

Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora

REBECCA KOBRIN 

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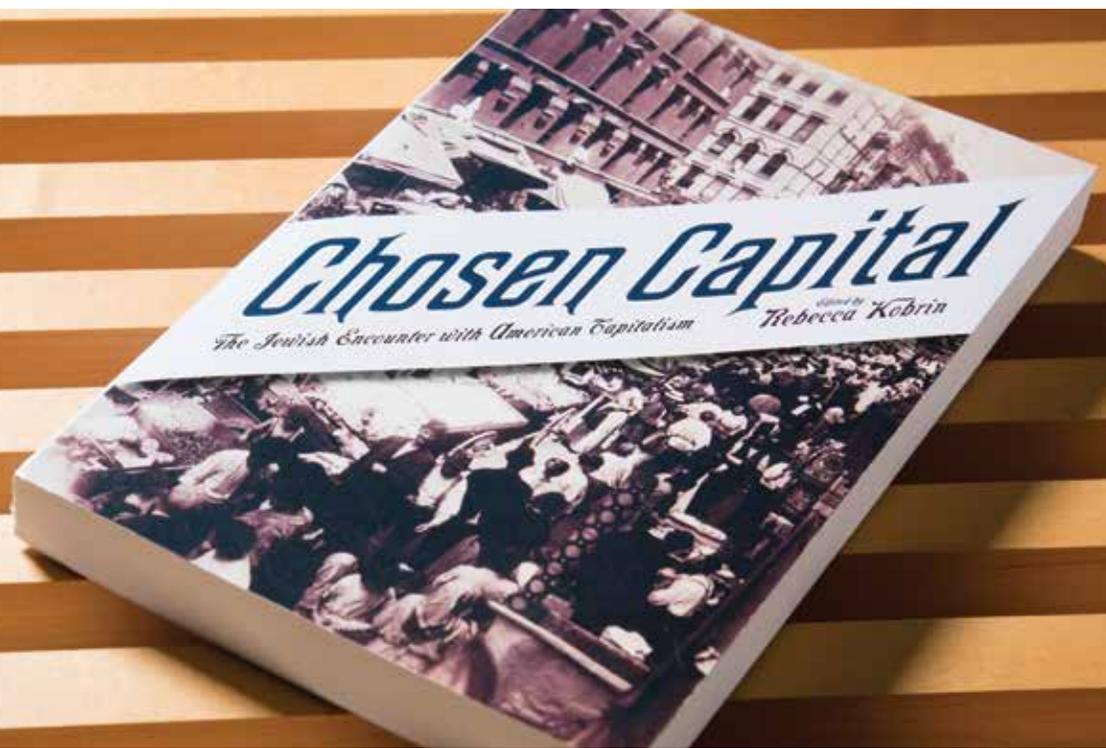
REBECCA KOBRIN IN PROFILE

BRINGING BIALYS TO BIALYSTOK

BY RONALD MEYER

In December 2014, Rebecca Kobrin (Russell and Bettina Knapp Associate Professor of American Jewish History) traveled to Bialystok, Poland, for the launch of the Polish translation of her prize-winning book *Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora*, published in 2010 in Indiana University Press's prestigious monograph series, *The Modern Jewish Experience*. The evening began with a sampling of bialys, the cousin to the bagel that had once been a celebrated regional delicacy but had disappeared from Bialystok, its namesake city, along with the Jewish residents that once comprised over 70 percent of the population. Kobrin, thanks to Fresh Direct, the New York City grocery delivery company, had been able to fill in one more missing link for her audience about the city's Jewish history and culture by bringing the Jewish bread back to the city that gave it its name. The bialy became a metaphor for the reception of her book, and indeed herself, in Poland—the food is known all around the world, but the residents of its birthplace have no idea what it is, even after unsuccessful attempts to make some from a recipe found on the Internet.

