

Lucy the Warrior

**From Left to Right:
Lucy S. Dawidowicz, the
New York Intellectuals, and the
Politics of Jewish History**

BY NANCY SINKOFF

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Reviewed by ROBERT D. KING

LUCY DAWIDOWICZ was a woman of many parts: a Holocaust historian of the first order, a social critic, a regular contributor to COMMENTARY, a political maverick, a gadfly, a promoter of Yiddish and Hebrew literature translation into English, a passionate Zionist in later life, a fan of the New York Mets—altogether a force of nature with a Bronx accent. The work for which she will be best remembered is her bestselling book *The War Against the Jews 1933–1945*, published in 1975. In it she argued that Hitler’s supreme obsession in World War II was to eradicate the Jews—eliminate them completely, exterminate them physically. True, he wanted *Lebensraum* for German colonization in Eastern Europe, of course he wanted the wheat of the Ukraine, yes, he wanted the oil of Romania, he wanted a lot. But above all, Dawidowicz argues in *The War Against the Jews*

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1933–1945, he wanted to kill every Jew his minions could get their paws on. She remains the leading representative of the “intentionalist” theory of Nazism—Hitler waged war intentionally to annihilate the Jews—in opposition to the “functionalist” theory: that Hitler wanted to gain a lot of things in going to war, and the Jews of Poland and Eastern Europe just happened to be in the way. But there was much more to Dawidowicz than the book that made her famous. Her life is now chronicled by Nancy Sinkoff in a superb biography, *From Left to Right: Lucy S. Dawidowicz, the New York Intellectuals, and the Politics of Jewish History*.

Sinkoff, who teaches at Rutgers and runs its Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, tells the story of Lucy Schildkret, born in the Bronx to Polish Jewish immigrants in 1915. Lucy’s parents spoke Yiddish at home. They were secular atheists, and she did not attend a synagogue service until she was in her early twenties (and then not in New York but in Vilna—today Vilnius, Lithuania). A red-diaper baby through and through, she even joined the Young Communist League in her teens—she was always rather proud of that, and proud, too, that the YCL had more or less expelled her for “deviation” (though she resigned before the party hacks could kick her out formally). Whatever the pull of Marxism in her early years, she had only bitter contempt for Communism thereafter.

Her first interest was literature, Keats’s and Wordsworth’s poetry

most of all, and she got a B.A. in English from Hunter College in 1936. By then, however, the clouds over European Jewry were ever more darkening—Hitler’s Nüremberg racial laws had just gone into effect—and her focus shifted to Jewish affairs and in particular to Yiddish language and literature and Jewish history. Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europe was her life’s passion, the home of her heart. In 1938, she went to Lithuania to study history and methodology at the Jewish Scientific Institute YIVO, now called YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, based since 1940 in Manhattan.

In Vilna she became acquainted with the poet Avrom Sutzkever and the novelist Chaim Grade on the first steps of their rise to the top of the Yiddish-language pantheon, both then only slightly older than she was. She managed to get out just weeks ahead of the outbreak of war, arriving safely back in America. That “guilt”—of getting out while some of her friends went into their destruction—never left her. Her means of escape was her American passport, and nothing made her happier to be an American than the leaving of Vilna in 1939. She wrote in a letter: “People like me live in a shadowy in-between world of pseudo-survivorhood. Driven by memories not rightfully mine, I now inhabited a shadow-world of murdered European Jews.”

In the postwar years, she returned to Europe to work for the JDC (Joint Distribution Committee) in aid of the Jews who had survived the butchery and were living in Displaced Persons camps. This was very hard for her, and she hated every minute she was forced to spend on German soil working with Germans indifferent to her pain. She frequently referred to Germany as “Amalek,” the biblical scourge of the Hebrews. Later, she

tried to avoid stopping in Germany on her flights to Israel and went back only once, to Berlin in 1985, to attend a conference of the Leo Baeck Institute, of which she was a board member.

It is heartrending to read of her work with the DP survivors. Sinkoff is especially good on this period and on Dawidowicz's central involvement in rescuing and reclaiming Yiddish and Hebrew books, manuscripts, and other documents for retrieval to YIVO and safety—the written documentation and library treasures that had been thrown this way and that by the Nazis, as often as not ending up as fire-starter for the hearth.

If it had not been for Dawidowicz's tenacity in battling and outwitting platoons of bureaucracy—German, American, Soviet, and Jewish—the YIVO collections would be much the poorer today. She grew a thick skin for overcoming obstacles and rebukes, good training for later battles as she moved from left to right politically. She had become a very tough cookie indeed, all “five foot nothing” of her, as she liked to say about herself.

In 1948 she married a Polish survivor, Szymon Dawidowicz, whom she had met in 1942. He had lost his first family, including a daughter in the flames of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943. This daughter, Tobtsche, was later honored with a medal of honor as a heroine of the resistance, by the Polish government. Szymon became a research bibliographer at YIVO. As Sinkoff shows, there is little written testimony of their marriage (apart from a few touching lines in love letters from her), but it appears to have been a good one for them both, and she put aside everything to nurse him during the last painful months of his life.

Somewhere along the line she acquired an appetite for controversy. Early in the 1950s she caused

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a stir when she defended the guilty verdict and death sentences of the atomic spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. One must have lived through the Fifties to understand how much intellectual strength and contrariness it took for a New York Jew to write “The Rosenberg Case: ‘Hate-America’ Weapon,” in *The New Leader* (1951) and “‘Anti-Semitism’ and the Rosenberg Case: The Latest Communist Propaganda Trap,” in COMMENTARY’s July 1952 issue.

