

**Aharon Pick, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter: A Memoir from the Ghetto of Šiauliai, Lithuania*, trans. Gabriel Laufer and Andrew Cassel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2023). 320 pp. Paperback \$36.**

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Aharon Pick, a Jewish physician and Zionist activist, was born in 1872 in Kedainai, Lithuania. Upon his graduation from the Sorbonne, he practiced medicine in Šiaulai, Lithuania. In 1940, he witnessed the Soviet occupation, followed by the German invasion in 1941, which led to his and his wife's forced relocation to the Šiaulai ghetto. Pick continued working in the ghetto hospital until he passed away due to illness in June 1944 at the age of seventy-two. For the first time, his extensive notes and diaries, preserved in three handwritten notebooks, are now available in English. This is made possible through the cooperative efforts of two experienced translators and historians of Lithuanian Jewry: Gabriel Laufer and Andrew Cassel.

To understand the daunting task faced by the translators, we need to take into account the fact that Pick wrote in Haskalic Hebrew, which has some notable differences from modern *ivrit*. While his handwriting was relatively legible (considering the notoriously illegible handwriting of doctors), translating all three volumes written by hand in a language that is no longer in common use is an impressive task indeed. Accurate translation also required an excellent knowledge of rabbinical literature, to which Pick referred in almost every paragraph, not to mention the various contemporary neologisms or expressions, some of which have been abandoned and not adopted in modern Hebrew. Some of his Talmudic puns suggest a kind of dry, sagacious humour that Pick used to relieve the

stress and daily struggles. The more important was the translators' wise decision to include explanatory notes, as many of these valuable references would otherwise have been lost in translation.

The book has all the features of a proper scholarly translation, including a foreword by the translators, which gives the reader all the basic background necessary to understand the context, scope and value of the work. Several pages of photographs and facsimiles are included, allowing the reader not only to connect with the human being who wrote the text, but also to appreciate the amount of work that has gone into providing a proper modern translation of it. The volume is designed to be accessible to both scholars and laypeople, as well as high school students and teachers, who may find sections of this book a compelling reading assignment in their classes on Holocaust history and literature. In particular, the sections describing the living conditions and social impact of the never-ending stream of restrictive regulations could be a welcome addition to the popular compendiums of excerpts and documents from the Holocaust era.

Aharon Pick was not particularly fond of the Bolshevik regime, whose crimes, such as the material deprivation of small entrepreneurs and deportations to the Soviet Union, he describes in detail, but he also acknowledges certain improvements over the Russian Tzarist regime, not to mention what was to come under the Nazis. While describing incidents of structural

discrimination and political oppression under Soviet rule, some of which touched him and his own family personally, he was also grateful that he could at least somehow continue to practice medicine in the now public hospitals. All the crimes of the Bolshevik regime are overshadowed by the plundering and arbitrary executions of the Lithuanian nationalists, also known as “Holocaust by bullets,”<sup>1</sup> and the final Nazi genocide. As his personal diary, the text indeed expresses many of his personal grievances about the petty politics of the hospital. Whether under the Bolsheviks, where he questions the conduct and character of many of his colleagues who were too quick to jump on the bandwagon, even at the expense of others, or within the ghetto, where desperate living conditions lead to demoralization, aggravated corruption and nepotism.

Pick turns out to be an excellent storyteller and a keen observer. What he modestly calls a “diary” often feels more like an anthropological exploration of the complex fabric of Jewish society living under duress within the confines of the ghetto. As a physician, Pick makes special note of the restrictive regulations that affected medical care, such as the prohibition on Jewish physicians providing medical care to non-Jews, restrictions on medical assistance to Jews, inability to perform surgeries, or the outright genocidal decree that forbade the birth of a Jewish child on pain of severe punishment, leading to forced abortions in miserable sanitary conditions. He also records any rumors or information available to him at the time he wrote his diary. In these sections, he switches from a first-person observer to a third-person narrator, as if he were writing a historical research study. A comparison of Pick’s accounts of the atrocities committed by either the Nazis or their Lithuanian collaborators in the surrounding towns and villages with current research on the subject<sup>2</sup> may be worthwhile for anyone interested in learning what the locals actually knew about the unfolding events. For example, on 5 November 1942, Pick witnessed the *Kinderaktion*, in which hundreds of Jewish

children were sent to Auschwitz. He understood that their fate was likely terrible, but he had no direct knowledge of the Nazi death camp at the time he wrote this entry, and there is no mention of the name “Auschwitz” in his notes—a name he surely would have recorded if he had known about it. Pick would certainly qualify as a member of the local Jewish “elite” with better access to information than most ordinary Jews in Šiauliai, and if anything escaped his keen observations, it was most likely unknown to the locals at the time.

As a religious person and promoter of Hebrew culture, Pick also recorded his immediate reactions to the destruction of religious communities, expressing his own theological views on the matter. Writing in 1944, he already referred to the concept of hiding the divine face (*hester panim*), which later became a common response to questions of Holocaust theodicy, popularized in North America by scholars like Emil L. Fackenheim or Eliezer Berkovits in the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike these two postwar theologians, who had the opportunity to witness the revival of Hebrew culture and thus to formulate their thoughts in a rather hopeful spirit, Pick’s writing manifests a deep disillusionment and loss of trust in divine justice.

The book is divided into three parts. The first two were written later and completed on 18 May 1942. The final part is a diary that chronicles the last months of Pick’s life from May 1942 to 7 June 1944. As with other wartime diaries of Holocaust victims, the conclusion ends abruptly due to Pick’s death. In this section, Pick’s direct reactions to the battle of Stalingrad, the Katyn massacre, or the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising are documented. When Pick passed away, the course of the war was already shifting. Soviet forces had already ousted the Germans from sections of Lithuanian land, however, it was too late for the majority of the Lithuanian Jews. As much as ninety-five percent of the native Jewish community were brutally massacred (one of the highest percentages in Europe), with the majority of them being killed by 1942.<sup>3</sup> The more important

it is to preserve every piece of testimony and prewar heritage of this decimated community. Complementing the existing body of Lithuanian Holocaust diaries and memoirs, such as Hary Gordon's *The Shadow of Death* or Ellen Cassedy's *We Are Here: Memories of the Lithuanian*

*Holocaust*, this new scholarly translation of Aharon Pick's diaries makes a welcome contribution to this task. Indiana University Press is to be commended for bringing this important piece of Lithuanian Jewish history to twenty-first century readers.

## REFERENCES

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- 1 See Rūta Vanagaitė and Efraim Zuroff, *Our People: Discovering Lithuania's Hidden Holocaust* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).
- 2 For example, Prit Buttar, *Centuries will Not Suffice: A History of the Lithuanian Holocaust* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing Limited, 2023).
- 3 Timothy Snyder, Timothy. 2003. *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003),p. 84–87.