Without the Internet the Polish translation most likely would not have happened. Out of the blue, Kobrin received an e-mail from the Mayor's Cultural Affairs Office in Bialystok, which had discovered her and her book the usual way—by means of a Google search. The Office was planning to put on a multicultural festival but had virtually no information on the Jewish component of the city's history, as the overwhelming majority of residents today are either Catholic or Russian Orthodox. The Cultural Affairs Office invited Kobrin to the festival and presented her with an award for her book, thus making it a truly multicultural festival, now that the Jewish history of the city was given a voice. The same Office also arranged to have



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Jewish Bialystok translated into Polish, supported by grants from the U.S. Embassy and the Harriman Institute. The book was published by Borderlands, a prestigious Polish press that has an impressive list of East European historians from abroad, including Timothy Snyder and Jan T. Gross. The modest book launches with which authors content themselves in U.S. academia pale by comparison—more than 300 people turned out for Kobrin’s launch. As Kobrin summed up the evening, “I was a celebrity.” (The book launch can be viewed on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7yC_ZoYPNA.)

Kobrin prefaced her remarks at the launch by quoting Polish President Komorowski, who had stated at the opening of POLIN, the new Museum of History of Polish Jews, a few months prior, “We cannot understand the history of Poland without the great contribution of its Jews to Polish culture.” But as it turns out, the present residents of Bialystok do not know the city’s history, in large part because, in addition to the loss of the Jewish population, the newspapers of the interwar period, like the majority of cultural institutions, conducted their business in Yiddish. Their records are now easier to find in New York and Tel Aviv than in Bialystok. Kobrin says that it had been her dream that people in Bialystok could read her book and learn the history of their city, which was destroyed and rebuilt in a modern style. Without knowing Jewish history, however, it is difficult to understand why Bialystok is a large, urban industrial center, as it almost certainly would not have existed if Jews had not flocked to cities, gone into industry, and made it their home.

How did Kobrin get started on her amazing journey from girlhood on Manhattan’s Upper West Side to Bialystok? First, a gap year between high school and Yale University during 1989–90, when she went to Israel at the same time thousands from the Soviet Union decided to go to Israel as well. Kobrin worked in an absorption center for Russian and Ethiopian Jews, tutoring young children in English, since in Israel instruction of English begins in the second grade and most of these children had never studied the language. She was struck by the many different stories and situations: some were preparing to move to the United States, others to Europe, while some simply would wait to see what would happen and weigh the different options. It made Kobrin realize that the story of immigration in the early twentieth century probably followed similarly diverse routes and not the direct, linear passage from Russia to New York City that scholars present as the paradigm; in fact, large numbers of the immigrants from Bialystok set off for Argentina, Australia, and Palestine.

An advanced course in history at Yale during Kobrin’s freshman year introduced her to the excitement of sifting through archives, and the process of shedding light on the lives of people whom no one knew. Bringing these voices to the fore can alter our understanding of larger historical narratives, including the story of immigration in the early twentieth century. As she stated in our interview, “It’s about stories. Stories about families and people you probably never heard of.” It was also at Yale that

Rebecca started studying the Russian language. Her year in Israel had given her a start of sorts, but most of the Russians she worked with in the absorption center were from Central Asia. When she showed up for her first day of Russian class at Yale her instructor remarked, “I see a beautiful young girl, I hear an old woman from Tashkent.” For what would become her Bialystok project, in addition to Russian and Polish, she would need Yiddish and Hebrew.

