

Inside Kishinev's Pogrom: Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Michael Davitt, and the Burdens of Truth *

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Chaim Weizmann's *Trial and Error*, his grand, lyrical autobiography of the late 1940s, returns repeatedly to lessons learned from the 1903 Kishinev pogrom. It offered him, he writes, the first glimpse of what the new century might have in store for Jews in Europe and also Palestine: "I had some experience with the atmosphere that precedes pogroms," he recalls telling Palestine High Commissioner Herbert Samuel in 1920. It would forever remind Weizmann of how inconceivable it was for him, despite his desire to pursue chemistry research, to avoid the political fray. Describing himself in the wake of the Palestinian riots of 1929: "I found it impossible...as in fact I had found it impossible in an earlier crisis that which followed the Kishinev pogrom and other pogroms thirty years before – to abstract myself....from Jewish life." (1)

He writes that his move in 1904 to England, which altered the course of the remainder of his life and had a considerable impact on the course of Zionism's history, too, was a direct byproduct of the miasma set in motion by Kishinev's massacre and Theodor Herzl's effort soon afterwards, loathed by most of those closest to Weizmann, to secure a slice of East Africa as a Jewish haven. Kishinev also taught him to recognize the imprint of mendacious officialdom: "Just before the [1937 Palestinian] riots broke out I had an intimate talk with the High Commissioner. He asked me whether I thought troubles were to be expected. I

replied that in Czarist Russia I knew that if the Government did not wish for troubles, they never happened." (2)

Kishinev, in short, is one of the book's lodestones and yet nearly everything he says about the massacre's details, its historical lessons, even its immediate impact on him (except, perhaps, for the reason for his Manchester move) is easily proven inaccurate. Weizmann's letters to his fiancé at the time of the pogrom hardly mention the event, the depiction in the autobiography that its outbreak caused him to return to Russia immediately to help organize self-defense groups is without foundation, and his insistence that Kishinev and massacres like it were concocted by the tsar's highest officials has long been disproven, at least qualified. Still, the certainty Weizmann brings to his depiction of the massacre, an event whose details, mangled and not, would come to occupy a central role in the memory of Jews at the time, is likely sincere and also illustrative. More than any event of its time, including the Dreyfus Affair (in 1903, the two were reported on side by side in Jewish press) Kishinev's pogrom would define the contour of contemporary Jewish life for countless Jews and others providing the rationale for so much including unfettered Jewish mass migration to the United States, Russian Jewry's embrace of the left, its still-starker repudiation of the right.

Widely recognized as the first instance when Russian Jewry captured sustained attention in the western world, the pogrom -- the term itself widely embraced only in Kishinev's wake to depict anti-Jewish riots -- would dominate headlines in newspapers in the United States and elsewhere for weeks (it would dominate

the Jewish press for months). It would inspire a spate of instant-books -- several finished in a matter of weeks -- plays, poems, and the like, and would make Kishinev into a synonym for Jewish calamity. (3) [Vladimir Korolenko would transmute the horrors enacted at just one of its addresses, 13 Asia Street, into one of the era's most widely cited depictions of horror;] it provided the first instance for Tolstoy to speak out in defense of Jews who denounced the Russian government as culpable in the massacre's wake. (4)

Amid this torrent of reportage, relief efforts, public meetings and gruesome imagery – Kishinev's outrages were among the first of its kind captured promiscuously in newspaper photography – the two most influential sources of all on it were, arguably, those of Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Irish radical and journalist Michael Davitt. Both were dispatched to Kishinev to amass data which they did with diligence; both produced work, while drastically different in form and substance, that managed to distill the catastrophe in ways all the more enduring because they were so concrete, so detailed. And both came away from the city with the same anguished impressions of the behavior of the town's Jewish males substantial numbers of whom, or so they claimed, proved unable or unwilling to protect the city's women from rape. For both this behavior indelibly defined its terrors. (5)

