what he did. Whatever the case, it makes for easy reading while being a valuable addition to the understanding of Vichy France.

### NOTES

1. p. 7.
2. p. 224.

MICHELLE MAZEL, born in Poitiers (France) during the war, is a graduate of Sciences Po—the Institute for Political Science—and the Paris Faculté de Droit. She is a writer of both fictional and non-fictional works and currently resides in Jerusalem.



## REMEMBERING A FORGOTTEN HERO OF HOLOCAUST HISTORIOGRAPHY

*Laying the Foundations for Holocaust Research: The Impact of the Historian Philip Friedman*, Search and Research—Lectures and Papers 15, by Roni Stauber, Yad Vashem, 2009, 60 pp.

Reviewed by LAURENCE WEINBAUM

I was a child, not quite ten, rummaging through a bookcase in my grandparents' house when I came across *Martyrs and Fighters*. It was on the cover of that 1962 paperback, its faded pages brittle to the touch, that I first came across the name of Philip Friedman—and that I received my first introduction to the heartrending story of the Warsaw Ghetto. In particular, one chilling vignette from that book remained etched in my consciousness. It was an eyewitness description of a Jewish boy caught smuggling food from the Aryan side and trying to wiggle his way back into the ghetto. The child's hips got caught in the hole under the wall and a German began beating him mercilessly. By the time he was finally pulled through to the Jewish side by a horrified passerby, it was too late. The boy was dying, his spine crushed.

Many years later, while sitting in a Jerusalem cinema watching *The Pianist*, I was startled to see that terrifying episode depicted on the screen. I immediately recalled Friedman's book, one of the first anthologies of ghetto testimonies, and eventually was able to acquire a durable hardcover edition. In its pages I quickly found the account of that incident dutifully reproduced by Friedman and attributed to the

(Polish-language) memoirs of Władysław Szpilman—the Warsaw Radio pianist immortalized as the protagonist of Roman Polanski’s masterful film.<sup>1</sup>

In the slim volume under review here, we are introduced to the story of Friedman—a great and often forgotten hero of Holocaust historiography. Friedman was an outstanding representative of the Galician Jewish intellectual tradition. That heritage was exemplified by such men as Emanuel Ringelblum, Ruben Feldshuh (Ben Shem), Joseph Tenenbaum, and Artur Eisenbach, all of whom played a disproportionate role in recording the story of the catastrophe that had befallen the Jewish people and their own families. The author, Dr. Roni Stauber, is a senior research fellow at Tel Aviv University’s Kantor **Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry**. He is also lecturer in the university’s Department of Jewish History and the academic advisor of the Wiener Library, and has written a number of important works on Israeli society and the Holocaust. Most recently, he was the editor of *Collaboration with the Nazis: Public Discourse after the Holocaust* (2010), a book on Europe’s confrontation with the legacy of the Shoah. At the beginning of this book Stauber notes that “Friedman’s work on Holocaust documentation, his contribution to the historical commissions staffed by survivors in Europe immediately after the war, his historiographical approach to various areas of research, and his methodological concepts have not yet been treated appropriately. Here I shall attempt to fill in this lacuna.” To achieve that end, the author made use of a wide variety of sources, including archival documents in YIVO, Yad Vashem, and elsewhere—but above all, Friedman’s own copious writings.

Stauber’s book is divided into two parts. The first deals with Friedman’s career as a historian of Polish Jewry, the largest prewar Jewish community in Europe. The second deals with his later work as a chronicler of its destruction. It is poignantly entitled “From the Study of a Vibrant Society to the Chronicle of Destruction.”

Stauber presents us with the salient details of his subject’s early life and work. Friedman was born in Lwów (Lemberg) in 1901. Like many of Galicia’s best and brightest, he completed his education in Vienna. After receiving his doctorate, he settled in Łódź to take up a teaching position at the city’s Jewish gymnasium. But in addition to his pedagogic activity, Friedman quickly made his mark as one of the pioneering historians of Polish Jewry. As Stauber explains:

Friedman was influenced by the local approach advocated by Meir Balaban, as well as by the synthetic and general method that focuses on economic and social aspects, promoted by Ignacy (Yitzhak) Schiper. His preference was for detailed studies of regional and urban communities, but he also evinced serious interest in synthesis, description, and analysis of the processes experienced by Polish Jews in the modern age...this idea of combining local studies with the analysis of larger processes would later characterize Friedman’s work on the Holocaust.

## Jewish Political Studies Review

Stauber also recounts Friedman's agonizing loss, on the eve of the war, of a manuscript that represented the first volume of a planned three-volume general history of Polish Jewry. He had sent the work to Salo Baron (with whom he had studied in Vienna) at Columbia University. The renowned Jewish scholar endeavored to return it to him immediately after reviewing it, but the text was lost. That would prove a trifling loss compared to what was to come. Shortly after the German invasion of Poland, Friedman and his family returned to his native city, which was occupied by the Soviets. Though miraculously the historian survived, his immediate family—including his wife Marina and thirteen-year-old daughter Elinka—did not. Both were murdered in 1942.

The second part of Stauber's study is devoted to Friedman's historiographical views and his extensive contribution to Holocaust studies. Certainly, at least this part of the book should be required reading for all those who study the evolution of Holocaust historiography. Even in hiding, Friedman sought to chronicle the excruciating suffering around him. At the end of the war, he journeyed to newly liberated Lublin where he played a leading role in the Central Historical Commission of Polish Jews. That body would later publish a series of "Guidelines" aimed at facilitating the collection of testimony and documentation. One of these was specifically aimed at those who would record the experience of Jewish children.

Friedman also began to write the first works about the Holocaust in Poland. By 1945 he had already completed a study about the annihilation of the Jews of Lwów and the story of the Janowska Camp in that city.

