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Warsaw as a Formative Space of a Jewish-Polish Identity. A Case Study Based on Zygmunt Turkow's Memoirs *Fragmentn fun mayn lebn*

Abstract

This article aims to sketch out the Jewish-Polish identity of a prominent Jewish actor and director, Zygmunt Turkow (1896–1970). A summary of the nature of Jewish identity is followed by a study of his memoirs *Fragmentn fun mayn lebn* [*Fragments of My Life*] (1951) from the period of 1896–1916. Drawing on Cultural Literacy (Segal 2014), the study focuses on the methods and thoughts of Roland Barthes ([1967] 1985) on urban space. The main section of this paper includes an overview of the places and institutions in Warsaw that Turkow mentioned in his memoirs. All the addresses are ascribed to four social categories (home and friends, religion, education, and freetime) and then discussed. The final section contains research conclusions on Turkow's selfhood, his sense of Jewish and Polish identity, and his attachment to Jewish or Polish culture, as well as the defining characteristics of his Polish-Jewish/Jewish-Polish self-identity. This article aims to explain the peculiar circumstances that contribute to the complexity of determining and investigating what can be considered as Jewish identity.

Keywords: Jewish identity, Polish identity, identity, Zygmunt Turkow, memoirs, *Fragmentn fun mayn lebn*, urban space

Introduction

When one reflects on Jewish identity, one has a more or less clear idea about its distinguishing features. However, when one starts to ponder deeply what exactly Polish, French, American, or Moroccan Jews had in common before the proclamation of the State of Israel, the traces are not so evident. They seem to be specific and somehow common at the same time. This ambiguity results from the diasporic character of the Jewish culture. To begin with, there is no such thing as *Jewish identity*; there are only diaspora-specific *Jewish identities*. They should be explored regarding their local context and contact with non-Jewish communities. This interaction always implies a confrontation of the differences with the non-Jewish dias-

pora neighbours. In extreme cases, for the Jews, this may result in assimilation to the non-Jewish culture or complete isolation from a non-Jewish society (Rosman [2007] 2011: 166–171). However, on this scale of the binary/opposite outcomes of the contact, there is a whole range of possible attitudes to the non-Jewish and own Jewish cultures, which result in many Jewish identities. Therefore, to collect the whole image of the patchwork of the Jewish characteristics covered by one umbrella term *Jewish identity*, one must take special care to the study of local individualities.

It transpires that interdisciplinary approaches are best suited to account for the complexity of determining Jewish identity. Therefore, researchers have recently employed socio-historical methods to examine Jewish memoirs, such as Kijek in *Dzieci modernizmu* (2017), as well as art history methodology, such as Matthew Baigell in *Jewish Identity in American Art. A Golden Age since the 1970s* (2020) or Piotr Ślōdkowski in *Modernizm żydowsko-polski. Henryk Streng/Marek Włodarski a historia sztuki* (2019) to analyse Jewish identities through visual art. There are also attempts to present them from the perspective of widely understood (cultural) contacts employing socio-urban and anthropological approaches, as in *Fragile Spaces* by Steven E. Aschheim (2018) or in *Jewish New York. The Remarkable Story of a City and a People* edited by Debora Dash Moore (2017).

Similarly, the paper aims to determine the Jewish-Polish self-identity of Zygmunt Turkow concerning the local diasporic experience of Jews in Warsaw. In this study, Cultural Literacy methods and Roland Barthes' view on urban space are applied to analyse his memoirs *Fragmentn fun mayn lebn* [*Fragments of my life*] (1951).

Born in Warsaw in 1896, Zygmunt Turkow was an actor and a director. After graduating from the private drama school of Helena Hryniewiecka, he worked in Polish and Jewish theatres. He also directed and appeared in Jewish film productions between the two world wars. In 1924 he established the avant-garde Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater—Varshaver Yidisher Kunst-teater—where he staged Jewish and non-Jewish plays in Yiddish. After the outbreak of the second world war, he escaped to Brazil. In 1952, he moved to Israel, where he founded ZUTA Theatre. He died in Tel Aviv in 1970 (Kagan 1986: 281; Zilbertsvayg 1934: 686). After the second world war, he published three parts of the memoirs—*Fragmentn fun mayn lebn* (1951), *Teater-zikhroynes fun a shturemisher tsayt* [*Theatre-memories from the Tempestuous Times*] (1956), *Di ibergerisene tkufe* [*The Broken Era*] (1961). In the first one, Turkow wrote about his early childhood until his graduation from theatre school in 1916. He described events, peoples and places in Warsaw that played a vital role in his upbringing and formation as a man and as an artist.