Dawidowicz had gone to work for the American Jewish Committee in 1949, a year or two after the Cold War between Soviet Russia and the West began, and would stay there for two decades. Her main task seems to have been preparing lengthy memoranda on Jewish-related topics of the day: the Jewish response to Communism, being Jewish in America, anti-Semitism, Jewish-black relations, Israel, Diaspora, assimilation. And then the

books started coming, beginning with *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* in 1967 and concluding with the posthumous *What Is the Use of Jewish History?* in 1992. In 1969, Dawidowicz was hired away from the American Jewish Committee by Yeshiva University. She became a full professor in 1974 and held first the Paul and Leah Lewis Chair in Holocaust Studies and subsequently the Eli and Diana Zborowski Chair in Interdisciplinary Holocaust Studies. But the popularity of Holocaust Studies was suspect to her: She mistrusted all “trends.” On more than one occasion, I heard her say sarcastically, “There is no business like *shoah*-business.”

But it was *The War Against the Jews* that made Dawidowicz's name. Sinkoff recounts the disagreements that whirled around the book. The Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg, with whom Dawidowicz initially had been friendly, attacked it viciously, saying that it builds “largely on secondary sources and convey[s] nothing whatever that could be called new.” But the differences between Hilberg and Dawidowicz went deeper than academic kerfuffle. The true issue was the role and nature of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust. Dawidowicz defended Jewish leaders in the ghettos who had tried to mitigate the approaching disaster. Hilberg, and even more Hannah Arendt in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), had excoriated these men as traitors to their people. Dawidowicz despised Arendt even more than she did Hilberg, and that is saying a lot. Her main reproach of Arendt was that she did not possess *ahavas yisroel* (love of the Jews).

Sinkoff situates the argument here in the context of the 1960s, with its distrust of the “Establishment,” of the social upheavals provoked by the Vietnam War and

the fraught pleasures of resistance. Men such as Adam Czerniaków, head of the Warsaw *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) and Chaim Rumkowski, head of the Lodz *Judenrat*, became detested Establishment figures, weak, conniving, abetting their murderers. Lucy saw them rather as flawed, all-too-human men trying to do their best for their people during a horror in which Nazis were no longer playing by the rules of the game.

Dawidowicz became one of the first of the “neoconservatives,” former liberals and socialists who had turned to the right, having been “mugged by reality,” as Irving Kristol put it. Sinkoff devotes several chapters to this move from left to right. She writes:

When Dawidowicz rejected the liberal tilt of American Jewish politics in the 1970s, she did so from within a tradition of Jewish conservatism deeply informed by her experiences in Europe, her lifelong involvement with Yiddish culture, and her commitment to Jewish cultural autonomy. Her life and work challenge the myth of the Jewish liberal “tradition,” whose adherents believe that political liberalism is synonymous with Jewishness and rejection of it a kind of heresy.

These chapters are essential reading for anyone trying to grasp what has moved many Jewish intellectuals (and others) from the liberal left to the right. In 1984, with President Reagan up for reelection, Lucy was trying to gather support for a “Jews for Reagan” committee. She called me up to ask if I would help by serving on one of the committees she envisioned. I said I couldn’t, pointing out—had

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she forgotten?—that I wasn’t a Jew. She said, “That doesn’t matter.” But it did, and she reconsidered.

The Germans have a saying: *Sie nimmt kein Blatt vor den Mund*—literally “she doesn’t cover her mouth with a leaf,” or, to translate more freely, “she speaks her mind and to hell with the consequences.” Dawidowicz concluded a 92nd Street Y lecture with a bluntness all her own: “I had been a lifelong Democrat, but the upheavals in the Democratic Party in the 1960s led me to move in a different direction. I am not a Republican but an independent neoconservative, and if that makes me Attila the Hun, so be it.” If she disliked the Democratic Party in the 1960s, what would she think of today’s Democratic Party, which can’t bring itself to expel the open anti-Semites gathering under its umbrella?

Lucy never covered her mouth with any kind of leaf, whether you were Jewish, Gentile, or anything else. I once showed her the outline for an essay I had written on the origins of the Yiddish language. She read it as I sat watching with barely concealed terror trying to read her facial expressions. And then she said, “I don’t like this; don’t try to publish it.” I thought, but didn’t say, “Yes, ma’am.”

Lucy could easily have succumbed to depression, lassitude, or even worse. She had lost her people, her friends, in the Holocaust. She might have followed the sad path of Iris Chang, who could not escape the long shadows of the brutal treatment of the Chinese by the Japanese army that she had chronicled so eloquently in *The Rape of Nanking*. It extracted a great toll: Chang took her own life. Lucy funneled her unearned guilt and hatred of the Germans into constructive channels: writing history, advocacy, preservation.

It is customary in a book review, especially a positive book review, to ferret out something that one does not like and expand on it. Normally I would obey this code, but it isn’t easy because I honestly liked everything about Nancy Sinkoff’s biography. It is well-written and informative about an important person and her growth and development and place in Jewish letters. It brings attention to a neglected and fascinating New York intellectual who went from left to right and stayed there, never seeing the need to apologize for her move. It has interesting new archival material and photographs. It has interesting letter exchanges with notable figures, among them Albert Einstein, Simon Wiesenthal, and Noam Chomsky. What’s not to like? 📖➡️