In the din of accusations and counter-accusations following the pogrom – at the time among the more persistent leveled by Jews against their coreligionists was that the city's wealthiest protected themselves, their neighborhoods and property at the expense of the poor – the charge that Jewish men hid themselves when

rapists ravaged Kishinev's girls and women took precedence over so many other travesties including, astonishingly, the horrors experienced by the women themselves. Such impressions fed, of course, on regnant stereotypes of feminized Jewish males whose passivity was said to be the byproduct of diaspora (as argued by Zionists), or the superstitions of traditional religiosity (as argued by Jewish socialists and others). In the immediate aftermath, the desecration of synagogues, of torah scrolls, the shattered glass of store windows, the feathers filling the city's streets and, of course, the rows of dead bodies whose photographs were reproduced in countless newspapers – these were among the more vivid images linked to Kishinev. But soon no image could compete with that of rape as the most horrific focal point of the pogrom with the moral failings of Kishinev's men overshadowing all else in this regard, this shorthand for the abject vulnerability of the Jewish people under Tsarism, its devastation of soul and body alike.

In this essay I argue that the writings of both Bialik (despite the density of his majestically dark Kishinev poem) and Davitt enjoy a certain transparency, an immediacy that sheds light not only on how the pogrom would be perceived but also on what it is that transpired amid its horrors. Davitt's account of his time in Kishinev was published first in *The New York American*, then reprinted in a spate of newspapers in the United States and elsewhere, and soon afterwards in expanded form in the best-selling book, *Within the Pale: The True Story of Anti-Semitic Persecutions in Russia*. Immediately on its publication, he emerged as a folk hero among Jews – Davitt was already a much-celebrated Irish political figure – with plays and poems written about his time in Kishinev in English and

Yiddish. (Lightly disguised in the script “Kishineff” written, never produced for New York’s resplendent New Star Theater, its protagonist the swashbuckling Dave Michels, journalist from the United States all-but- singlehandedly saves the city’s Jewish maidens and is told at the play’s end that he is “the truest, dearest friend our people ever had.”) In Bialik’s case, his best-known, fullest distillation of his reactions to Kishinev went into his “Be-’ir ha-haregah” (“In the City of Killing” originally published under another title for censorship reasons) appearing in its original Hebrew version in November/December 1903. Its almost immediate impact on Jewish literature, on politics, eventually on Israeli pedagogy (it would remain a mainstay of the educational curriculum for decades), even military affairs (it is widely credited with influencing the formation of the Hagannah, the kernel of Israel’s armed forces) are well known. (6)

Never have Davitt and Bialik been examined side by side. This despite the fact that, though apparently they never met, their stays in Kishinev investigating the riot’s aftermath overlapped: Bialik was there for some five weeks starting in early May, Davitt for 11 days with both in the city at the month’s end. While there, they relied on the same assistant, the teacher and Hebrew-language newspaper contributor Pesakh Averbach. Bialik sat together with him in the homes of victims and had him collate and translate their testimonies into Hebrew from their original Yiddish; for Davitt, Averbach served as part of a small team of translators since the Irish journalist wasn’t familiar with Russian or Yiddish. Tel Aviv’s future founding-mayor Meir Dizengoff stepped in to translate for Davitt, too. (7)

Both, in addition to their published accounts of the massacre and its aftermath, left behind extensive notes on what they witnessed. Bialik's, in the form of transcripts contained in several notebooks of victim testimonies accompanied by photographs, were almost entirely sequestered from view for more than 80 years among his archival papers in Tel Aviv before they were finally edited (superbly so, by Yaakov Goren) and published. Davitt's remain in Trinity College, Dublin where I reviewed them recently, the first Jewish studies scholar to have drawn on them. (Contained in his archive are treasures, including the only copies of the notorious Kishinev-based newspaper *Bessarabets* outside the former Soviet Union.) (8)