This study aims to determine the role of the city in the development of his selfhood. Namely, it seeks to establish whether he was more attached to the Jewish or non-Jewish districts of Warsaw, whether he was in contact with the Jewish community, and, if not, what the places of contact with non-Jews were. Other essential issues concern his membership in the local Jewish or non-Jewish cultural institutions or institutions he visited in general. By analysing those elements, this study attempts to examine the distinguishing features of his sense of Jewish and Polish identity.

Thus, in this article, identity is defined as a set of properties depicting essential features of a social entity. It is also considered to be a life-long multi-layered process of acceptance, rejection, and negotiation of given features, rather than a result of a process of acquiring them (Boksański 2005: 16, 35; Jawłowska 2001: 53–54; Rosenthal 1197: 2–3). For an analysis of the elements that contributed to the process of formation of Turkow's Jewish-Polish identity in his childhood, the notions of *textuality* and *historicity* from Cultural Literacy are employed. According to the first one, “any cultural object can be understood

as an artefact,” and thus, one may analyse “any social entity, from a law to a bodily gesture,” while “the historicity of things relates to their formation as ‘little narratives,’ [and] (...) to the synchronous historical context of a socio-cultural phenomenon.” (Segal 2014: 5–6) Therefore, Turkow’s memoirs are treated as an artefact of identity formation processes in a given time through an urban narrative.

Turkow starts an account of his memoirs from the visit to Warsaw in 1948. He took part in the Ghetto Uprising commemoration. He was sent there as a member of a commission whose aim was to report on the Jewish life in Warsaw. Wandering through the ruins, he recalls what a given neighbourhood looked like, and he starts to spin the story about places of great significance to his experience. The style in which the memories are evoked accords with the Barthes’ ideas. In his *Semiology and the urban*, city is treated as a discourse—the city speaks to its inhabitants, and inhabitants speak to the city. This conversation may be expressed by a walk or just glancing at the buildings (Barthes [1967] 1985: 265). In this perspective, it can be assumed that by providing the city with a narration, one obtains a sense of narrativity of one’s own life by which her/his identity is formed.

Therefore, based on Turkow’s memoirs, the addresses of given buildings and institutions that took part in the mutual discourse Warsaw-Zygmunt Turkow/Zygmunt Turkow-Warsaw were distinguished. Those elements were then assigned to the four social categories—home and friends, religion, education, and freetime. Later those categories were analysed from the perspective of the role they played in the process of forging his Jewish-Polish/Polish-Jewish identity in 1896–1916.

1. Home and Friends

As a child, Zygmunt Turkow lived at Dzika 7 Street, Miła 38, Przejazd 38, and Dzika 44 Street. He was attached to the northern part of Warsaw, considered a Jewish district (Chomątowska 2016: 30–44). Although he depicted Dzika street as “rather unpleasant” (Turkow 1951: 143), this was the most influential neighbourhood for him. He got acquainted with secular holidays, marches of the working class under the red banner, and left-wing slogans cried out during the manifestations. However, he did not belong to that world, and he could only watch from the windows of his big, richly furnished apartment how that life passed by. Because the apartment was spacious, Zygmunt’s parents invited family and friends for Shabbat dinners during which people talked about politics, business and family issues, as well as new stage productions in the Polish and Jewish theatres. Zygmunt was asked to restage some scenes from those plays, and his cousin recited Mickiewicz’s or Słowacki’s poems (Turkow 1951: 52).

Due to the fact that the neighbourhood in which Turkow lived in his early childhood was displeasing, he made friends only with “better kids” (sic!) (Turkow 1951: 143). His father allowed him to have closer bonds with Jankowiak and Shloyme (Samuel) Mendelson¹. The first one was a student of Turkow’s father. He was the one who explained to Zygmunt what he saw on the streets during the protests. He introduced Zygmunt to politics, strikes, and the world without religion (*ibidem*). Mendelson, on the other hand, familiarised him with a world of the Jewish parties and movements. The close bond they had was an

¹ Shloyme Mendelson (1886–1948)—he met Turkow at Krinski’s school. He became a teacher and a member of the Folkist Party and then Bund. He formed Tsisho (Central Jewish School Organization) and organised courses for the teachers during which he gave lectures on methods for teaching Yiddish.

outcome of their fascination for the theatre and art. It was Mendelson who took Turkow to a drama club (Turkow 1951: 200).

