

# The history of seventy-five years of publishing gravestone books

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Lior Becker, *A Mention to Those not Mentioned: Yizkor Books and Holocaust Memory 1943–2008*, *Studia Historica Upsaliensia* 273 (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 2022), 343 s.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Yizkor – or memorial – books commemorating destroyed Jewish communities were published. The first appeared while the Holocaust was still ongoing – focusing on the Jewish community in Lodz in Western Poland in 1943. More appeared in the years and decades that followed the end of the war. They were a publishing phenomenon, with an estimated 1300 Yizkor books produced. However, despite this they have been relatively neglected in the scholarship on Holocaust memory, certainly when compared to the attention paid to memoirs, memorials or museums. Lior Becker's thesis sets out to fill this historiographical gap.

Becker's main contribution lies in the fact that he has undertaken study of a far larger sample of Yizkor books than previous scholars. Drawing on 613 Yizkor books – around half of all those published – he provides new knowledge on a number of key questions: when and where these books were published, by who and in what languages. Working with a slightly smaller subset of the editorials included in 565 Yizkor books, he reveals the varied motivations that editors outlined in undertaking the task of bringing the volume to publication. Finally, he undertakes an in-depth reading of a random sample of 30 Yizkor books.

While Becker does undertake analysis of what was written in these books, his main focus and contribution lies in exploring the history of production of Yizkor books. As he explains, the thesis is driven by a cluster of research questions that ask: "Who published Yizkor books: who were they? What reasons did they have for publishing the books? How did they produce them?" and what "continuities and changes [...] can be observed with regard to the

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people who published and edited the books" (p. 293). Although he offers a secondary set of questions that are more concerned with content – "What kind of memory of the diaspora and the Holocaust did they present to their readers?" and "whether and, if so, how the content and function of the books were affected by significant historical events" (p. 293) – these assume less prominence within the thesis and are where his analysis is less convincing.

Working with a sample of over 600 Yizkor books, Becker adds to our understanding of this long-lived publishing phenomenon in several ways. Firstly, he signals a broader range of actors lying behind these initiatives by stretching his chronological focus from the early post-war years through to the late 2000s. Traditionally, Yizkor books have largely been seen to have originated from *Landsmanschaftn* (mutual aid societies created by emigrant communities from the same place). While they were important in publishing early *Pinkasim* (or name lists of victims) and Yizkor books, Becker shows that they were declining in importance by the late 1960s and early 1970s when Yizkor book publishing reached its peak. Rather than simply being created by mutual aid societies in Argentina and the United States, the initiative for these books came from more varied actors: from individuals, through diverse organisations, to school projects initiated in Israel in the 1960s after the Eichmann trial. Of particular interest are those new organisations created in Israel solely to initiate commemorative activities for specific communities. These activities included creating a Yizkor book, alongside engaging in other acts of commemoration from sponsoring a memorial plaque in the memorial cellar established on Mount Zion to tree planting in the Forest of the Martyrs in Israel.

Secondly, as well as signalling a diverse range of producers of Yizkor books, Becker points to a breadth of motivations spelt out by the editors in their opening words. These included a desire to commemorate lost communities and an impulse to communicate these histories and memories to future readers, driven by a mix of internal and external motivations – for example personal connections to these communities as well as an overwhelming sense that the dead or divine demanded that these stories be retold. What is most striking in Becker's analysis of motivations is his identification of one persisting trope across the many editorials that he has read: that Yizkor books were seen as a gravestone book that combined the place-based, material qualities of a grave with all the advantages of a book that meant that more knowledge could be conveyed than simply a line etched in stone. As he shows, those producing these books saw them as playing a vital role in the aftermath of a genocide whose victims were never laid to rest in marked graves. In the absence of gravestones, the Yizkor book itself was imagined by editors and publishers as a site for mourning and specifically saying the

place-based prayer *kaddish*. Publishing Yizkor books was seen as nothing less than an act of place-making, albeit dispersed commemorative place-making that could occupy shelves of a diasporic community rather than being confined to a single site to be visited.

