

THE TAILORS OF TOMASZOW: A MEMOIR OF POLISH JEWS

By Rena Margulies Chernoff and Allan Chernoff
Texas Tech University Press, 2014, Lubbock,
TX, 182 pp.

In 1935 the Joint Distribution Committee commissioned the Russian born photographer Roman Vishniac to document Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. A selection of those photographs, made between 1935 and 1939, would later be published as *A Vanished World*.¹ Like works in an exhibition, Vishniac's pictures offer multiple glimpses into European Jewry in the years before its destruction. One can hardly look at these images without feeling the immense distance of time and fate that separates us from the faces and scenes preserved in these pages. Within the space of just a few years nearly everyone who looked into Vishniac's lens would be murdered. Part of the force of Vishniac's visual record, compiled from all over Eastern Europe, lies in what we will never know. Who these people were, how their lives might have been fulfilled, and what they might have contributed—these questions are evoked but never answered. It scarcely needs a narrative to add to its power.

A different approach is taken in the *Tailors of Tomaszow*, by Rena Margulies Chernoff and Allan Chernoff. Through a meticulously reconstructed narrative that represents a small Polish city, Tomaszow-Mazowiecki, and its large Jewish community as it existed before, during and after Nazi occupation, the Chernoffs open a door, inviting us into that world. In its richness and precision, their account achingly demonstrates how ephemeral a geographical space can be. The Chernoffs' account joins memory and forgetting within what the anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin calls "a geography of common reference," in which "forgetting and memory are so intermingled as to become almost one."² Reading their words, we cannot help but realize how much of their narrative would never have been known, but for their retelling, or consider the infinite number of narratives that will remain untold.

What distinguishes this narrative is the way in which it combines the perspectives of two generations. Rena Margulies Chernoff's recollections, and those that she gathered from others, display all

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the immediacy of first hand description. Her narrative includes tales of family disputes, misbehaving employees and practical jokes, before moving on to the horrors of Auschwitz and the martyrdom of her younger brother, Romek. The phenomenological challenges of reconstructing and representing, nearly eight decades later, a community that has been irrevocably destroyed, fell to Rena's son, American-born journalist Allan Chernoff. The dual vision that results from their collaboration produces an almost stereoscopic view of their community. Homes, factories, the synagogue, and streets stand out in such high relief that we feel as if we could navigate the pre-war city blindfolded. We learn that the main sections of Tomaszow were called, in Yiddish, *in der gas* and *iber der brick*, and that the three major textile factories, "the backbone of the town's economy," as well as the public bathhouse, were located *iber der brik*, across the Wilborka river.³ The Margulies family's apartment and tailor shop, at Antoniego 21, were *in der gas*, ("in the street"), or in town. We learn that most buildings did not have running water, and instead relied on the services of a *wassen trager*, or water carrier. The Margulies family was fortunate to have a pump in the backyard, though it took some skill to operate it. Five year-old Rena started kindergarten on Pilsudskiego Street in *der gas*. We learn of the brick fences she would pass on the way, and of the glass of milk she couldn't finish on the day the class buried a small bird. The town's biggest synagogue, the Groys Shul, stood on Handlova Street. The changing

seasons of family as well as community life—births, marriages, deaths, and their associated and other rituals—take place against settings such as these. Despite the economic troubles of the thirties and the rise of an increasingly virulent anti-Semitism in the years before the war, Tomaszow appears as a place fixed in time, immutable.

Rena Margulies was six years old when the war began and only eleven when she arrived at Auschwitz on July 30, 1944, after a period in the labor camp Blizyn. She is thus one of the youngest survivors—and one of the last direct witnesses—of the Shoah. Rena's own voice is clearer at times than at others. When we learn, for example, how Tomaszow became a center for the tailoring industry, due to the presence of the nearby mills, and the waterpower supplied by the three rivers that traverse the city, it is not hard to hear Allan's voice-over. When we hear her tell how her father and his brother, after a stay in France, set up a "Parisian" tailoring shop, we feel as though we are eavesdropping on a family conversation. And when she relates her most painful memories, she is in full command of the narrative.

As war and occupation intrude; as a murderous new regime forces the Jewish population into a ghetto and then into sub-ghettos, time speeds up, and space becomes part of the narrative in a new way: as events. Internal displacement is followed by external displacement. Stripped of its relational and even physical spaces, Tomaszow continues to exist, but only in memory. For those who survive it remains

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“a geography of common reference.” As a mnemonic device, Tomaszow evokes the “memory palaces” of the classical world: those imaginary structures with well-defined spaces that served as a basis for remembering and retrieving information. Reconstructed in memory, it invites recall and keeps the past alive. For Rena and her mother, that past, and the certainties attached to it, provide a small degree of stability during their time at Auschwitz.

