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BIOGRAFIE

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A People's Biography: Ada El'evna Raichonak and Her Hermanavichy

Summary

The article advances an approach to studying 20th century Jewish experience in the former Pale of Jewish Settlement that foregrounds individual biographies and places them in a larger cultural and historical context. Drawing on interviews and various other sources, this approach reveals, among others, how individuals challenge familiar categories of identification and thereby appeal to flexible research agendas.

Keywords

Belarus, Hermanavichy, Jewish history, Holocaust, biography

Pressed against a windowsill to maximize light exposure, I am holding the pages of a stiffly bound book down with my left hand.¹ With my right hand, shaking ever so slightly at the weight of the camera, I try to zoom and push the shutter without too much movement, following the steady rhythm set by my left hand's acrobatics to turn the pages, flatten them,

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¹ I am indebted to Ada Raichonak for taking the time to speak to me, and to my colleagues Ida Shenderovich (Mahilioŭ, Belarus) and Arkadii Shul'man (Viciebsk, Belarus) for sharing and directing me toward crucial material in the preparation of this article. I am also grateful to Natalia Aleksun and the two reviewers whose comments encouraged me to strengthen the analysis presented here.

and expose them to the camera. Why the rush, why the awkward position? The owner of the book is anxious to have it back in her hands. The book is valuable, there is only this one copy.² Sixty-five pages of neat, cursive handwriting promise an invaluable account of Jewish life in Hermanavichy (Belarusian), Germanovichi (Russian), Hermanowicze (Polish) before its near total destruction in 1943. (Fig. 1) Ada Raichonak, the woman waiting for me to finish photographing the book, sits in the neighboring room, taking a rest from a busy day filled with organizing paint for the walls of an extension to the gallery of Belarusian art and culture that we are in, worrying about the lawn around the house that needs to be trimmed, all of it disrupted by taking an hour or so to talk to me, yet another, probably unannounced, visitor to this unique space. Alongside a tour of the art gallery, I learn about her childhood in the Viciebsk ghetto, her family's struggle to survive being used as a human shield by retreating German troops, and her postwar efforts to educate about and preserve Belarusian culture. About the major award she has received in recognition of her work. And all along I wonder, who knows about all this? You, reader, may wonder, why does it matter?

What does it mean to study the Jewish experience in the former Pale of Jewish Settlement, an area that has been ravaged by German occupation terror, whose Jewish population has been all but erased, and whose other residents have seen violence against bodies and country throughout the 20th century yet have been making a life nonetheless? I have asked myself this question many times, and the answer has shifted over the almost twenty years that I have attempted to understand how humans have responded to these repeated assaults on individual and communal lives. Within all these answers, however, one element has remained consistent: That the turn to people's lives, and how people narrate them, is at the center of such study. The encounter with Ada Raichonak in June 2018 encapsulates the urgency of this endeavor and demonstrates how individual lives testify to communal experiences, but also that the agency of individuals such as Raichonak are central for making this experience accessible to those of us who come after and from far away.

This essay offers a snapshot of what it means to expose oneself to chance encounters with individuals who are at the center of scholarly endeavors. The encounter with Ada Raichonak was brief but peaked the scholar's interest because of the complexity of Belarusian Jewish experience it revealed. The following pages will not provide a conclusive account or analysis of Raichonak's biography. Rather, they provide a sketch of one Jewish woman's life in Belarus and point to important experiences that may motivate further research. This sketch rests on my own and several other scholars' interviews with Raichonak as well as other publicly

² Ada Raichonak, interview with author, Hermanavichy, 5.06.2018, n.p.

available material about the woman; due to her efforts to popularize Belarusian and Jewish culture, she is a public figure and regularly the subject of media reports.

Considering Ada Raichonak's life and how it is perceived by others evokes a number of themes that form the background to her story and which we may use to consider its meaning. First of all, Raichonak's life, especially her current work in the fields of heritage preservation and commemoration, point to the complex Belarusian-Jewish relationship that ranges from peaceful coexistence and friendship to segregation, from animosity to antisemitism, and from discrimination to violence including murder. All of these variations are driven by individual motives and aspirations as well as by state policies; they can be studied in various periods including the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and independent Belarus. Raichonak's story may also fuel a field of inquiry pertaining to the construction of Belarusians and Jewish identity by offering the perspective of one individual that seems to straddle both. Last but not least, Raichonak's activism is directly engaged with the construction of Holocaust memory in the Belarusian context, a memory that to a large extent is confined to Jewish communities and grassroots initiatives and remains on the margins of public commemorations of World War II. The paper concludes with an attempt to highlight initial insights regarding these three fields as they can be gleaned from Ada Raichonak's biography.

Ada El'evna Raichonak

Ada El'evna Raichonak was born in Viciebsk in 1937. Her parents, Elia Aronov, a student and musician, and her mother Praskova (Pasha) Beliakova, head of a workshop of the Profintern factory, were as surprised by the German invasion of Soviet territories in June 1941 as most others around them. The Soviet government's misguided ignorance of any warnings of the impending attack is well-known yet had concrete and drastic consequences for the residents of what was then the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. Thousands of them tried to enter the evacuation trains that, provided belatedly and in insufficient number, were heading east; many more took to the roads on their own.³ Many residents of Viciebsk were left behind amidst the chaos and found themselves behind the frontline,⁴ like young Ada's family: Her father

³ On Soviet politics and policies of evacuation, see: Rebecca Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Leslie Moch, Lewis Siegelbaum, *Broad Is My Native Land: Repertoires and Regimes of Migration in Russia's Twentieth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), Ch. 6.

