

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 16, No.4 - Winter 1970

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LITHUANIAN HASIDISM

Wolf Zeev Rabinowitsch, LITHUANIAN HASIDISM FROM ITS BEGINNINGS TO THE PRESENT DAY, (London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1970), xiii, 263 pp.

Most Lithuanians, in a vague way, are aware that at various times within the boundaries of historical Lithuania, there has existed a fairly extensive Jewish culture. Some of its products have even been persons of some importance in western culture in general. We might mention the Kantian philosopher Salamon Maimon or, in more recent times, the art historian and critic, Bernard Berenson. But few Lithuanians know much more than this and partly because this Jewish culture existed in extreme isolation. This isolation is very noticeable in the present book. It describes events mostly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period of great turbulence for this region. Yet these events are hardly ever referred to, except on the sporadic occasions when the outside world, like a natural calamity, interrupted the independent course of the Jewish communities.

The Lithuania of the title only to a small extent coincides with the Lithuania of present day maps. For the author, Lithuania is defined, roughly, by what were then called the five Principal Communities of the Province of Lithuania, namely, Gardinas (Grodno), Brest-Litovsk, Pinsk, Vilnius, and Slutsk. These communities and the small ones scattered between them were governed primarily by their own council and enjoyed in local affairs considerable autonomy from the political authorities of the country at large. Allied to this Lithuanian province were two other provinces, that of White Russia and Zamut, that is, Žemaitija, or the province of Kaunas.

The doctrines and spirit of the Hasidic movement have been much emphasized by Martin Buber and are perhaps best known through his work. The present account ignores on the whole the doctrinal side of the movement and concentrates on presenting a fairly detailed record of the historical development of Hasidism.

Hasidism, also called Chassidism, is a Jewish revival movement which originated somewhat to the south of Lithuania, in the sense defined above, in the regions of Podolia and Volhynia. These regions were very much affected by the Cossack risings and other wars and Jews here lived a very unsettled and impoverished life. As a result, various pseudo-messianic movements were rife. According to the author, the Hasidic movement was in part a protest against the "fantasies of the pseudo-messiahs." But at the same time, it was a protest against the domination of Jewish life by the rabbinical scholars.

These social conditions created a ready ground for the doctrines of the founder of Hasidism, the Rabbi Yisrael, when he began preaching around 1735. The condition of the Lithuanian Jews was somewhat more settled and initially the Hasidic doctrines had little influence there. Only after the death of the founder in 1760, did Hasidism begin to penetrate into Lithuania. There, it encountered very severe opposition from the more established rabbies. In 1772, the leader of the Jews in Vilnius proclaimed a ban on Hasidism in Vilnius and asked neighboring communities in Lithuania and White Russia to join him in outlawing it. The Hasidic houses of prayer in Vilnius were closed, their writings burnt, and their teachers attacked. But in spite of such persecution, the movement spread and for a long time remained one of the important currents in Jewish life. The author, in great detail, traces the history of this movement through the Nazi persecutions up to the present day.

Perhaps the most valuable part of the book is the very extensive bibliography. It lists many books published in Lithuania, Poland, and White Russia before the first world war. More recent publications are also extensively represented.

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