

BOOKSHELF

‘From Left to Right’ Review: Singed but Not Consumed

In 1939, the young Lucy S. Dawidowicz narrowly escaped the fires of the Holocaust. She survived to become the mother of modern Jewish studies in America.

By Benjamin Balint

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No historian better grasped—or more fearlessly embodied—the close connections between the Holocaust and the postwar politics of American Jews than Lucy S. Dawidowicz. In a nuanced biography, Nancy Sinkoff of Rutgers University traces Dawidowicz’s controversial political journey from left to right and describes how her love of an almost extinguished Yiddish culture “formed the deepest wellspring of her Jewish identity.”

Born in the Bronx, N.Y., in 1915, Lucy Schildkret grew up as a red-diaper baby in a secular socialist home but found her calling during two formative experiences in Europe. In the summer of 1938, after graduating from Hunter College, the 23-year-old sailed to Vilna (then Polish Wilno and today Lithuanian Vilnius). As she recalled in her memoir, “From That Place and Time” (1989), she felt drawn to the city once known as the Jerusalem of Lithuania. There she could “search for continuities of Jewish history, the connections between my world and the one my parents left behind.” Armed with a fellowship at the Yiddish Scientific Institute (known as YIVO, its Yiddish acronym), the precocious young woman discussed war and peace with the Yiddish writers Abraham Sutzkever and Chaim Grade and the linguist Max Weinreich, even as she sensed that their world represented, as she put it, “a feverish flowering in the shadow of death.”



Lucy Schildkret at the YIVO library in 1938.

PHOTO: WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

By Nancy Sinkoff

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Days before the outbreak of war in September 1939, Dawidowicz fled. Her escape took her through Berlin, where she watched, as she later wrote, “an endless sea of soldiers and Nazi flags, with the equipage of war—cavalry, tanks, cannons—rising like heavy swells above the human tide.” “Singed but not consumed by the fires of the Holocaust,” Ms. Sinkoff writes, she returned to New York with a conviction that Jewish life, however beset by catastrophe, carries the seeds of its survival. During the war, she met a personification of sufficiency and survival in her future husband, Szymon Dawidowicz, a refugee from Warsaw whose daughter had been murdered in that city’s ghetto uprising.

For 15 months in 1946 and 1947, Dawidowicz returned to Europe to work with survivors in displaced-persons camps in postwar Germany, thrusting her onto the front lines of postwar cultural restoration. At the Offenbach Archival Depot, near Frankfurt, a repository of millions of books pillaged at the direction of the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, she examined more than 160,000 Yiddish and Hebrew volumes. She also salvaged the YIVO library (an incomparable collection of rare books, communal records and correspondence, among much else) and prepared it for shipment to New York. “When I came upon those YIVO books,” she said, “I had a feeling akin to holiness, that I was touching something sacred.” In Munich, she helped launch a Yiddish-language newspaper printed on the same press that had once been used to print the *Völkischer Beobachter*, an organ of the Nazi Party. Finally, she was dispatched

to Hamburg to aid the 4,500 refugees disembarking from the SS Exodus, known as the Exodus 1947, a ship that the British had violently turned away in July 1947 from the shores of Palestine.

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On returning once more to New York, Dawidowicz served as a researcher for the Pulitzer Prize-winning author John Hersey, then writing a fictional account of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, “The Wall” (1950), and for the American Jewish Committee, where she worked through the 1950s and 1960s. There she wrote papers on Soviet anti-Semitism (one of which earned her a letter of thanks from FBI director J. Edgar Hoover), honed her polemical skills and met Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* magazine, to which she would contribute some 50 articles.

An anticommunist liberal Democrat until the 1960s, Dawidowicz recoiled from the New Left activists who denounced Israel’s self-defense against Arab armies bent on its annihilation in 1967, and she grew alarmed by emerging anti-Semitism among those she deemed “otherwise responsible activists and leaders in the civil rights movement.” As she came to mistrust old affinities and alliances, Ms. Sinkoff writes, Dawidowicz “rejected the enshrinement of liberalism as an essential characteristic of being Jewish much earlier than the New York intellectuals did.” In certain ways, Ms. Sinkoff proposes, “the men who would later become prominent neoconservatives were just catching up with her.”

All the while, Dawidowicz had been negotiating a rapprochement with religious tradition. Secularists, she wrote, “have lived off the capital of traditional Judaism and have by now exhausted their patrimony.” At the suggestion of the theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, Dawidowicz gathered an anthology of first-person memoirs that gave voice to the vitality and variety of Jewish life in Eastern Europe from the late 18th century to the eve of cataclysm. “The Golden Tradition” (1967) debunked the myth that this culture had been fixed in “Fiddler on the

Roof”-style piety and poverty. It also imbued American readers, Ms. Sinkoff remarks, “with a usable past through which they might create a Jewish future in a diaspora far removed from its East European Jewish heartland.”

In 1970, Yeshiva University appointed Dawidowicz to the first chair in America devoted to Holocaust studies. The position allowed her to write a magisterial history of the crime that, in her view, would be “forever lodged in history’s throat.” If “The Golden Tradition” represented the “before” of her coming-of-age sojourn in Vilna, the ground-breaking study that made her famous—“The War Against the Jews, 1933-1945,” published in 1975—represented the “after.”

Where others had interpreted the genocide of the Jews more as a by-product of the impersonal machinery of Germany’s war aims than a result of any special anti-Jewish animus, Dawidowicz understood what the Germans euphemistically called the “Final Solution” as an intentional part of Nazi racial ideology: an end in itself. “From the start,” she argued, “the Nazis assigned primacy of place, in doctrine and in action, to make hatred of the Jews, with all its tragic consequences, a cardinal feature of the state’s policy.” She insisted, too, on the Nazis’ unprecedented purposes in pursuit of that policy. “Since time immemorial,” Dawidowicz wrote, “human beings have killed one another for spoils, land, or power, but never before had one people denied another people the fundamental right to live.”

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PREVIEW

As Ms. Sinkoff notes, Dawidowicz’s books, informed by her unflinching attempts to comprehend the incomprehensible, “became central texts in shaping Holocaust consciousness among American Jews.” Their influence owed as much to style as to substance. Despite the nearness of the tragedy, Dawidowicz employed an urgent, unsentimental prose that joins objectivity with compassion. “Personal commitments do not distort,” she wrote, “but instead they enrich, historical writing.”

Yet Ms. Sinkoff also notes “the wide gulf” between the scholarly opprobrium and public approbation of her work. Because she lacked a doctorate, some professional historians dismissed her as an amateur. Her book “The Holocaust and the Historians” (1981), a blunt exposé of the distortions and omissions of historians in their treatment of the subject, earned her no welcomes in that guild. Nor did her vocal support for President Ronald Reagan. Contrasting her with Hannah Arendt, the German-born political philosopher who emigrated to

New York and enjoyed a career as a sought-after public intellectual, Ms. Sinkoff cites Dawidowicz's deficiencies of "academic pedigree" and "sexual allure." By the 1980s, Ms. Sinkoff concludes, Dawidowicz felt "intellectually abandoned, unrecognized, and alone."

Alert to her driving obligations to both the European past and American present, Lucy Dawidowicz once said she felt "somehow pulled between two poles, never quite at home in either, and above all not wishing to be." Thirty years after her death in 1990, Ms. Sinkoff's rewarding reappraisal, a model of biographical clarity, at last brings a formidable practitioner of the historian's craft home and gives her the attention commensurate with her irrefutable influence.

—Mr. Balint, a writer living in Jerusalem, is the author of "Running Commentary" and "Kafka's Last Trial."

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