⁴ Mikhaïl Rivkin, Arkadii Shulman, *Khronika strashnykh dnei: Tragedia Vitebskogo getto* (Minsk: Medizont, 2014), 50.

was either drafted into the Soviet army as soon as the alarms sounded and left Viciebsk, or he was assigned to organize the evacuation of equipment belonging to the local polytechnic and, unsuccessful in completing the task, captured by the German army.⁵ There is no way to establish exactly what happened – the father disappeared and never returned. Young Ada and her mother were unable to leave the city and found themselves under German occupation, exposed to those who would erect a three-year long regime of exploitation and terror.

In Viciebsk, the German occupation regime took shape quickly. Merely a week after German troops had occupied the city on 11 July 1941, all Jews including so-called *Mischlinge* (half-Jews) as well as people cohabitating with Jews were required to register. On several occasions, groups of Jews were shot, and by the end of July all Jews were ordered to move to the western bank of the river Dvina, where they were further confined into one of two ghettos that, together, housed between 10,000 and 16,000 Jews.⁶ Because of her Jewish father, Ada would have been considered a Jew, but Ada and her mother remained in their home, defying the resettlement order. And yet, soon after four years-old Ada ventured out of the home to explore and was promptly caught and apprehended by a German soldier. “I looked like my Jewish father,”⁷ a statement with which Raichonak explains that the German decided that she ought to be with other Jews because she was a Jew. The survivor’s explanation here evokes the physical stereotypes the Nazi regime used to identify its victims, in this case, likely the child’s dark hair and dark eyes. Problematic as this may be because Raichonak seems to adopt the stereotype, it allows her to rationalize a moment of intense fear and in which she was directly targeted for her identity. At the same time, what appears to be an anecdotal impression of a number of survivors who explain either survival with “not looking Jewish,” or the arrest and murder of others because they did, has been proven to be true – for Ada Raichonak and many others.⁸ After she was “recognized” as a Jew, she was delivered to the newly created ghetto – alone, without anyone she knew. “I had a horrible time in the ghetto. Imagine, a four-year-old child, in the midst of people she doesn’t know at all. Children are

⁵ Raichonak, interview with author, n.p.; Ada Raichonak, interview with Ida Shenderovich, July 2015, n.p.; Arkadii Shul’man, *Nash gost’ Ada Raichonak*, <http://mishpoha.org/vspominayut-uzniki/737-nash-gost-ada-raichonok>, accessed 12.02.2020.

⁶ Daniel Romanovsky, “Vitebsk,” in: *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, ed. Martin Dean, vol. 2: *Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 1745–1746.

⁷ Raichonak, interview with Shenderovich, n.p.

⁸ See, for instance: Peter Suedfeld, Helen Paterson, Erin Soriano, Samantha Zuvic, “Lethal Stereotypes: Hair and Eye Color as Survival Characteristics During the Holocaust,” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 32 (2002), 11: 2368–2376.

crying, the adults are nervous, everyone is constantly hungry.”⁹ Her mother’s panicked search was successful and she managed to rescue Ada from the ghetto, relying on well-meaning neighbors who testified that the young girl was, in fact, of Belarusian nationality. Subsequently and for fear that Ada’s true identity would be discovered, her mother confined her to the house. “All things considered, for the whole time of the war I was told to sit at home, and my mother told me not to talk to anyone.”¹⁰ The precaution was justified, because soon after her rescue from the ghetto some other adolescents caught her in the yard, yelling “Oh, a little kike!,” and threw her into a nearby barbed wire fence.¹¹ Whereas some neighbors supported the young mother and her child, first of all by not denouncing her to the German occupants, others demonstrated how easily antisemitism can be mobilized into action. Even those who had previously lived side by side with their Jewish neighbors, now felt compelled to report them for being, or looking, different.¹²

In fall 1941, Ada and her mother received terrible news from Hermanavichy, the place where several relatives of Ada’s father lived. Roza and a boy whose name is unclear, niece and nephew of Ada’s father, visited and contemplated sheltering in Viciebsk to evade the increasing assault on Hermanavichy’s community of about 350 Jews: Coinciding with the German occupation of the small town, some locals had looted Jewish property, all Jews were to wear a yellow Star of David on their chest, and by August 1941 the town’s remaining Jews were confined to a ghetto and abused and humiliated in various violent ways.¹³ For them, ghetto confinement and respective conditions that Ada had been able to escape so far, had become reality.

Frantishek Kuntsevich (František Kunzevič), at the time a young boy, describes the terror against the Jews of Hermanavichy. He penned his account in the late 1990s when Ada Raichonak asked him to do so – the result was the book which I hastily scanned in summer 2018. Kuntsevich details a number of assaults on individual Jews or Jewish families, all the while emphasizing the horror with which gentile neighbors looked on. Among others, he writes, in August 1941 a German field commander ordered that the Jewish men remove all ritual objects and books held at the synagogue, pile them up in the center of the market square, and set

⁹ Shul’man, *Nash gost’*.

¹⁰ Raichonak, interview with author, n.p.

¹¹ Ibidem. See also: Gennadii Vinnitsa, *Listy Istorii* (Vitebsk: Vitebskii Tsentri Marketinga, 1999), 196.

¹² Aliaksandr Smalianchuk, “Tragedyia khalakostu i ie prychny ŭ vusnykh uspaminakh Belarusaŭ,” in: *Homo Historicus 2016: Gadavik antrapalagichnai gistorii*, ed. Aliaksandr Smalianchuk (Vilnius: Bielaruski kaliehium, 2016), 172–183; Anika Walke, “Split Memory: The Geography of Holocaust Memory and Amnesia in Belarus,” *Slavic Review* 77 (2018), 1: 182.