Kobrin’s early experience in Israel led her to choose comparative migration as the topic for her dissertation and first book. (As she told her audience in Bialystok, “Be sure that you love your subject—it may be with you for twenty years!”) She had mentioned to a colleague that she wanted to write a transnational history of migration from Eastern Europe and was informed of the extraordinarily rich collection of documents assembled by Chen Merhavia of the National Library’s Rare Book and Manuscript Division in Tel Aviv. Merhavia, a native of Bialystok, tirelessly devoted himself to amassing materials from all over the world related to his birth city for a work that he had planned to write but ultimately was unable to do so for health reasons. The Merhavia Collection was a goldmine. It gave Kobrin a running start on piecing together a global portrait of migration from Bialystok. She was able to use Bialystok as a test case of transnational migration and compare the new homes that Jews from Bialystok made in Argentina, Australia, Palestine, and the United States. The resettlement in these cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries not only transformed the demographic and cultural centers of the world, but it also reshaped Jews’ understanding and performance of their diasporic identities. To that end, Kobrin explores the organizations, institutions, newspapers, and philanthropies that the Bialystokers created around the world and that reshaped perceptions of exile and diaspora.

In her next two books, Kobrin shifts her focus from migration to problems of economics, finance, and capitalism, as practiced by these new Jewish immigrants: *Chosen Capital: The Jewish Encounter with American Capitalism* (Rutgers University Press, 2012), an edited volume based on a conference she organized, which was singled out as “recommended reading” by the Jewish Book Council; and the forthcoming *Purchasing Power: The Economics of Jewish History*, edited with Adam Teller (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). Both volumes feed into her current work-in-progress, *A Credit to Their Nation: Jewish Immigrant Banks and the Shaping of American Finance, 1914–1930*, which will come out with Harvard University Press and delves into the economics underpinning mass migration.

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SELECTED AWARDS

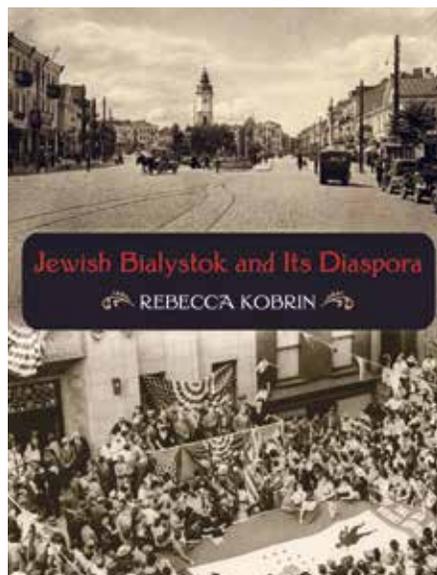
AAJR Special Initiatives Grant, 2015
Lenfest Distinguished Faculty Award,
Columbia University, 2015
Southern Jewish Historical Society Kawaler
Prize, for innovative research, 2013
Wasserman Prize, American Jewish
Historical Society, best scholarly
article, 2013
Genesis Philanthropy Group Grant,
Innovative Research on Russian-
Speaking Jews, 2012
Jordan Schnitzer Prize for best book in
modern Jewish history, 2012
Shoah Foundation Teaching Fellowship,
Shoah Foundation, 2012
University Service Learning Fellowship,
Repair the World Foundation, 2012
International Multicultural Award, City of
Bialystok Mayor's Office, 2011
Natalie Racolin Memorial Fellowship,
YIVO Institute for Jewish
Research, 2011
National Jewish Book Award, Finalist,
American Jewish Studies, 2011
Maurice Amado Award in Sephardic
Studies, UCLA, 2009
Center for Advanced Jewish Studies,
Fellow, "Jews, Commerce and Culture,"
2008–9
Milstein Family Research Fellowship,
Center for Jewish History, 2008–9
Cahnman Family Book Award, Association
for Jewish Studies, 2008
Hettleman Summer Award, Columbia
Faculty Development Committee, 2008
Koret Foundation, Jewish Studies
Publication Award, 2005
Center for Jewish History, Sandra and Fred
Rose Young Historian's Award, 2004
American Philosophical Society, Franklin
Postdoctoral Research Fellowship, 2003