In Bialik's case, much scholarship has been devoted to the discrepancy between Bialik's poem's scathing condemnation of Jewish passivity and the description in his notebooks of Jewish self-defense, the most significant effort a concerted if foiled attempt early morning of the massacre's second day. The episode was, in fact, extensively documented at the time with pogromists' lawyers making the argument – in a series of consecutive trials lasting well into 1904 -- that the defendants merely were protecting themselves from Jewish assailants who were the ones who initiated the assault on Kishinev's gentiles. Why Bialik shunted this episode aside has been explained, on the whole, as a byproduct of his effort to merge in his poem nationalist outrage and personal anguish, a meshing strikingly original yet also consistent with the poet's Zionist commitments. Just before his departure for Kishinev, Bialik signed a letter, widely circulated by Odessa's Jewish intellectuals and mostly composed by Bialik's ideological

mentor, the influential essayist Ahad Ha'am (pen name for Asher Ginsberg), that took for granted the passivity of Kishinev's Jews, and it is argued that Bialik cleaved to such assumptions despite evidence to the contrary. (9)

No doubt, there is truth in this. Yet reading Davitt's Kishinev notes together with Bialik's invites a reassessment of what it meant to make sense of the pogrom and its confounding, often contradictory details. The fact that Davitt, too, albeit in his unpublished notes and not in his articles or book, levels precisely the same criticisms of the behavior of Jews as does Bialik indicates that Bialik's observations might well have been grounded in more than ideological commitment. That Davitt, a scrupulous journalist who certainly didn't shun controversy (as a Irish radical, he had spent years in English jails) chose for reasons never explained to sequester his criticisms raises intriguing questions, not only with regard Davitt's motivations, but also as to how it is that complex, unsettling stories tend to narrated, reproduced and also, at times, obliterated.

The fact that Bialik and Davitt shared in Kishinev the same translator perhaps offers something an explanation, but Davitt was a painstakingly honest, hardworking journalist – his book remains to this day one of the most authoritative on the pogrom in large measure because of its meticulous, on-site research – and he shared, of course, none of Bialik's Ahad Ha'amist, Odessa-bred cultural influences. Davitt states in his notes that his impressions were the byproduct of numerous conversations with Jewish men whom, he insists, acknowledged to him that they witnessed their wives, and other relatives raped and they watched helplessly.

This essay, then, is an effort to make sense of how the two of them made sense of their time in Kishinev. Fortunately, the evidence at-hand is rich, and multi-varied: Kishinev's pogrom may well have been among the most comprehensively covered events in Russian Jewish history. Obviously, neither Bialik nor Davitt had the time or inclination, or for that matter the opportunity, to wade through all but a fraction of this material, but both immersed themselves in much of it, they spoke with its victims extensively and both, it seems clear, strained hard to tell the truth as they saw it. Looking closely at them as they struggled to tell this truth reveals something crucial, as I see it, about the various, conflicting ways in which a moment in time might be fixed in history, what it is that history manages best to record and what falls between its grates, and also how it is that a poem might contain an historicity, a kernel of essential information too unwieldy, too raw or indelicate, too slippery for expressly historical or journalistic sources to take hold of. Bialik's poem has been termed a "poetic chronicle" or, as literary historian Dan Miron has put it, "studded with details, accurate pictures, and a factual tone." This may well be truer than could previously have been imagined. (10)

Henry Hyndman, the British businessman-turned Marxist politician and author of the first introduction to Marx in the English language, tells in his

remembrances of an encounter with Davitt on a Parisian Budapest-bound train as Davitt made his way to Kishinev. Hyndman, who had been active in the pro-Irish causes, relates how as he entered his sleeping car he noticed that on the seat opposite his was the name "M. Davitt." He was so pleased to discover Michael Davitt walking in a few minutes later that "our fellow passengers were astonished to see two elderly and apparently sane travellers suddenly set to work to dance a fandango of jubilation in the corridor of the sleeping-car." The first words out of Davitt's mouth were: "there is not a police bureau in Europe [that] would believe that this was an accidental meeting." (11)

They talked much of the way about the boon of small land-ownership (Davitt's keenest preoccupation as an Irish nationalist), about the beauty of the Bavarian and Austrian countryside, about socialism and also about Jews. Hyndman was in touch with Davitt after his Kishinev stay, too. The gist of what Hyndman took away was that while Davitt felt great antipathy for those responsible for the massacre he also saw Jews themselves as fanning discontent, or worse.