¹³ Gennadii Vinnitsa, Martin Dean, “Hermanowicze,” in: *Encyclopedia*, 1196.

them on fire “if they want their women and children to remain alive.”¹⁴ Kuntsevich’s thus is not only one of the rare accounts of how German occupiers made local Jews complicit in the erasure of their own heritage, it also functions as a witness to this heritage. His account offers a portrayal of prewar Jewish life and testifies to the destruction of important buildings and institutions, which without the inclusion in this narrative would disappear into oblivion.

This near complete erasure was achieved when in September 1941 about 270 Jews were sent from Hermanavichy to the ghetto in nearby Sharakaŭshchyna; most of them fell victim to a mass killing action against the ghetto inhabitants by German police and local collaborators in June 1942.¹⁵ Among the victims were Marisia, Ada’s grandmother’s sister, and her husband¹⁶ – the parents of Roza and the young boy, who had visited Ada and her mother but then decided to move on to Surazh, only to be killed there.¹⁷

During the second and third year of the German occupation, when German troops were aware of impending defeat and on the retreat, civilians in the occupied territories suffered from a new wave of violence that drove the number of victims into the tens of thousands. Ada, her mother, and a man who had coaxed her mother into marrying him with the promise that he would not give away Ada’s Jewish identity, shared the fate of thousands of locals who were herded into a concentration camp in Liepiel’, a town a little more than 100 km away from Viciebsk. It is most likely that Ada’s family was held in a reception or detention camp (*Auffanglager*). Usually, these make-shift camps were large spaces surrounded by barbed wire, where prisoners built shelters in the form of *zemliankas* or huts, dugouts in the ground or structures made out of branches, twigs and leaves. Often, the camps held civilians who were driven out of their homes during one of the major anti-partisan operations that German troops, often supported by Latvian auxiliaries, conducted in the northwest of present-day Belarus.¹⁸ During these campaigns in 1943 and 1944, the occupation regime strove to create a so-called dead zone, an area emptied of people, infrastructure, resources, or hiding places that might otherwise aid the growing partisan movement. Whole villages were razed, the residents often herded into a barn or other larger building that was then set on fire; other

¹⁴ Frantisek Kuntsevich, *Moi vospominania iz detstva: O svoikh odnosel’chaniakh evreiakh iz mestechka Germanovichi Vitebskoi oblasti za period 1931–1943gg.* (Gdansk: n.p., 1996), 24.

¹⁵ Gennadii Vinnitsa, Martin Dean, “Sczarkowszczyzna,” in: *Encyclopedia*, 1289–1290.

¹⁶ Arkadii Shul’man, *V gostiakh u Ady El’evny*, <http://mishpoha.org/pamyat/270-v-gostyakh-u-ady-elevny>, accessed 12.02.2020.

¹⁷ Idem, *Perel’many iz Luzhkov*, <http://mishpoha.org/library/04/0405.php>, accessed 12.02.2020.

¹⁸ Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland, 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999), 1004; Konstantin Karpekin, *Istoricheskaja Spravka: Lepel’skii kotslager*, <http://mishpoha.org/vspominayut-uzniki/737-nash-gost-ada-rajchonok>, accessed 12.02.2020.

locals were rounded up and summarily deported for forced labor in Greater Germany or sent to nearby labor or concentration camps.¹⁹ Ada's family fell victim to these furious raids when her mother's sister, the wife of Soviet partisan commander Nikolai Petrovich Kovalev, was arrested while sheltering in Ada's home with her three children; as supporters of a partisan family everyone residing in the home was rounded up and imprisoned.²⁰

In the final phase of the war, thousands of civilians were used as "human shields" and driven across or onto empty fields that were suspected of having been mined with explosives. Ada El'evna describes the exposure to lethal violence. She recalls:

When the Germans retreated, they drove us ahead of themselves, (...) how do you say, like a shield, when airplanes attacked (...) it was when they tried to cross the Berezina [river – A.W.], it was horrible, I remember this as if it was yesterday. They sent all their machinery and us across the water, and the Soviet army conducted an air raid, and they basically threw bombs at people (...) I remember on the bridge, there were wounded people, and people who had been killed. Everybody was running, somebody was dragging me along.²¹

Throughout this ordeal, Ada held on to a small bag that contained family photographs, the only but immensely valuable possession her mother and she were able to rescue from their home.

Shortly after the river crossing, the guards were told to kill their charges: "we could already hear machine gun salvos nearby, (...) so the order was to kill us too, but these Germans weren't like the ones that we had encountered at the beginning of the war, they already knew that their end was near. And so one of the soldiers told us to run away, in Polish."²² The family and several others managed to shelter in a nearby hut. The next day, a Soviet soldier found the group and insulted them: "Bitches! Why did you stay with the Germans?" and shot into the ceiling. In rage the soldier killed the German who had stayed with the refugees. Ada El'evna still recoils from the brutality.²³

Ada, her mother and her stepfather made a new home in an abandoned railway booth near Parafianava, just in time for the mother to give birth to Ada's half-brother Lenia in late

¹⁹ For a concise study of these campaigns, see: Gerlach, *Kalkulierte*, Ch. 9; Bernhard Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front: Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weissrussland 1941–1944* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1998).

²⁰ Shul'man, *Nash gost'*.

²¹ Raichonak, interview with author, n.p.

²² *Ibidem*, n.p.