Turkow had only one friend from his neighbourhood—Shloyme Mendrzerzecki. He came from a religious Chassidic family. Although Mendrzerzecki was “not from (...) [Turkow’s family] circles”, they became friends due to their love for the theatre (Turkow 1951: 144, 146). They even organised a yard theatre where they staged *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo (Turkow 1951: 146).

2. Religion

It seems that for Turkow religion was not a fundamental element constituting his Jewish identity. He declared himself an atheist who joined family religious celebrations not to hurt the father (Turkow 1951: 188–189). He only mentioned two Synagogues. The first one was situated at Dzika 7 Street, where his father took him as a small child. Also, he had his Bar Mitzvah there during which he had to present a special speech in Hebrew (Turkow 1951: 94). The synagogue which all of the Jewish students attended during the public holidays was situated at Tłomackie 13. This is where they sang *God Save the Tsar!* in Russian and listened to “boring preaches” of a rabbi in Polish (Turkow 1951: 27).

3. Education

Even though Zygmunt Turkow was not very keen on religious issues, his father wanted him to receive Jewish religious education. Thus, a few times a week, a rabbi came to their home at Dzika 7 and Przejazd 38 to teach him Hebrew and Tanakh. Until Bar Mitzvah, Turkow went to a kheder² (Turkow 1951: 57). It is worth mentioning that on the occasion of Bar Mitzvah, Mendelson gave him a Mendele Moykher Sforim³ book, which along with the Tanakh edition for children, was the only Yiddish book they had at home (Turkow 1951: 198).

In 1905 Turkow started attending The Muravlov’s School of Commerce at Rymarska 12 Street. He depicts it as a place of horror where students were taught debasing servility to the Tsar (Turkow 1951: 54). He was expelled from that school because of his disobedience. In 1908, Turkow’s father enrolled him in a newly established Magnus Kryński’s⁴ private school. According to Turkow, the school was situated on the second floor of Pasaż Simonsa at the corner of Długa, Bielańska, and Nalewki Street. Contrary to Muravlov’s school, the atmosphere of freedom of expression and critical thinking prevailed there (Turkow 1951: 164–166). The headmaster organised meetings with Jewish writers, i.a. Mendele Moykher Sforim,

2 A Jewish school of a religious character.

3 Or rather Sholem Yakov Abramowitz (1835–1917), a Jewish author considered a founder of modern Yiddish literature.

4 Magnus Kryński (1863–1916)—a Jewish journalist and teacher. He was a founder and editor of the first Jewish magazine dedicated to the literary and cultural affairs of “Roman Tsaytung.” He was also an author of the Hebrew primer *Ha-Dibur ha-Ivri*.

Isaac Leib Peretz⁵, Nahum Sokolow⁶, and Sholem Asch⁷. Jewish art exhibitions and Jewish plays were hosted at the school. Also, an impressive collection of books in Polish, Russian, Hebrew was situated there, and to the surprise of Turkow, in Yiddish too. The language of instruction was Polish (he learned there also Hebrew and German.) Moreover, a Polish-language teacher who inspired in Turkow a “love to Poland and Polish literature,” was vividly remembered by him (Turkow 1951: 179). In general, Kryński’s school instilled into him the pride of being Jewish, having his “own language, national art and unique [art] style” (Turkow 1951: 166–168, 179).

Undoubtedly this school helped Turkow in choosing his artistic career. Before applying to the Warsaw theatre schools, he had joined the ha-Zamir drama club at Kupiecka 12 Street. For him, it was one of the formative experiences because he felt that he contributed to the development of the Jewish theatre. However, he regretted playing in Hebrew, not in Yiddish (Turkow 1951: 33). In 1914 he had an entrance examination for the theatre school, during which he recited *Smutno mi, Boże* by Juliusz Słowacki. He was accepted in the private drama school of Hryniewiecka (Turkow 1951: 242), where he completed his education. On the day of his final exam, after which he gained the diploma, Hryniewiecka advised him to change his name from Salomon (Shloyme) to Zygmunt, as he wanted to work in Polish theatres. If he used his Jewish name (Salomon), he could be confronted with the anti-Semitism which was a rather common attitude by that time among the Polish theatre artists (Turkow 1951: 292–293; Steinlauf 1987: 143–144; Wilski 1978: 234).