"Undoubtedly, Davitt in private while not excusing the Russian authorities felt that Russia would be much better off if she had no Jews at all within her boundaries. " Sitting together on the train, Hyndman related to him the story of one ragged Jew who, with a few years of stumbling into a Russian village, had "to use Marx's phrase, ...eaten up the pores of this simple society. Everything had become his, and the peasants themselves, with their families, were little better than his slaves." The impression Hyndman gives is that Davitt agreed that the story captured something essential, if also unfortunate about the role of Jews in economic life. (12)

Davitt's views on Jews were complex, born of sympathy and also unassailable assumptions regarding inbred racial characteristics that caused Jews to exploit those weak, ignorant, or naïve. In his bloated, 600-page tome published the year before, *The Boer War for Freedom*, he singled out as the prime exploiters of the region a clutch of no fewer than forty "Anglicized German Jews" who were, as he put it, along with Cecil Rhodes the "capitalist kings" most responsible for the oppression of the Boers. "Where anti-Semitism," he states in the preface to *Within the Pale*, "stands in fair political combat...or against the engineers of a sordid war in South Africa...I am resolutely in line with its spirit and programme." And, as he argues later in the book, "If the race generally are exploiters and extortionists, who made them so?" True, he would soon defend Irish Jews against the infamous Limerick boycott of 1904 and, in the wake of his Kishinev dispatches and his popular book, would loom large in Jewish life as a beloved protector. But he shared a set of emphatic viewpoints on the essential characteristics of the races – English motivations he would forever distrust, African "savages" he sidelined in his book on South Africa, Moldavians were overwhelmingly responsible for the worst of Kishinev's outrages because they were the descendants of Roman slaves, and Jews -- while harmless in those places where there were gentiles clever enough to compete with them like in the United States – were justly feared in backward Russia. Certainly, this didn't justify their oppression but did constitute a sufficient argument for Jews to consider seriously mass migration preferably to Palestine. (13)

Still, he was a highly professional journalist. Born without money (in contrast to his erstwhile comrade, later his rival, the towering Irish radical leader Parnell), Davitt made his living from journalism and accepted the Kishinev assignment because he needed the cash. (Bialik agreed to take on the task of collecting data on the pogrom, in no small measure, for the same reason.) The Hearst newspaper-chain that hired Davitt for the assignment would soon adopt Kishinev as little less than a crusade. "In my various newspapers," wrote Hearst in a letter to the editor printed in his own *New York American* on May 20, "in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco I have published the fullest obtainable details of the Kishineff crimes." Hearst led his own relief campaign – side by side with many others in New York, and elsewhere – to which he gave its largest single donation. Davitt's photograph appeared on the paper's front page immediately after he agreed to take the job with the announcement that he was its "agent" or "commissioner" in Kishinev. Crowds of Jews now gathered daily outside the offices of the *New York American* and other papers seeking news of the riot, especially of relatives who might have been harmed. In a contemporaneous summation of the pogrom and its aftermath, the characteristically under-stated Columbia University scholar, Zionist leader Richard Gottheil declared, "Few events in modern history have called forth the indignation of the civilized world as have the riots at Kishineff." (14)