²³ *Ibidem*, n.p.



spring 1944. The family remained in the booth for several months. Like them, tens of thousands of people housed in similarly repurposed buildings such as train stations, schools or stores, or in *zemliankas* (dugouts) and make-shift huts.²⁴

It was very difficult, because I had no shoes, I walked to school barefoot from September to October. Then somebody gave me something. We were hungry, and it was very cold. We might have died of hunger, but the German warehouses had burned down, and my step-father brought a lot of millet from there. But it had burned, and I have hated millet ever since. But at the time, there was no other way, and we ate that burned millet.²⁵

Months later, Semon Aronov, Ada's paternal uncle, tracked her down, took her in and enrolled her in a school in Novaya Vil'nia, where she would spend several years and continue her schooling. Eventually, Ada studied at the Polatsk Pedagogical Academy and, after graduation, was assigned to the school in Slabada, Sharkaüşhchynskii raion. Because her husband, Aleh Ryhoravich Raichonak, was sent to head the local kolkhoz in Hermanavichy, the family settled there, moving in with her paternal grandmother and her three (adult) children, who had moved there after the war.²⁶

Soviet employment policies therefore brought her back to an area of the then Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic that had a similar history as her paternal family's home town Dokshytsy. At the time of her father's birth, Dokszyce, Hermanowicze and other nearby towns were located within the Second Polish Republic. Elia Aronov's father, Khaim Sholomovich Aronov, had been a delegate to the 1903 London Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (the precursor of the Communist Party) and was active member of the Communist underground in the 1920s. He was acutely threatened by arrest by Polish police and was only spared imprisonment because he was too ill to be transported; he died in 1926 confined to the house and isolated while Polish officials waited outside the house for his passing. His wife, Lota El'evna, who had been an active member of the Communist Party as well and distributed underground newspapers and pamphlets, was taken to Viciebsk by Communist activists and continued to raise her three children there.²⁷ When World War II broke out, she

²⁴ By 1944, 1,200,000 residential houses in the countryside lay in ruins; 90 percent of urban houses and public buildings were uninhabitable, only 23 percent of the pre-war living space was left for use in Minsk, Gomel, and Mogilev (Gerlach, *Kalkulierte*, 11).

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*; Private communication with Ada Raichonak, February 2020.

²⁷ Private communication with Ada Raichonak, February 2020; see also: Shul'man, *Nash gost'*; Raichonak, interview with Shenderovich, np.

was evacuated and survived the war in the Soviet rear.²⁸ Her sister, Marisia, who had moved to Hermanowicze well before World War II, remained there and fell victim to the Holocaust.

Did it matter for Ada El'evna that she metaphorically returned to ancestral homes – the territory with its distinct mix of forests, swamps, and fields and a site where Jewish life once thrived? By all accounts, Hermanavichy was what we now call a *shtetl*, a place where a substantial Jewish population engaged in various crafts, traded a number of goods, and followed Jewish religious laws such as observing the Shabbat, educating their children in *cheders*, and visiting one of the two synagogues regularly. The town, like many others in Eastern Europe, was also shaped by the different political movements that attracted young Jews – from Zionists that paraded in military-style uniforms on Polish state holidays²⁹ to the Communists, which Aronov and others supported.

Nearby Luzhki resembled Hermanavichy; the close proximity and small size facilitated a symbiotic relationship between the two towns, with Jews and non-Jews partaking in the many forms of connection. The close relationship between the two places continued to the very end of the Jewish community during World War II, when the majority of the 300 Jews that German troops encountered in Hermanavichy in summer 1941 was killed in 1942 in a ravine near Luzhki. Now all but emptied of Jewish presence, the two towns mirror each other until this day. The district, says Ada El'evna half-jokingly, is now home to “one and a half Jews, me and another one who lives in Sharkaūshchyna.”³⁰ These two people are literally and figuratively the surviving remnant of the rich Jewish history of this area.

Even buildings and objects are all but nonexistent. The former synagogue in Luzhki was used for grain storage for years, the building is now in a very poor state. The Jewish cemetery in Hermanavichy was destroyed in 1973, when the local *kolkhoz* was told to remove the *matzevot*, level the ground, and utilize the site for agricultural purposes.³¹ Ada El'evna remarks that she scolded her husband for complying but acknowledges that he was unable to refuse without losing his job.

Nowadays, the search for material traces of the area's long-lasting Jewish presence makes Ada El'evna wonder. Committed to documenting Belarusian and Jewish local history, she and her son Mikhail, who died a premature death, visited many a home in the district, and yet

²⁸ Raichonak, interview with author, n.p.

²⁹ Kuntsevich, *Moi vospominania*, 5.

³⁰ Raichonak, interview with author, n.p.

³¹ Shul'man, *Perel'many*; Raichonak, interview with author, n.p.; Raichonak, interview with Shenderovich, n.p. See also: Iulia Labetskaia, *150 Zolotykh Marshrutov Moei Belarusi – Germanovichi*, https://7dney.by/ru/issues?art_id=6070, accessed 2.09.2020.

during all these expeditions, we never came across any artifact testifying to Jewish culture. That is very strange, after all, many Jews used to live here. Some Jewish homes have been preserved, they are well-built, from red bricks, and give Luzhki a very nice look. There were some wooden homes as well, but these did not survive. But artifacts that one could put into a museum – we’ve never seen any.³²

The inability to find any material traces of Jewish life in the area is indeed suspicious. While much of the movable property was certainly taken by German occupants, several studies have established the active participation of local residents in appropriating the property of deported or murdered Jews. These locals may now hide items such as bedding, dishes, or furniture out of shame, or they sold them in the past.³³ Nevertheless, Raichonak’s disappointment primarily reflects her desire to create a museum of Jewish culture in the building where Eliezer Ben-Yehuda went to school. Born in Luzhki in 1858, Ben-Yehuda is nowadays widely known as the driving force of a revival of the Hebrew language. Mostly forgotten in his homeland, the lexicographer is celebrated for his impact on the transformation of Hebrew from a sacred into a national vernacular. Raichonak is spearheading efforts of some local enthusiasts to commemorate Ben-Yehuda’s origins, which recently included the establishment of a sculpture to mark his birthplace. In the late 1990s, the Viciebsk paper “Narodnoe slovo” published Ada El’evna’s lengthy article, “Once there were Jews in the Sharkaūshchyna district”, taking to task participants of a conference of kraevedy (local historians or ethnographers) in Sharkaūshchyna on the region’s history that completely omitted the Jewish

³² Shul’man, *Perel’many*.