At the core of Becker's thesis is the well justified claim that "Yizkor books became replacements for sanctified places of memory" (p. 187). But, as he notes, these books were always more than "just 'Holocaust memorials'" (p. 195). In a well-chosen analogy, he suggests that Yizkor books "function in the same way as people behave in a memorial service for a loved one; the main topic discussed is not the death of the person, but his or her life and this is usually done in a positive way, even if only in retrospect" (p. 195). Yizkor books were a kind of collective, community memorial service for a lost community. "Since the Holocaust was the death of or the end of all these Jewish communities, and in itself was such a traumatic event, it is only natural that it is given a significant place in the books," Becker explains, and yet he suggests that "the most important part, with few exceptions, is people's lives." (p. 195) While the events of the Holocaust were recorded in these books, more space (anything from two-thirds to nine-tenths of the total of the 30 books he examines in detail) was given to other themes – the daily life of the pre-war community and the lives of the individuals who made up that lost community. These are books that don't simply retell destruction, but also seek posthumous "resurrection" (p. 196) of these communities in, and through, print.

While Becker makes good use of a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse the production history and varied editorial motivations of Yizkor books, there are some gaps or failings. Oddly, he offers two different three-fold periodizations when outlining the history of production in broad brush strokes. Early in the thesis he points to 1943–1960, 1961–1980, and 1981–2008 as the three periods of production, with 1961–1980 being the period of peak publishing (p. 46). Later in the thesis, he offers a refined chronology of 1943–1964, 1964–early 1970s, and 1970s–2008, with the narrower central period being the time when most Yizkor books were published (pp. 296–299). The inconsistency in the text is strange, especially given that the former appears alongside a figure (p. 47) that points to the shorter peak years suggested at the close of the thesis. More significantly, this narrower peak focuses attention on the immediate aftermath of the 1961 Eichmann trial as crucial in stimulating the genre, and signals the way that the thesis could contribute more richly to understanding the nature of Israeli Holocaust memory.

Working with the basic data of time and place of publication, as well as the language of Yizkor books and those responsible for initiating them, Becker

at times overstates his case. One example comes with his jump from noting the prevalence of Hungarian but not Polish among Yizkor book languages, to a claim that this represented a rejection of their language – and nation – by Polish Jews compared to Hungarian Jews (p. 138; pp. 238–239). However, this pattern could simply be the result of the fact that most Hungarian Jewish communities only spoke Hungarian rather than Yiddish. Here Becker would need to work with other sources to substantiate his claims about the politics of languages of memory. More generally, he would benefit from undertaking further quantitative analysis of the texts, as well as utilising a wider range of sources, to further pursue his core concerns about unpicking the publishing history of Yizkor books and the motivations that underlay their production. It would, for example, be good to get a greater sense of the page extents of these volumes as a whole, as well as a broad picture of the relative proportion given to different languages, to necrologies, to the events of the Holocaust vis-à-vis stories of pre-war life, to name just a few. Richer analysis of what these volumes contain – and if, and how, this changed over time and space – might help to deal with the limitations that Becker acknowledges in using the stated motivations found in editorials. Other archival documents, alongside interviews with editors still alive, could have filled out the analysis of publishing history that dominates Becker's core research questions.

When it comes to answering his secondary set of research questions – about the memory of the diaspora and the Holocaust within the books and "how the content and function of the books were affected by significant historical events" (p. 293) – Becker is less successful. Key here is a lack of understanding of the broad contours of the current historiography combined with a failure to develop a coherent set of theoretical tools that can then be deployed to enable analysis. The lengthy opening chapters of the thesis do outline several theoretical concepts – collective memory and collected memories, conceptual history, Rüsen et al's ideas of catastrophic and critical crisis leading to changing patterns of historical interpretation – and briefly sketch out the historical context of memory cultures in Israel and America. However, at times these ideas are misunderstood and lack reference to key literatures (for example, dealing with collective memory and collected memories, Becker fails to fully understand the former and omits the key work of James Young in coining the latter; his outlining of memory cultures in Israel and America reveals superficial understanding and mistakes such as suggesting the importance of heroism in American Holocaust narratives).<sup>1</sup> While theories are introduced (and this is particularly the case with conceptual history) they are never followed through in enlivening subsequent

1. James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven 1993).

analysis, or they are used in rather odd ways (for example, interpreting the Eichmann trial as a critical crisis that led to changing patterns of historical interpretation in Israel).

