

Eugene M. Avrutin, et al., eds., *Photographing the Jewish Nation: Pictures from S. An-sky's Ethnographic Expeditions*. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2009. 212 pp., 170 plates, \$39.95.

An-sky's Images: From Shtetl Past to National Future

On the cover of *Photographing the Jewish Nation*, two little girls in pinafore and braids, one touching the other's shoulder in sisterly companionship, stare out at the camera, their expressions both pensive and quizzical. Seen close-up, they announce—or are used to announce—the recent presentation of S. An-sky's famous ethnographic expeditions of 1912–14. The book brings together 170 hitherto unpublished pictures from the An-sky archive of the European University at St. Petersburg and, in its design and content, the book demonstrates An-sky's unique ethnographic goals. The cover image, for example, is a distinctive editorial choice. Approximately six and eight years old, these girls are unlike the ragged urchins, street toughs, and *kheder* boys we usually find in such photo collections. Those kids are included too—two boys in tatters, labeled “Poor children, Dubno” (pl. 85), repeat the comradely pose. The choice of girls for the cover upends gender expectations, however, and supplants the nostalgia such imagery often invokes. They take me by surprise, these two, though I see in them my mother and aunt at the same age, serious in their Russian school uniforms. All these girls are gone, of course, but the camera's close attention to them certifies their place within Jewish youth and a nation's future.

Beginning with *Tracing An-sky*, the exhibition mounted by Amsterdam's Joodshistorisch Museum in 1992, recent studies led by David Roskies and Gabriella Safran, and a collection of essays edited by Safran and Steve Zipperstein have considerably enriched the scholarship on An-sky's life and work.¹ But along with his writings, especially *The Dybbuk*, An-sky's great contribution to Jewish history and culture is the material collected on his famous ethnographic expeditions into the Jewish Pale of Settlement in 1912–15. The two are

not unrelated. While the play may be read as both a lament for and critique of a rapidly changing Jewish world, the materials collected on the expedition—songs, stories, superstitions, artifacts, interviews, and images—are a treasure trove of that world's social and cultural life. Though dispersed and incomplete, the photographic archive today has become the core of the expedition project.

Photographing the Jewish Nation groups the expedition pictures into thematic chapters, each partnered with an essay by Russian scholars, who are uniquely placed to trace the collection's history and the complexities of its retrieval. The book thus serves as its own form of exhibition and catalog.

The introduction by Eugene Avrutin and Harriet Murav explains the context of An-sky's expedition and its innovative ethnographic character.² Studies of Jewish communities in the Russian empire date as early as 1861.³ But rather than consider the *shtetl* Jews of the Pale as regional or exotic outsiders within the mainstream gentile culture, An-sky's expedition studied Jews from an insider's perspective. Born within the culture he documented, by the time An-sky developed the idea of the expedition, he had moved from rebellious *maskil*, to socialist, writer, and Jewish nationalist.⁴ “Many years of my life,” he declared in a well-known 1910 address, “passed on this frontier, on the border between both [Jewish and gentile] worlds.”⁵

Retrieving the world he had once abandoned, An-sky sought to preserve the past as Jewish heritage, envisioning it as a vital foundation for a Jewish future. In 1914 he celebrated the status of Jewish folklore when he wrote: “The Oral Tradition, consisting of all manner of folklore . . . is, like the Bible, the product of the Jewish spirit; it reflects . . . the same loftiness and depth of Jewish thought.”⁶ Rather than simply rescue the objects and record the habits of a culture about

¹ David G. Roskies, “Introduction,” in S. An-sky, *The Dybbuk and Other Writings*, trans. Golda Werman, ed. David G. Roskies, (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), xi–xxxvi; Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein eds., *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006); Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-sky* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2010).

² Eugene M. Avrutin and Harriet Murav, “Introduction,” in *Photographing the Jewish Nation* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2009), 4–5.

³ On early Jewish ethnographies, Avrutin and Murav, “Introduction,” 23, n. 24.

⁴ For details of An-sky's biography and professional moves, see Gabriella Safran's recent study (n. 1 above), and David G. Roskies, “S. Ansky and the Paradigm of Return,” in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁵ Quoted in Lucy S. Davidowicz, *The Golden Tradition; Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1989), 305.