³³ For more on local population’s or policemen robbing or profiting from Jewish property in the occupied Soviet territories, see: Daniel Romanovsky, “The Holocaust in the Eyes of *Homo Sovieticus*: A Survey Based on Northeastern Belorussia and Northwestern Russia,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 12 (1999), 3: 371–373; Martin Dean, “Jewish Property Seized in the Occupied Soviet Union in 1941 and 1942: The Records of the *Reichshauptkasse Beutestelle*,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 14 (2000), 9: 91; Yitzhak Arad, “Plunder of Jewish Property in the Nazi-Occupied Areas of the Soviet Union,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 29 (2001): 109–148; Martin Dean, *Robbing the Jews: The Confiscation of Jewish Property in the Holocaust, 1933–1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 173–221; Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 403–410; Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 97; Leonid Rein, *The Kings and the Pawns: Collaboration in Byelorussia during World War II* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 273–276. Related discussions are in: Jan Tomasz Gross, Irena Grudzinska Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Anna Wylegała, “Listening to the Different Voices: Jewish, Polish, and Ukrainian Narratives on Jewish Property in Nazi-Occupied Eastern Galicia,” in: *The Holocaust in the Borderlands: Interethnic Relations and the Dynamics of Violence in Occupied Eastern Europe*, eds. Gaëlle Fisher, Caroline Mezger (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 157–183.

presence in the area. Her piece offered a detailed account of the demographics and culture of Jews in the district including their destruction by German occupiers and local helpers.³⁴

Simultaneously, Ada El'evna puts substantial efforts into preserving and popularizing Belarusian culture and art – from organizing festivals to celebrating the many different recipes to cook or fry potatoes to establishing long-term exhibitions of art and material culture. Most notably, in 1986 she founded Hermanavichy's Museum of Belarusian Art and Culture, named after the local artist Iazep Nartsyzavich Drazdavich. By 1992 the museum achieved the status of a state museum and is now included in the register of national museums.³⁵ The museum displays work tools, dishes, and other housewares to document rural life in the area. Moreover, Raichonak regularly organizes Plein Air Festivals in Honor of the Belarusian writer Vasil Bykaŭ (1924–2003), inviting artists to come to Hermanavichy for a few days and interpret and paint or draw local residents, landscapes, and infrastructure; the results of this work are on display in an art gallery Raichonak created in a previously abandoned house.³⁶ The most recent festival took place in 2017 and was devoted to the memory of the Holocaust.³⁷ Raichonak opened the festival with a narrative about her own life, about local Jewish life and its destruction; other locals who remembered the war contributed as well.³⁸ The artists then went out and created numerous representations of these experiences, including a portrait of Ada El'evna as a four year-old, based on one of the photos she rescued, an image of the ghetto fence, and a painting of the riverbanks where the local Jews were shot.³⁹ Organizing these visits is not easy, from finding accommodations for the artists to setting up additional stoves to cook food for a group of up to 15 artists, to convincing her neighbors that there is nothing dangerous about interacting with the visitors, perhaps even sit for them, to encouraging non-governmental organizations to donate – Raichonak mobilizes a whole village and more.⁴⁰

The purpose of this work, it appears, is manifold and reflects her belonging to two distinct yet deeply intertwined cultural and historical heritage systems: Belarusian and Jewish. On

³⁴ Shul'man, *Perel'many*.

³⁵ Uchrezhdenie kul'tury "Khudozhestvenno-etnograficheskii musei imeni Ia.N. Drozdovicha," <http://germanovichi.museum.by>, accessed 18.02.2020.

³⁶ See: Uladzimir Kolas, *Ada Gallery* (documentary film), (Poland–Belarus: Studio Filmowe Everest, 2008), for a detailed portrayal of these efforts.

³⁷ *Khudozhestvennyi plener v derevne Germanovichi*, Belsat TV, 12.10.2017, <https://belsat.eu/ru/programs/natsionalnoe-graffiti-vyhodit-iz-podpolya/> Belsat, accessed 12.02.2020.

³⁸ Shul'man, *Nash gost'*.

³⁹ Idem, *V gostiakh*.

⁴⁰ See: Kolas, *Ada*.

the one hand, Raichonak explains her goals as follows: “When I lead people through the gallery or the museum, my goal is that the person leaves here as a real Belarusian, that is always my goal. Well, and when a Jew comes to visit, of course I tell them about the Jews.” When I inquired, whether she doesn’t tell non-Jews about that part, she responds, “I do, just not that much. Though I could fill a whole room with material on that.”⁴¹ Expanding on the latter, she says, “I can’t stop what I am doing. I work because I care about those boys and girls who were in the ghetto with me and stayed in the ravines around Viciebsk. I am probably the only one who survived. This is probably what gives me energy and makes me do something.”⁴² As opposed to her siblings and cousins, some of whom live as far away as the United States, Raichonak feels “attached” to the area and has never considered emigration.⁴³ Her commitments to the place and to projects, in sum, straddle three important aspects of local and regional history and memory – Belarusian heritage, Jewish heritage, and the Holocaust during the German occupation and how it implicated local residents: Jews and gentiles.