Most significantly, Stauber draws our attention to the fact that

Friedman took a different stance than that adopted a little later by historians in Israel, such as Ben-Zion Dinur and Israel Halpern, who headed Yad Vashem in the 1950s. The Israeli historians from the Hebrew University, who did not see the urgency of writing immediately, thought that Holocaust scholars should focus on developing the tools for the synthetic work to be done later.... Like many other historian survivors, Friedman was primarily animated by the need to understand the broader psychological, social, and historical contexts of his personal tragedy. This was supplemented by a fierce desire to tell the story to those who did not know and had not experienced the horrible events, thereby erecting a monument to the victims of the Holocaust, including his own family.

Certainly, this lack of urgency meant that in Israel, genuine scholarship on the Holocaust (and in fact contemporary history) was slow to develop. And most of what did emerge, and came to dominate the field, were writings strongly colored by the political leanings of their authors. As a result it took many years and even generations for professional historians to untangle the knots in which history had been bound.

In Poland itself, there was also debate among the members of the commission. Stauber notes that Friedman and his colleagues in Łódź wanted to devote their energies to the publication of collections of documents and monographs, while some of the historians in Kraków believed that the emphasis should be on more popular works such as survivor memoirs and even *belles-lettres*, which would reach a wider readership. This struggle was also taking place against the backdrop of a creeping Communist *Gleichschaltung* in Poland, with the commission coming under pressure to produce “anti-Fascist” works of a propagandistic nature. It was also a time of murderous anti-Jewish violence that claimed hundreds of lives and culminated in the horrific pogrom in Kielce in the summer of 1946. Friedman, like many other survivors in Poland, came to the conclusion that Jewish life in that country was untenable. Significantly, the publications of those who remained, some of whom were themselves either Marxists or at least not entirely ill-disposed to the socioeconomic changes it wrought, would eventually be tainted by Stalinist propaganda and could hardly be seen as dispassionate history-writing.

Friedman and his new wife eventually settled in New York, where he found work—in part thanks to the efforts of his mentor Baron—at Columbia University. There he distinguished himself as a driving force among those who believed that chronicling the destruction of European Jewry was a top priority.

Friedman opposed what he called “martyrology school” historians who looked at the fate of Jews in Europe only in terms of the calamity that befell them, without reference to their prewar socioeconomic standing. One can only imagine what he would have thought of the many works devoted to telling the story of the destruction of Jews but divorced from their context. Though he appreciated the scholarly contributions of Raul Hilberg, Léon Poliakov, and Gerald Reitlinger, he fiercely disputed their methodology, which was largely based on perpetrator documentation and contained no reference to the perspective of the victims.

Friedman’s nuanced approach to history can also be seen in the way he dealt with the issue of resistance at a time when there was widespread acceptance of the idea that Jews had gone to their deaths “like sheep to the slaughter.” Stauber reminds us that, on the one hand, Friedman cautioned against ideologically motivated accounts of Jewish heroism that violated the principles of scholarly research (and which dominated, for example, the emerging narrative of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising). On the other hand, he favored a broad, inclusive definition of resistance, one which would embrace all forms of noncompliance with, and struggle against, German decrees. In fact, as Stauber notes, this discussion dating back to the 1950s actually preceded a later debate in the 1960s in which the Hebrew term *amidah* (enduring) came to be used. Friedman was one of the first secular Jews to include Jewish religious observance and the idea of “Bravery with Holiness” as a manifestation of resistance.

Better than many others, Friedman understood the pitfalls of the uncritical

## Jewish Political Studies Review

use of survivor testimony and cautioned early on about the need for vigilance. “Legendary stories...are always likely to be invented and diffused in time of crisis at their face value without checking their authenticity. It will, therefore, be a difficult task for the scholar in years to come to free himself of the new myth that has already struck deep roots in our historical consciousness.” Stauber notes that Friedman “harshly criticized survivors, who, without appropriate training, took up the historian’s pen and, instead of describing only what they had seen and experienced, wrote books on the history of their community, in which they incorporated, without critical scrutiny, passages from memoirs and rumors that were frequently without basis in fact.”

Friedman went so far as to characterize the situation as “anarchy.” Yet, sadly, it was a warning that at least in popular circles went unheeded. Nowadays, with the proliferation of such material, it is nearly impossible for the general public to distinguish fact from fantasy. Lamentably, some of these flawed works have been used as ammunition by those with the sinister agenda of Holocaust negation.

Long after Friedman’s death in 1960, the late American Jewish historian of the Shoah Lucy Dawidowicz wrote that in reading his works, one is impressed by

the discipline of methodology that Friedman imposed on his material and by the control with which he governed his feelings as Jew and survivor. At a remove of a mere decade or so from the traumatic events that he had experienced, he managed to establish the distance needed to write objective history. His accomplishment must be regarded as a triumph of professionalism and of restraint.<sup>2</sup>

It is those hallmarks that continue to be appreciated by a small number of Holocaust specialists who are familiar with Friedman’s efforts to chronicle the catastrophe that befell Polish Jewry, and in which his own nearest and dearest perished. Friedman’s work was a building block on which much of the later research on the destruction of Polish Jewry rested. That a man who made such inestimable contributions to our knowledge has been largely forgotten is a telling commentary on the amnesia of the people whose imperative has always been “*Zakhor!*” To his great credit, Stauber has ensured that a new generation of scholars and students will come to appreciate the extraordinary efforts and erudition of that humble, haunted historian from Lwów.

### NOTES

1. Philip Friedman, *Martyrs and Fighters* (New York: Praeger, 1954), 54–55.
2. Lucy Dawidowicz, “Holocaust Historians,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1981.

LAURENCE WEINBAUM is chief editor of *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*.