4. Freetime

It seems that Turkow’s profound love for the theatre was fostered in his early childhood. Every Shabbat afternoon, his father took him to the National Theatre (Teatr Narodowy) at the Krasiński Square, Teatr Rozmaitości at Wierzbowa 5, or to the theatre in the Łazienki Garden, where the work of Polish artists fascinated him. He even admitted that “Teatr Rozmaitości was the first school of drama” for him and “influenced [his] artistic taste” (Turkow 1951: 261; Król-Kaczorowska 1986: 46–47, 95–97). The only Jewish plays he saw in Warsaw were staged by the wandering troupes in Elizeum Theatre at Karowa 18 and Kaminski Theatre at Oboźna 1/3 (Turkow 1951: 128; Turkow-Grudberg 1968: 93–94). In his free time, Turkow also went to the cinema at Marszałkowska 118 Street. Since it was owned by his school friend’s father, Mordechai Towbin, Turkow had free entrances and watched films almost every afternoon (Turkow 1951: 100; Lubelski 2009: 33). He also spent time in Kryński’s school library, and along with his younger brother, Jonas (1898–1987), translated Polish and Russian plays and poems into Yiddish (Turkow 1951: 40, 201, 232, 244).

5 Isaac Leib Peretz (1852–1915)—considered along with Mendele Mokher Seforim and Sholem Aleichem, one of the three classical Yiddish writers. He was the author of short stories, novels, and dramas. He took an active role in attempts to professionalise the Yiddish theatre.

6 Nahum Sokolow (1859–1936)—a Jewish writer and translator. He was a leader of the Zionist Movement and a propagator of a Hebrew language press.

7 Sholem Asch (1880–1957)—a Jewish prose-writer and dramatist.

Conclusions

As it can be observed, Turkow lived in the Jewish district of Warsaw, but he was not attached to it. He was not involved in local events, and he did not have strong bonds with his neighbours. The most influential parts of the city that contributed to his Jewish-Polish identity were Kryński's school at the border of the Jewish and non-Jewish neighbourhood (Leociak 2017: 19–20, 249), as well as Polish theatres located in the central and the southern parts of Warsaw. The only Jewish institutions he was a member of were Synagogues and the drama club. The spaces of Turkow's contact with non-Jewish citizens of Warsaw were at the Muravlov's school and Polish theatres. The first one was depicted as a place of oppression, whereas the second one as a formative place of his artistic taste. However, the information about his name change points that in his future career Polish theatres might be places of oppression, too.

It seems that for Turkow the most influential models in his childhood were his father and Kryński. The first one instilled in him the love for the theatre, chose friends from the upper-class families and sent him to the private school with a rather modern approach to education. Kryński awakened in Turkow a sense of belonging to an ethnonational community. It seems in that time, and by the influence of Kryński's school, Turkow chose Yiddish as one of the Jewish languages in which he wanted to express his Jewish identity. Seemingly, he has stronger and tighter bonds with the Polish language and culture, rather than with Russian, due to his school teachers' influence, including the unpleasant experiences at Muravlov's school. However, the efforts of Turkow's father towards his son's religious upbringing failed. Comparing the robust depictions of his meetings with Jewish writers at school or theatre plays in the Polish theatres with only free passages of Turkow's memories concerning the Synagogue, Bar Mitzvah, and Shabbat dinner at home, one may assume that religion was not a central distinguishing feature of his Jewish identity.

On the basis of *Fragments fun mayn lebn*, one may state that Turkow was an exemplary upper-class Jew who lived in the Jewish district but was exposed to non-Jewish cultures. He moved away from the religious tradition in favour of arts, especially theatre. Indeed, both his *Jewishness* and *Polishness* were experienced and expressed through arts. Turkow was dedicated to contributing to a secular Yiddish culture by deriving elements from the local non-Jewish—especially Polish—culture, which he considered most proper. He did not regard Yiddish culture as of lower status, but he wanted to make it flourish by enriching it with some non-Jewish repertoire elements. It may be assumed that Zygmunt Turkow's identity is an example of a modern, secular Jewish intelligentsia with an inclination toward Yiddish culture. Thus, it is rather Jewish-Polish than Polish-Jewish identity.

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