Rather than elucidating more on all four areas, in the interests of space, I only expand on the final one referred to above given its importance in structuring the final chapter: Becker's use of Rüsen et al's work.<sup>2</sup> Becker argues throughout that the Eichmann Trial can be seen as a "critical crisis" (p. 93). While the Eichmann Trial – and later on the Six Day War – have been seen as turning points in Holocaust memory in the United States in particular, they play a different role in Israel in primarily bringing survivors' voices to the fore. A stronger case for the trial ushering in a crisis demanding a new historical representation can be found in the impact of Hannah Arendt's work that coined the idea of the "banality of evil", stimulating a wider reappraisal of perpetrators in particular and humanity in general – seen for example in the experiments of Milgram and Zimbardo.<sup>3</sup> However, perpetrators don't feature large in the Yizkor books. Where the Eichmann trial did impact these books was in broadening the initiators of these projects yet further. In the years after the trial, school children were encouraged to rise to the challenge of producing Yizkor Books for communities yet unremembered in this way.

Where Becker might have made more telling use of Rüsen's concepts is by working with the case of the Holocaust which Rüsen himself saw as a "catastrophic crisis" (p. 81). Arguably Yizkor books can be seen as a response, initially at least, by emigrant Jewish communities to the crisis created by the destruction of their communities of origin. This crisis meant, as Becker notes, that the dead lay unburied and needing the symbolic sites of memory that Yizkor books were seen to create. But the crisis also stretched to an existential sense of being orphaned and cast adrift as the community of origin was destroyed, awaiting symbolic recreation in Yizkor books that can also be seen as a form of creating moorings in the instability of the post-genocidal world.

Digging deeper into this story of why this genre became so widespread in the post-Holocaust world, Becker could have paid greater attention to the production history and content of Yizkor books to offer more telling analysis of continuities and changes across the seven decades he analyses. There are hints of the evolution of the genre in his work, but they remain rather

2. Jörn Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York 2005); Jörn Rüsen, Diane Kerns & Katie Digan, *Evidence and Meaning: A Theory of Historical Studies. Making Sense of History* (New York 2017).

3. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York 1963).

undeveloped. He signals a broad linguistic shift from Yiddish to Hebrew, but does not examine what content appeared in which language in those Yizkor books where both were used. Reading between the lines, it appears that a certain professionalisation took place, seen for example in the emergence of an editor like David Sztokfisz who edited 22 individual volumes, but this is never explored despite the focus on production histories. While Becker points to a tendency across the volumes – a couple of early books aside – to downplay the vitality of Communist organisations within Jewish communities and to instead stress the role of Zionist organisations, he does not do more with the evolution of the genre within Israel during the Cold War.

Overall my sense is that Becker overstates the differences between the narratives in the Yizkor books and those within early Holocaust memory in Israel. For example, his discussion of the language of "martyrs" – as well as "heroes" – to describe all those murdered during the Holocaust is offered as a contrast with the focus on heroes in early Israeli Holocaust memory, yet this fails to deal with the fact that the so-called Yad Vashem Law enacted in Israel in 1953 explicitly used the language of "martyrs and heroes" that Becker suggests was distinctive to the Yizkor books. Where he is stronger is in identifying how, contra the dominant narratives of Zionism in the young state of Israel, authors of the Yizkor books did not reduce these diasporic communities as inevitably doomed to failure. Rather, he points to a nostalgia for these lost communities that are celebrated for their life and vibrancy – albeit lives and vibrancy cut short by the Holocaust. These are clearly more complex texts than simply Zionist narratives, but my sense is that they mirror the emerging Holocaust memory culture in post-war Israel more closely than Becker suggests. Indeed, a case could be made for examining Yizkor books as key products of – and insights into – this emerging and evolving national memory culture, particularly as the nature of these producers shifted to include memory-focused organisation and Israeli school children.

While I note a number of significant failings in the thesis relating to the secondary set of research questions in particular, this is not to dismiss Becker's work entirely. It is a valuable contribution to the relatively limited scholarship on Yizkor books. It is certainly not the last word on the subject, but it does extend our understanding of this complex memory genre, and raises a host of new research questions in the process. Becker's main contribution is in revealing that Yizkor books were a longer running publication phenomenon and one engaging a more varied set of actors than has generally been understood. By working with just under half the extant texts, Becker shines new light on this genre that appears to have remained remarkably stable over seven decades as a mode of commemoration in the aftermath of the Holocaust.