Belarusian Jewishness / Jewish Belarusianness

Ada Raichonak’s multidirectional activities⁴⁴ reflect her personal experience and her self-perception of not being either Belarusian or Jewish, but both in equal measure. Ada El’evna penned a poem that clearly articulates this entangled life:

Я дочка двух народаў
 І тым ганаруся,
 Але я беларускай с маленства лічуся
 Беларуская матуля мяне гадавала
 І ў часы ліхалецця ад бяды зберагала
 Але жах Халакосту я спазнала тады
 І мне сняцца растрэлы праз гады, праз гады
 Але бацьку яўрэя адабрала война
 І сіроцкую долю я спазнала спаўна

⁴¹ Raichonak, interview with author, n.p.

⁴² Shul’man, *Nash gost’*.

⁴³ Raichonak, interview with author, n.p.

⁴⁴ I am leaning here on Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory to capture the productive relationship between different, yet related histories and legacies; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Вось чаму я страшэнна баюся войны
 Ужо выраслі ўнукі, пастарэлі сыны
 Ні хочу я каб ім давялось ваеваць
 І сваю крывею зямлю паліваць
 На ідыш мая размаўляла бабуля
 А на трасянцы матуля
 Я не ведаў ідыш
 Не мая ў тым вина
 Ва ўсім вінавата вайна

I am the daughter of two peoples
 And I am proud of that
 Since childhood I call myself a Belarusian
 My Belarusian mother raised me
 Saving me from harm in times of trouble

I saw the horror of the Holocaust
 And for years I had nightmares from the executions

My Jewish father was taken by the war
 And I have carried the burden of orphanhood

Therefore I am horribly afraid of the war
 The grandchildren have grown up, my sons have grown old,
 I hope they will never have to fight
 And spill their blood

Yiddish was the language of my grandmother
 Belarusian that of my mother

But I don't know Yiddish
 But this is not my fault
 But guilty is the war.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Author's literal translation from Belarusian. The original poem uses a simple end-rhyme scheme. For the original, see Shul'man, *Nash gost'*. I am grateful to Aliaksandra Dynko for help with the translation.

The unprompted production of the account of herself indicates a motivation to place herself within a larger framework of social relationships, historical change, and cultural transformation. Her way of doing so indicates that stable categories of identification such as “Jewish” or “Belarusian” may be insufficient to describe a life lived within a multinational society that has experienced drastic transformations and violence including Sovietization and German occupation, the latter of which directly sought to limit individuals to one particular element of their identity. One must note, for instance, that in the poem Raichonak’s Jewishness comes to the fore solely in relationship to her persecution by the Nazi regime and long-deceased relatives in the past. In essence, she describes herself in relationship to larger social and political processes that simultaneously reflect and are in tension with her own personal choices (“I call myself a Belarusian”), yet she also embraces her Jewish heritage, regretting that its full development has been undermined by “the war”.⁴⁶

Ada El’evna Raichonak’s life and self-perception remind us of the complex experiences and identity constructs we may find in the area. Some Jews might disavow a Belarusian identity or entanglement with Belarusian culture, for others the relationship might be the opposite. Individual lives follow unique trajectories, often defying categorizations, and we can only capture this plurality of human life by actively seeking it out and taking seriously how individuals navigate difficult and often contradictory conditions. Capturing the multiple facets of Raichonak’s life and agency allows us to see how she creates space for a Belarusianness that is in part Jewish, and a Jewishness that is distinctly Belarusian, a form of belonging that is deeply rooted in experience and attachment.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Floya Anthias captures this alternative to determining fixed identities with the concept of positionality, see: “Where Do I Belong? Narrating Collective Identity and Translocational Positionality,” *Ethnicities* 2 (2002), 4: 491–514.

⁴⁷ Definitions of Belarusianness vary greatly and are, like most attempts to solidify a national identity, often heavily politicized. This paper is not the place to expand on this problem, even though Raichonak’s closeness to the BNR and other political groups may seem troubling. For helpful discussions of competing concepts of Belarusian identity, please see: Nelly Bekus, *Struggle over Identity: The Official and the Alternative “Belarusianness,”* (Budapest–New York: Central University Press, 2010); Serguei Oushakine, “How to Grow out of Nothing: The Afterlife of National Rebirth in Postcolonial Belarus,” *Qui Parle* 26 (2017), 2: 423–490. Jewish identities in Belarus are similarly varied and contested but usually discussed in relation to particular historical periods. For 20th century iterations, see, for instance: Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experience in Minsk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Leonid Smilovitsky, *Jewish Life in Belarus: The Final Decade of the Stalin Regime (1944–53)* (Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2014); Anika Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Andrew Sloan, *The Jewish Revolution in Belorussia: Economy, Race, and Bolshevik Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Zina Gimpelevich, *The Portrayal of Jews in Modern Belarussian Literature* (Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2018).