⁶ Quoted more fully in Roskies, “Introduction,” xxiv.

to disappear—the method of anthropology’s “salvage paradigm,” An-sky’s project infused ethnography with a nationalistic dimension. Indeed, An-sky’s activities after his return to Russia in 1905 were marked by a visionary commitment to the culture of Yiddish-speaking Jews. His zeal was fully in line with his generation’s experience of upheavals in Jewish life: the intellectual energies of the Haskalah, the force of modern education and industrial labor, the rise of revolutionary movements and anti-Jewish violence, the stirring of national Zionist ideals. Rather than a political vision of statehood, An-sky’s focus was a social and cultural self-consciousness and re-fashioning. He was, as anthropologist Jack Kugelmass suggests, “the father of Jewish Ethnography” and the information gleaned from his questionnaire—over two thousand questions on all phases of Jewish life—as well as songs, tales, material objects, and the images his team collected in the Jewish towns and villages of western Russia and Ukraine go well beyond a salvaged and static folklore.⁷

Solomon Iudovin (1892–54), An-sky’s young nephew, served as the expedition photographer, tasked with recording individuals, families, social types, and sites. While a relatively new practice at the time, ethnographic photography already had sub-categories: portraits designating social positions and physiognomies, costume, objects, and building structures. Iudovin’s pictures encompass these categories, but as Alexander Ivanov points out in his essay “From Ethnography to Art,” the staging, design, and printing of the images enrich their documentary data. He notes, for example, how the lighting in the formal portrait of a “Rabbi’s family, Ostrog” (pl. 10) renders the mother and girls dominant in contrast to the father and sons, who are almost lost in shadow. With the youngest boy and girl as central pivots (though, in my view, Ivanov overstates the figure of the boy), the viewer must glance from side to side to assemble the group as a family, and peer deeply to find its patriarch. The pictorial effect gives suggestive attention to children, lighting a Jewish future and dimming the past.

The wedding ceremony beside the synagogue in Polonnoe, photographed from above, is so packed with celebrants that one can hardly make out the *khupe*, much less the bride and groom. Even more striking is

the seeming disorder of the crowd—men and women intermingle, unlike their separation in the synagogue, or indeed, at almost every ceremonial occasion. The sheer lack of hierarchy, the hubbub of the throng underscores the sense of moment and ethnographic reality.

Ivanov also argues for the aesthetic character of the photographs, pointing to Iudovin’s training with Yehudah Pen, Chagall’s teacher, in Vitebsk, and to his use of these photographs, decades later, for his graphic imagery. The later works are mainly woodcut prints depicting *shtetl* types—artisans, old men, and streetchildren—and they served as illustrations for aptly named print series like “The Past” (1928). The woodcuts’ stark patterning consigns the photographs’ immediacy to a picturesque graphic tradition, mildly modern, but disappointingly far from the medium where Iudovin’s talents were most promising. Ivanov does not comment on this shift from photographer to graphic artist, and one wonders about the professional conditions that led the young man away from photography and into safer, artistic territory. But if the essay seems to side-step Iudovin’s place in Russia’s artistic context, Ivanov does suggest the importance of his pictures for Jewish culture, and their impact on the Jewish photographic collections in the 1920s and 30s by Alter Kacyzne and Roman Vishniac.⁸

The section on labor titled “Brothers and Sisters in Toil and Trouble: Jewish Workers and Artisans on the Eve of Revolution,” proclaims the expedition’s social agenda. Heroizing portraits of artisans, along with pictures of wise old age, are staples of ethnographic imagery and Jewish iconography in particular, and Valerii Dymshits further ennobles the practice by suggesting links to Rembrandt’s sympathetic portraits of Jews. The high-art reference seems needless, as the pictures clearly follow a genre paradigm—cobblers, rope-makers, carpenters—but with some difference, for not only are they iconic types, they are also shown in settings that disclose a fair amount of workaday detail. The shoemaker, for example, works at his cluttered table while shoe lasts litter the floor and a well-dressed customer, partially cut off by the frame, waits for his repair. When the same subject appears in one of Iudovin’s later woodcuts, the quotidian details

⁷ Jack Kugelmass, “The Father of Jewish Ethnography?” in *Worlds of An-sky*, 346–59.

⁸ I discuss the photography of Kacyzne and Vishniac in my book *Jewish Visual Culture and Modern Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

disappear, smoothed away by the graphic style, and in the process, the works lose the specificity that is the photograph's forte.

As a group, however, the photographic combinations point to changes in *shtetl* labor and trades. Images of the individual artisan interweave with men working in teams, women at factory tables producing cigarettes, workers almost lost in a weaving mill's forest of gears and beams. Together, their variety captures the "eve of revolution," a still vital moment of the Jewish past and a glimpse of its future.

A similar approach brings out An-sky's program in "The Jewish Nursery: Educating the Next Generation." Beginning with pictures of midwives, the selection avoids stereotypical signs of mothering (no *Yiddishe Mamas* here). "A Midwife and her 'grandchildren'" (pl. 60), shows a woman surrounded by a crowd of youngsters, from toddlers to twelve-year-olds, who in their varied expressions—demure, distracted, mischievous, wary—suggest a future community. The energy in this image contrasts with the static and conventionally posed family pictures, with girls on one side, boys on the other. School pictures also signal change. An-sky's two worlds—the Jewish world he renounced and the one he envisioned—appear in pictures of the *melamed* and *kheder* boys beside classes in the Talmud Torah schools that, Alexander Lvov's essay states, An-sky favored as modern sites of learning for a Jewish future. Despite the winsome sisters selected for the cover, the section also discloses a traditional gender divide. This may have been beyond An-sky's (or Iudovin's) notice, but modern scholars might take note. Apprenticeships are clearly gendered—boys learn modern flooring and girls learn basketry, but Jewish institutional education appears to focus on boys, playing at recess or in formal class ranks.