Imbedded in the book’s title is a suggestion of why some of the residents of Tomaszow, particularly the younger ones were able to survive the camps. At first officers with the occupying German forces sought out the services of tailors for their custom suits and leather coats. One grateful German officer offered to fly Rena’s family to Switzerland in his plane, a proposition her father refused, not wanting to abandon other family members. But by the end of 1940, the Nazis had seized Jewish businesses, herded Tomaszow’s Jews into progressively smaller ghettos, and established a series of slave labor workshops. Rena tells us,

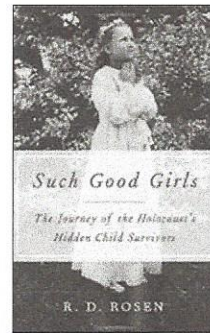
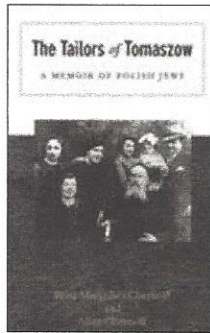
“One day the Germans came to confiscate my sewing machine,” remembered Uncle Jozef. “My wife complained, ‘How will we make a living?’ The German said, ‘You’ll be thankful to me that you’re working for the Germans.’”⁴

Working on the second floor of a converted textile mill, six days a week, the tailors, now slave laborers, numbered about 100 men and women. There they produced both uniforms and nonmilitary clothing. Carpenters, shoemakers and dressmakers occupied the other floors, producing goods for both the Germans and the local *Volksdeutschen*, ethnic Germans who lived in Poland. Officially, the Germans paid the tailors with “a half-loaf of round, dark bread every Saturday, some margarine, and a potato.”⁵ Sometimes clients would supplement these meager rations with additional food. The invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, and the need for additional clothing for the Eastern front, required the continued services of tailors. Although the majority of Tomaszow’s Jews were deported to Treblinka in two actions in late 1942, Rena, her parents and her brother remained in Tomaszow until May 30, 1943, when they were sent to the labor camp at Bilzyn. From there, the family was deported to Auschwitz on July 30, 1944. The liberation

of the camp by the Soviets, less than six months later, would be too late to save the life of Rena’s father or her brother Romek.

After their liberation mother and daughter try to resettle in Tomaszow. Few traces of the city they knew remain. Cognitive dissonance, a lack of understanding, the prevailing anti-Semitism and an unabated sense of loss compel them to leave for America.

Much more than a simple memoir, *The Tailors of Tomaszow* is a significant contribution to the literature of collective memory. This slim volume demonstrates the intimate linkages between space and the reconstruction of the past, recalling not only events but also the geography against



which they were played out.

Just as physical destruction does, the destruction of memory inevitably deforms what remains. Without detailed descriptions of Jewish life before the war, it is easy to overlook the dense and complex culture that existed in Eastern Europe or to draw erroneous conclusions. In its reconstruction of Tomaszow-Mazowiecki’s Jewish community, *The Tailors of Tomaszow* goes a long way toward reversing this destruction.

The importance of this book for the history of the Shoah and the society that it destroyed should be evident. As well, its treatment of the interaction of space and time strongly recommends it as a reading at the upper secondary or university level. For courses on collective memory, its accessibility, precision, and relative brevity would make it an excellent complement to more theoretical works such as Boyarin, Halbwachs or Benjamin.

Reviewed by Anne Griffin, Professor of Sociology at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art.

1. Roman Vishniac, *A Vanished World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).

2. Jonathan Boyarin, “The Lower East Side: A Place of Forgetting,” in *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 4-5.

3. Chernoff and Chernoff, pp. 18-19.

4. Chernoff and Chernoff, p. 66.

5. P. 66.

SUCH GOOD GIRLS The Journey of the Holocaust’s Hidden Child Survivors

By R. D. Rosen
Harper, 2014, pp 257

During his three-year struggle with the topic, with the “excavation” of his subjects’ distressing memories and the difficulties of writing this book (see Hiding from the Holocaust in this issue, page 40), Richard Rosen often asked himself: “Does the world really need another Holocaust book?” Richard was not alone in his avoidance of and struggle with the Holocaust. For decades, survivors and non-survivors have danced around the subject with discomfort. Why recall painful memories? Why ask hurtful questions? So it became a decades-long habit: we didn’t tell, and nobody asked.

The floodgates to the history of the Hidden Children opened after the first international gathering, organized by the Hidden Child Foundation/ADL, in 1991, when we were exhorted to “tell our stories.” With the spate of books that ensued, Richard was justified in asking himself that question. And when he finally concludes, “Not being a survivor conferred a certain advantage; I could write, from a slightly dispassionate remove, about the converging stories of more than a single survivor, follow them into their adulthood, and in the process tell the story of an entire generation of hidden child survivors,” I am in total agreement.

This book, which focuses mostly (but not entirely) on the lives of three women—Sophie, Flora and Carla—does speak for most Hidden Children: we’ve lived a lifetime with the memories of war and persecution, and, on the whole, we’ve had productive, successful lives. Richard presents a full picture: all three women are strong, accomplished and resolute, yet he lays bare their (and our) insecurities, foibles, nightmares and fears. He addresses

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