Raichonak is revered and embraced by Jewish individuals and organizations that regularly feature material about her, much of which served to write this paper.⁴⁸ Belarusian organizations and media that otherwise pay scant attention to Jewish themes or the history and memory of the Holocaust document her work as well.⁴⁹ In 2010, Raichonak was awarded the “Bykhov Prize for Freedom of Thought,” a prize that honors “individuals who have dedicated their civic or artistic work to the good of Belarus and the pursuit of freedom” and which was inaugurated by the leader of the oppositional movement “Za svabodu”, Aliaksandr Milinkevich in 2008.⁵⁰ In 2019, Raichonak received a medal awarded by Ivonka Survilla, President of the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic. This Belarusian diaspora organization identifies as the government in exile of the Belarusian People’s Republic, a short-lived attempt to create a Belarusian state during World War I in 1918–1919, and until today advocates for Belarusian independence and democracy in Belarus.⁵¹

One is tempted to see bridgebuilders like Ada El’evna as trailblazers for a more inclusive society that allows for capacious forms of self-identifications. More importantly, her engagement is embedded in a more complex and contested political process of renegotiating Belarusian national identity. The alliance between Raichonak and others who see themselves in opposition to the ruling government and the dominating narrative of Belarusian history results from the shared commitment to claim a new Belarusian national narrative, one that specifically foregrounds marginalized histories.⁵² Reclaiming and publicizing Jewish heritage alongside pre-Soviet Belarusian history and culture puts them at odds with the state narrative, with direct consequences: in 2000, Raichonak was arrested and fined for her engagement, and lost her job.⁵³

⁴⁸ Shul’man, *Nash gost’*; idem, *V gostiakh*; idem, *Perelmany*; “Galereia Ady,” *Evreiskii mir za nedeliu*, 189, <http://newswe.com/index.php?go=Pages&in=view&id=879>, accessed 10.02.2020.

⁴⁹ “Ada Raichonok: Ia mogu podoiti i dat’ poshchechiny,” *BelGazeta*, 28.07.2008, http://www.belgazeta.by/ru/2008_07_28/radosti_zhizni/17048/, accessed 10.02.2020; “Dni evreiskoi kul’tury v Polotske,” National Museum for History and Culture, Polotsk, 10.07.2013, <http://polotsk.museum.by/node/34058>, accessed 10.02.2020; “Kletski, draniki i ‘bul’bianoi striptiz’ – v Germanovichakh proshel festival’ kartofel’nykh bliud,” *Komsomol’skaia Pravda Belarus*, 29.06.2015, <https://www.kp.by/online/news/2094878/>, accessed 10.02.2020.

⁵⁰ “Premia ‘Za svabodu dumki’ imeni Bykava,” *Rukh Za Svabodu*, 23.06.2019, <https://mff.by/bel/campaign/4/>, accessed 10.02.2020; “Laureatam premii ‘Za svabody dumki’ stala Ada Raichonak,” *Rukh Za Svabodu*, 19.06.2010, <https://pyx.by/rus/news/95/>, accessed 10.02.2020.

⁵¹ “Adu Raichonak uznagarodzili medalem da 100-goddzia BNR,” *Ratsyia*, 24.02.2020, <https://www.racyja.com/hramadstva/adu-rajchonak-uznagarodzili-medalyom-d/>, accessed 24.02.2020; see also: Shul’man, *Nash gost’*.

⁵² Magdalena Waligórska, “Jewish Heritage and the New Belarusian National Identity Project,” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 30 (2016), 2: 338–340.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 337.

Looking to personal histories provides clues into shared experiences and their perceptions that are, otherwise, not documented and would escape the scholar's attention would she limit herself to existing archives. While we might be able to reconstruct particular events such as the assault on the Jews of Hermanavichy, Viciebsk, and elsewhere in Belarus, we would glean rather scant information about personal experiences as well the legacy and aftermath of this assault – about, for instance, the role of just a few individuals to keep alive these Jews' history and how its destruction reverberated among their neighbors. Kuntsevich's account speaks to the horror with which locals looked on as individual Jews were beaten up, rabbis abused in public, and their neighbors pushed into a ghetto, exposed to hunger, starvation, and further violence. Some locals benefited from, and participated, in the violence when they robbed Jewish residents' property⁵⁴ – an aspect of the occupation experience that is overall sparsely documented. (Fig. 2) Without Ada Raichonak's insistence on Kuntsevich's writing, we would get even less insight into the complexity of witnessing, observing, or complicity that, until today, poses many questions for scholars and current members of Belarusian society even though instances of local collaboration or complicity with German occupation authorities have been well established.⁵⁵ Belarusian and Jewish lives are thus entangled in positive and negative ways, which may be at the heart of a complicated relationship that reaches into personal lives such as Ada Raichonak's.

Looking to the footnotes of this paper, the reader will notice the rather limited source base that is available to study these issues, yet which in itself is a reflection of the history's complexity: Ada Raichonak has been interviewed by scholars and historians working for outlets targeting either a Jewish or a largely Belarusian audience. Combined with my own interview, one can assemble a rich portrayal of an individual's life and position in the creation of a historical narrative, here, of a variegated local heritage. Notably, it is her own heritage only by extension. Resembling a dynamic in many other places in Belarus where nearly all Jews were killed during the German occupation or where survivors refused to remain or return to after the war, Raichonak, who tells the story of Jewish life and its destruction in Hermanavichy and environs, moved there only after the fact. Kuntsevich's account, in turn, is that of a Catholic who observed Jewish experience but has since left the area as well. The history of Jewish life in Belarus, consequently, is truly a construct, and one often developed

⁵⁴ Kuntsevich, *Moi vospominania*, 22.