The section on "The Space of Jewish Tradition: Sacred and Profane Places" seems at first conventionally ethnographic, with its pictures of monuments and interiors. Imposing synagogues and a few rustic wood structures, decorated interiors with ornate *bimas*, arks, and chandeliers, testify not to a threatened culture, but rather to thriving religious communities. Indeed, anyone who today visits what remains of these structures—the imposing synagogue in Brody, the cathedral-like stone synagogue in Grodno, for

example—can only marvel at the scale, the solidity, and the presumed permanence of what had been. Alla Sokolova points out that the photographs do more than document these ritual spaces and monuments. The pictures take us into the courtyards and crannies of the *shtetl*, where dilapidated structures, and higgledy-piggledy additions or sheds declare their difference from the institutionalized order of yeshivas, burial societies, cemeteries, and gravestones. The synagogues or sumptuous rabbi's house loom large in the townscape or border a market square. Now, post-Shoah, their photographs offer viewers a haunting cultural memory, but as expedition documents, they stand as active centers of a people's spiritual wealth.

Concluding the volume, Valerii Dymshits gives a forceful account of the expedition's history and achievement, the collection's presentation in the Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society, and its museological success. It is also a story of dispiriting setbacks. After three field trips from 1912 to 1914, the project was cut short by the outbreak of World War I. In what must have seemed a terrible inversion of his expedition's purpose, An-sky travelled as a translator with the Russian military and wrote *The Destruction of Galicia*, an eye-witness account of antisemitic pogroms and slaughter on the Galician front.⁹ His record of the savagery can only have reinforced the urgency of the expedition's goals. Dymshits details An-sky's unflagging efforts, as the war continued, to house the collection in the Jewish Historical-Ethnographic Society. In 1914, a small display opened in the Society's headquarters, which Dymshits labels the "first Jewish Museum." For today's reader, the designation enlivens a lineage of Jewish museums worldwide. While Jewish-themed displays had already appeared in the nineteenth century, Dymshits underscores the broader scope of An-sky's collection. Along with finely wrought ritual objects was a so-called "second-tier Judaica"—broadsheets, sound-recordings, and, of course, photographs—which enriched the ethnographic national legacy.

Installation views hint at how An-sky organized the 1914 exhibition; they are a compelling visual record of early Jewish museology. Candlesticks, menorahs, and other objects ranked on shelves become ethnological commodities, if not quite loot or curiosities. As objects embodying a narrative, Dymshits writes, "An-sky was

⁹ The most recent English translation is S. An-sky, *The Enemy at his Pleasure*, trans. and ed. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002). Written in Russian, the first

publication appeared in Yiddish as *Khubrn Galitsye: Der yiddisher khubrn fun Poyln, Galitsye un Bokovine, fun togbukh 1914–17*.

collecting relics of national memory.”¹⁰ They were meant to speak as a cultural history, but also as the daily practice that presented a past Jewish culture to its future community.

The cultural ferment of the new Soviet Union put its own ambivalent stamp on the collection’s status and future. His legal status uncertain, An-sky fled to Vilna in 1918, and finally, in the face of continuing anti-Jewish violence, to Warsaw, where he died in 1920.¹¹ With his uncle’s departure, Solomon Iudovin left the Art Academy in Vitebsk, to take up the curatorship and custodial care of the collection. He remained in this post until 1929—an ominous year for progressive culture—as Stalinist repressions came to control the Soviet Union and its cultural sphere.

Framed by the excitement of social revolution, An-sky’s ethnographically based vision of Jewish renewal was an inspiring promise. The following years, Dymshits reports, saw the collection’s fragmentation, dispersal to various Soviet cities, and as a result, its

partial loss. Almost as peripatetic as An-sky’s own history, the vagaries of the collection point to what became long-term instabilities in Soviet Jewish culture.

Photographing the Jewish Nation offers some corrective to this scatter and disarray, and hopefully inaugurates greater access to and study of the collection. Dymshits calls for further critical analysis of Jewish museums in the Soviet Union—there are several, and they are relatively unknown in Euro-American scholarship. The distinctive feature of this volume is its clarity of museological purpose, enabling viewers to see beyond documentary information and to grasp the images’ cultural intent. Neither melancholic nor nostalgic, the book sets An-sky’s achievement of diasporic ethnography and cultural self-fashioning firmly beside his literary fame.

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¹⁰ Valerii Dymshits, “The First Jewish Museum,” in *Photographing the Jewish Nation*, 192.

¹¹ Cecile Kuznitz describes An-sky’s effort to continue his work in Vilna in “An-sky’s Legacy: The Vilna Historic Ethnographic Society and the Shaping of Modern Jewish Culture,” in *Worlds of An-sky*, 320–45.