In the midst of this frenzy Davitt was instructed to ascertain whether there was truth to reports of multiple rapes, the murder of infants, the likelihood that another pogrom was in the offing. (Initial reports indicated that as many as hundred, perhaps more, were killed; the actual number was 44, with five dying

of wounds afterwards.) Rumors that the horrid photographs from Kishinev were doctored or that all that had really happened was the antics of a few, local ruffians were circulated by the Russian government and this, too, Davitt sought to investigate. And at the same time rife was the widespread “fear that even yet [readers] had not learned the worst” as the *New York American* stated on May 13. (15)

Davitt’s notes show him to be exceedingly cautious -- so cautious that his London-based editor was soon badgering him for copy that Davitt insisted wasn’t ready because he was still immersed in fact checking. On his arrival in Odessa, via a ship from Constantinople, on May 20 (according to Russia’s Julian calendar, May 7) he sat for some seven hours with the Kishinev Jewish communal leader and Zionist Jacob Bernstein-Kogan who, with the help of translator Dizengoff, filled him in. Soon in Kishinev 100 miles to Odessa’s west and linked by rail, he interviewed large numbers in his hotel room – which was besieged by Jews hoping to obtain his help to emigrate -- and spoke with those who could provide him with information at local hospitals, Jewish and Russian, in the homes of pogrom victims, in local government offices, and elsewhere. (16)

“To arrive at definite conclusions as to the immediate and the contributory causes of the sanguinary outrages perpetrated upon the Jews of Kishineff on the 19th and 20th of April, was a tedious and painful process, beset with innumerable difficulties.” (17) This is how Davitt begins the narrative on the pogrom in his book. His notes reveal that he weighed all matters with due skepticism: That the windows of some Christian homes may well have been shattered by

pogromists, too, as reported in a Russian newspaper, could well mean that the attack wasn't exclusively an anti-Jewish one but, as he asks himself, the "organization of workingmen animated by a political & economical animus against the bourgeoisie." If buildings near Governor General von Raaben's home and that of the city mayor Karl Schmidt were also damaged the allegation that local officials were complicit would seem fallacious. Surely such authorities wouldn't "allow a pre-arranged fire to blaze near their official residences." (18)

How many pogromists were there he attempts hard to discover. (Told that there were only about 300, the bulk of them "imported hirelings," he asks in his notations "what were the 30,000 Jews doing?") He identifies the weapons used by the attackers (mostly clubs), what that they did at night ("violating women"). He quantifies how many of the city's liquor stores and brothels are owned by Jews, how many Jewish prostitutes work in Kishinev, were there a disproportionate number of masons amid the pogromists, how many women participated in the attacks alongside men? He attempts to find out whether the rumor that a 5 year-old girl was raped is true, and after interviewing no fewer than 10 doctors at the Jewish hospital and two at the Russian institution he is unable to confirm the report. The youngest victim, aged 12 months, died he discovers because its mother dropped the infant while in flight. (19)

He counts at the cemetery the number of fresh graves, interviews local rabbis to learn how many husbands have divorced their wives because they were raped (11 is the number he jots down), and confirms that at least in one instance nails were, as rumored, driven into the head of a Jewish victim. He produces a list

with the names of thirteen girls and women between the ages of seventeen and forty-eight who were been raped with another six unnamed but identified; he notes that some 40 were said to have been raped. The Russian doctors with whom Davitt speaks tell him that the magnitude of the pogrom, as reported by Jews and in the press abroad, wasn't exaggerated. (20)

His analysis of how and why the pogrom broke out is remarkably clearheaded, quite similar to how historians with access to sources inaccessible to Davitt would later reconstruct it. He argues that its root cause was the exasperatingly confounding nature of anti-Jewish legislation in Russia, the recent expulsion of the Jews from the countryside which was, especially in a rather remote, border region like that of Kishinev's Bessarabia, readily contravened by bribery, and the abiding uncertainty as to whether Jews enjoyed any protection at all under the law. This was coupled with the highly combustible charge of Jewish ritual murder – leveled after the killing of a Christian boy in a town near Kishinev soon before the pogrom's outbreak – which unleashed passions unchecked because of the ineptitude of the local administrators, the indifference of the police, and the hostility of the city's Orthodox churchmen. Perhaps the most crucial indigenous factor was Russia's fiercest antisemitic newspaper, the Kishinev-based *Bessarabets* with some 20,000 readers and the region's only daily. Davitt placed blame for the pogrom's organization squarely on the shoulders of its editor Pavel Krushevan, together and a small entourage of fanatics close to him, including local seminarians (Kishinev sported the largest seminary in the region, a hotbed of both leftwing and rightwing politics, with some 1000 students) who, as reported by many sources at the time, helped guide pogromists to Jewish homes.