Few people think of economic models when they think of migration, but, as the tragic events involving current refugees in Eastern Europe illustrate, Kobrin notes, the business of mass migration can be treacherous for migrants. *A Credit to Their Nation* discusses how this business operated in the early twentieth century through the world of immigrant banks. It opens by pondering how different the dominant narrative of trans-Atlantic immigration history would sound if we invited its commercial practices to center stage. To be sure, many discuss the economic factors that drove 11 million European migrants to board ships in hopes of starting anew across the ocean in the years leading up to 1914. But the fact that these trips were facilitated by thousands of Jewish businessmen working in both Europe and the United States through institutions called immigrant banks that offered credit to immigrants to buy their tickets is largely ignored. The summer of 1914 is most often remembered for Europe's fall into an unprecedented war. Few recall that during the same summer in America, overshadowed by gruesome events in Europe, the era of immigrant banking came to an end. In response to immigrants' desire to send millions of dollars back to Europe, Eugene Lamb, New York State's banking superintendent, clamped down and closed numerous immigrant banks that had sprouted up in previous decades. These banks not only held the deposits of immigrants, but also sold ship tickets to millions of migrants wanting to better their lives. By selling the tickets on installment, they in essence offered impoverished migrants with the credit needed to make their dream of migration a reality. While these private unincorporated banks have faded into history, as Kobrin argues, the debates they launched over immigration, access to credit, and banking reform continue to this day and are important for twenty-first-century readers to understand.

"Peoples in Motion," the 2011–12 Harriman Core Project, included the component "Voices of the New Russian-Jewish Diaspora," an autobiography contest, cosponsored by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and the Harriman Institute. Kobrin placed advertisements in the Russian newspapers, asking for readers to submit their autobiographies, with a cash prize awarded for the winning stories. The model for this project was the Harriman Institute's 1947 call for the papers of those who had lived through the seismic shifts of the early twentieth century, most notably the demise of imperial Russia, the Bolshevik revolution, and the birth of the Soviet Union. Crucial historical sources concerning these shifts were being lost, they astutely observed; it was the duty of a Western academic institution to provide a home where all scholars would have free access to these materials, which were critical



Rebecca Kobrin



for a “full and free” picture of Russia and Eastern Europe in modern times. Kobrin’s call took the form of a contest, borrowing from a model used by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Hundreds of stories were sent in, some of which were absolutely fascinating. Just as we expect a linear route of immigration from Russia to New York City, we expect to read only tales of prejudice, of people being forced out of their jobs because they were Jewish or had submitted documents for an exit visa; in other words, harassment on a large scale. But the stories, not surprisingly, turned out to be much more complex. My favorite—I was one of the dozen judges—was written by a person who was not given an exit visa because he was an instructor at a military academy and therefore had access to state secrets. Rather than submit to the decision, he took the academy to court—and won! That indeed was a story that needed to be told.

Kobrin has initiated a second autobiography contest—this time in Germany—that seeks to expand the collection of autobiographies, this time by calling on members of the new Russian immigrant diaspora scattered throughout Germany to narrate their lives. She is working with the Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe in Marburg along with the Center for Metropolitan Studies (CMS) in Berlin to collect the autobiographies, which will fill in the picture of the renaissance of Jewish life in Germany after reunification. With a Harriman Faculty Small Research Grant and a Diversity Initiative Grant from the University, Kobrin has been able to

hire an assistant, place advertisements in Jewish media, and put together prize money. Like the initial autobiography project, the collection will be donated to Columbia’s Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European Culture. “Voices of the New Russian-Jewish Diaspora,” like Kobrin’s other projects, broadens the narrative by providing for the multiplicity of voices, ultimately enriching our understanding of how scholars and migrants themselves conceptualize, narrate, and theorize the long and silent revolution of Russian-Jewish migration, a movement that transformed life in the former Soviet Union, the United States, and Germany. □

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Rebecca Kobrin

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Available from Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, directly from the publisher, and select bookstores.

Chosen Capital: The Jewish Encounter with American Capitalism

Rebecca Kobrin (Editor)

Rutgers University Press (2012)

ISBN 978-0-8135-5308-5

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