⁵⁵ See, for instance, expansive portrayals of the collaboration or participation of local residents in what is now the Republic of Belarus: Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941–1944* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Rein, *The Kings*; Franziska Exeler, "What Did You Do during the War? Personal Responses to the Aftermath of Nazi Occupation," *Kritika* 17 (2016), 4: 805–835.

by latecomers, witnesses, or gentiles – who, it turns out, are often not free from widely shared stereotypes of Jews.⁵⁶

Ada El'evna's story, and the way we can tell it, is indicative of larger patterns of experience and memory. Due to her efforts to document and preserve local culture and history, she is a figure of public interest. My reconstruction of her life and work relies on a number of interviews with her and media reports about her work; only this multiplicity of sources allowed me to tell her story. Her public life was the very foundation for our encounter. When I visited Sharkaūshchyna, I had no intention to meet her. It was only when one of my local contacts, a representative of the Department for Culture, Ideology, and Youth (who fulfilled the double function of assisting and surveilling me) recognized my interest in the history of Belarusian Jewry, that her name was brought to my attention. Subsequently, the department insisted on providing transportation to my next destination, as well as on introducing me to Ada El'evna. Learning about her then and afterwards, I realized that this offer served a double purpose: to help me learn about the district, as well as to encourage me to transpose my admiration for Raichonak's work onto the local authorities. People like Ada El'evna are the driving force of preservation and commemoration, yet state institutions and authorities, especially outside of urban centers, who are unwilling or unable to pursue such projects on their own, benefit from these efforts. While they are rather critical of Raichonak's civic activism and provide no assistance for her endeavors, they happily refer the foreign scholar to her.⁵⁷ This instrumental relationship to Raichonak's work mirrors a more widespread pattern of Belarusian authorities to participate in the promotion of a public memorialization of the Holocaust only to a limited extent and because it is useful to gain or maintain international recognition. The lack of initiative and misrepresentation is, for instance, similarly on display in the recently established memorial complex Maly Trostenets. In 2015, then-president Aliaksandr Lukashenka opened this memorial on a killing site where tens of thousands of Belarusian and Jews from other European countries were murdered with great fanfare, yet much of the funding was secured by international donors and the narrative of the memorial continues to downplay the Jewish identity of the majority of the victims.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Kuntsevich, for instance, elaborates that Christian homes were "cleaner" and "more comfortable" than the Jewish homes in Hermanavichy (Kuntsevich, *Moi vospominania*, 11).

⁵⁷ See: Kolas, *Ada*; "Ada Raichonok."

⁵⁸ See Magdalena Waligórska, "Remembering the Holocaust on the Fault Lines of East and West-European Memorial Cultures: The New Memorial Complex in Trastsianets, Belarus," *Holocaust Studies* 24 (2018), 3: 329–353. On the lack of Holocaust memory more broadly, please see: Walke, "Split Memory;" Ekaterina Keding, "Konkurrenz der Erinnerungen: Partisanenwiderstand und Holocaust in der belarussischen Gedenkkultur," in: *Ein weißer Fleck in Europa... Die Imagination der Belarus als Kontaktzone zwischen Ost und West*, eds. Thomas M. Bohn, Victor Shadurski (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011), 159–171.

Raichonak and the many others who document the life and death of Belarusian Jewish communities alongside the Belarusian past more broadly are crucial to the work of scholars who study Jewish and Belarusian history and culture. With often limited budgets and restricted to few technological resources – producing handwritten books, for example – they create archives that otherwise would not exist. Their personal history, as much as the history they allow us to write and how we are able to write it, provide glimpses into the richness of life in what is now Belarus and thus offers a departure for further research. More than anything, this personal account illuminates how individuals make and tell a life in the face of massive historical change, violence, and institutional stagnation.

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Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł poddaje analizie doświadczenie Żydów w dawnej Strefie Osiedleńczej przez pryzmat indywidualnej biografii osadzonej w XX wieku i rozpatrywanej w szerszym kontekście kulturowym i historycznym. Analiza ta, oparta na różnorodnych źródłach, w tym na wywiadach, pokazuje, jak bardzo opis jednostkowych losów wymyka się łatwej kategoryzacji, a badania biograficzne wymagają zniuansowanego podejścia do ich przedmiotu.

Słowa kluczowe

Białoruś, Hermanowicze, historia żydowska, Holocaust, biografia

PROSIMY O CYTOWANIE TEGO ARTYKUŁU JAKO:

Anika Walke, „A People’s Biography: Ada El’evna Raichonak and Her Hermanavichy”, *Autobiografia: Literatura. Kultura. Media* 1 (2020), 14: 123–144. DOI: 10.18276/au.2020.1.14-07

Appendix

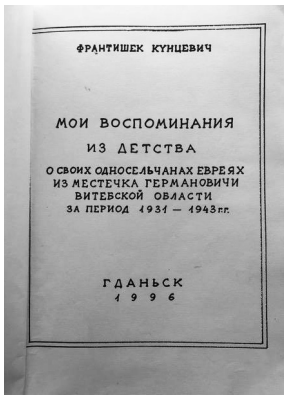


Fig 1. Cover page of, Frantishek Kuntsevich, *Moi vospominania iz detstva: O svoikh odnosel'chaniakh evreiakh iz mestechka Germanovichi Vitebskoi oblasti za period 1931–1943gg.* (Gdansk: n.p., 1996)

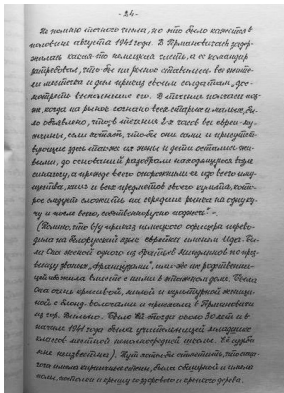


Fig. 2. Frantishek Kuntsevich, *Moi vospominania iz detstva: O svoikh odnosel'chaniakh evreiakh iz mestechka Germanovichi Vitebskoi oblasti za period 1931–1943gg.* (Gdansk: n.p., 1996), 24