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978-1-107-01131-1 - The Jewish Press and the Holocaust, 1939–1945: Palestine, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union

Yosef Gorny

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## The Jewish Press and the Holocaust, 1939–1945

This book presents the results of comprehensive research into the world's Jewish press during World War II and explores its stance in the face of annihilation of the Jewish people by the Nazi regime in Europe. The research is based on the major Jewish newspapers that were published in four countries – Palestine, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union – and in three languages: Hebrew, Yiddish, and English. The Jewish press frequently described the situation of the Jewish people in occupied countries. It urged the Jewish leaders and institutions to act in rescue of their brethren. It protested vigorously against the refusal of the democratic leadership to recognize that the Jewish plight was unique because of the Nazi intention to annihilate Jews as a people. Yosef Gorny argues that the Jewish press was the persistent open national voice fighting on behalf of the Jewish people suffering and perishing under Nazi occupation.

Yosef Gorny is professor emeritus of Jewish history at Tel Aviv University, where he served since 1970. His main fields of interest and research are the history of Zionism; the building of the Jewish national entity in Eretz-Israel (Palestine); the Jewish–Arab conflict; the relations between the State of Israel and the Jewish Diaspora in the United States and in Europe; the Zionist labor movement in Palestine and the anti-Zionist labor movement in Eastern Europe. His books include *Zionism and the Arabs, 1882–1948: A Study of Ideology*; *The State of Israel in Jewish Public Thought: The Quest for Collective Identity*; *Converging Alternatives: The Bund and the Zionist Labor Movement, 1897–1985*; and *Between Auschwitz and Jerusalem*. He has been a visiting professor at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York University, Illinois State University at Urbana, and the University of Chicago.

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# The Jewish Press and the Holocaust, 1939–1945

*Palestine, Britain, the United States,  
and the Soviet Union*

YOSEF GORNY

*Tel Aviv University*

*Translated by* NAFTALI GREENWOOD



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*To Geulah – my partner in life and work*

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## Preface

This study concerns itself with the way the Jewish press in the free world reported and understood the plight of the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe.

As I wound up my research, it occurred to me that my investigation began not in libraries in Israel, New York, and London, but much earlier: when the Soviet authorities exiled my family – to its good fortune – to the fringes of Siberia, whence we migrated to Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia.

In the place where we lived in Kyrgyzstan, there was a large sugar factory where most of the refugees who had gathered there worked. On the bulletin board affixed to the factory gate, the official state newspaper, *Izvestia*, was posted every day. Almost every day on my way home from school, I passed this location to read the headlines that described how the war was progressing. Thus, I became something of a commentator on military affairs, interpreting the battles on the various fronts for my Russian, Polish, and Jewish classmates. As I did my research for this book, I found a similarity between the Russian press from my childhood and the Jewish one that I investigated. It had to do with the blaring headlines that these newspapers regularly devoted to the demarches of the war on the Soviet front: The headlines were almost the same in form. In contrast, the main American and British newspapers that I perused for comparison purposes – *The New York Times*, *The Times of London*, and so forth – invested such emphasis only in special developments on the war front.

The memory of it gave me a “split personality.” I became, on the one hand, a scholar who examines the matter anachronistically and in a broad global context, and on the other hand, a person who had been there, in real time, as a boy who had an adult and very mordant social awareness that surmounted his years.

Thus, the sense of personal involvement in this study stayed with me from beginning to end. For example, I found an item in *The Jewish Chronicle* from a Polish underground newspaper that reported the impressions of a traveler who, on his way from his hometown to Warsaw, passed through my place of birth, Wyszaków, and saw thousands of Jews being led along by German

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soldiers. Today we know that they were being marched to their death. My parents and I might have been among them had it not been for a stroke of good luck: A firebomb thrown from a German aircraft passing over our town burned our home to the ground. As a result, we were forced to flee to Warsaw, and after that city was occupied, as stated, we made our way to Lwów, which was controlled by a Communist regime. From Lwów, fortunately, the Soviet authorities banished us to the edge of Siberia – thanks to which we survived.

Thus I, the researcher, was one of those whom the Jewish press recounted, although a luckier one than most of the others. It was my lot to be different from colleagues who researched that period, whether they had experienced it personally as young people or children or whether they had had no personal experiential connection with it because they were too young at the time. What made me special was where I stood relative to the inferno: concurrently inside and out.

I must admit that as I immersed myself in the research and progressed toward its conclusion, I was repeatedly perturbed by the question of whether my subjective memories were not interfering with my efforts as a researcher to assess the past as objectively as possible by observing the arena of events from afar. This question, however, also confronted me from another perspective: Do my personal recollections not give me an *ab initio* advantage that allows me to understand better what people felt in those years? Here I refer in particular to the main concept in this study: the awareness of the Jewish collective powerlessness, influenced by the personal powerlessness of a child who had stumbled into a foreign environment that, I admit, did not persecute him but mistreated him anyway because it did not want him around.

Here I cannot refrain from sharing a personal memory that occasionally accompanies me to this day. Back then I had a friend, a Russian boy. One day, after I read the newspaper headlines, I encountered him and cried joyfully: “Our army liberated that city!” He stared at me in amazement. “Yours?” he blurted. “It’s not yours, it’s ours!”

And I fell silent, knowing that he was right.

There is no doubt that my personal powerlessness also influenced my perception of the collective powerlessness of *klal Yisrael*. Furthermore, I think I would not overstate the case by adding the personal memory to the Jewish national fate. I hope that readers who take an interest in the topic will agree with me.

Writing a study is not a solo act; the researcher cannot but avail him/herself of others. Accordingly, I am indebted to everyone who helped me complete this book. The first to thank are the staff of the Palestine Hebrew Press Microfilm Department at Tel Aviv University, the YIVO (Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut) Archives in New York, the New York Public Library – Dorot Jewish Division, the Jewish Theological Seminary library, and the British Library in London. I am also thankful to Yitzhak Gershon, then the manager of Yad Tabenkin, the research and documentation center of the kibbutz movement, for his support.