Most historians today concur that Krushevan exerted critical, if mysterious, and hard-to-pin-down influence on the riot. And, as it happens, there is ample proof that it was Krushevan, perhaps along with one or two others, who was the author of the original version of what would eventually be entitled *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*; he certainly was its first publisher. (21)

By far, the lengthiest description in Davitt's notations is of a raped then murdered girl in an outlying, impoverished neighborhood on the first night of the pogrom. Only passing, sparse reference found its way into his newspaper reports (these constrained by Russian censorship, nearly all either spirited across the border while he was in Kishinev or forwarded from Berlin after he left) or his book. I quote only a brief selection:

"The house where the girl was ravished & murdered....The entire place littered with fragments of the furniture, glass, feathers, a scene of the most complete wreckage possible. It was in the inner room (in carpenter's shed) where ...the young girl of 12 was outraged & literally torn asunder....About a hundred feet from this house there is a long wooden shed....In this shed 23 persons sought refuge after learning of the approach of the rioters....The young girl ...by some accident or chance was left in her house, the house nearest the gateway entrance to the yard....The shrieks of the girl were heard by the terrified crowd in the shed for a short while & and then all was silent." He then added, "Correct above: The young girl & the wife of the man who told me the tale (he being present) were taken out of the shed, and carried into the house & violated." (22)

On his return from Kishinev, Davitt admitted to a friend that "In their naked horror" what he saw surpassed "almost anything which the imagination could invent." (23) Invention was something he assiduously avoided -- his notations are interspersed with lists of "facts" painfully accumulated. Hence the following comments cannot be dismissed, it seems to me, either as invention, or as passing impression:

"Note: Jewish men appear except in rare instances, to have acted as contemptible cowards. In no instance have I heard from women of any courageous stand being made by either their husbands or sons...Several of these miserable poltroons came to my hotel to recount their marvelous escapes but not one had a story of courage or of counter attack to relate." (24)

Davitt knew, of course, of various efforts of Jews to resist and describes how the large group of mostly laborers and shopkeepers, numbering at least 250, early on the second morning of the pogrom at the city's wine market, battled rioters before being stopped by police with several arrested. Nowhere either in his dispatches or in his book did he mention the confessions made by Jewish men in his hotel room: the nearest he came is in the observation in the book of how striking it is that the mayhem caused by rioters numbering no more than 2,000 could have transpired in a city with tens of thousands of Jews. "Ninety per cent of [the Jews] hid themselves, or fled to safer parts in and out of the city for

refuge.” (25) Davitt’s decision to not to include these reactions -- among the fiercest, certainly the most critical of Jewish behavior in the very extensive notes he took -- brings us to Hayyim Nahman Bialik’s altogether different choice to situate much the same observations into what it is that generations of readers would come to see as the incendiary core of his epochal poem.

Several of those close to Bialik in Odessa, where he had lived on and off since the early 1890s most recently as a teacher at one or another of its modern Jewish schools, admitted years later that they were surprised at his sudden rise, almost immediately after the publication of his Kishinev poem (in fact, his second on the pogrom, by far the most famous), as the literary conscience of their generation. Bialik’s fame would rapidly move now well beyond the confines of Hebrew literary devotees, especially once Vladimir Jabotinsky’s brilliant Russian translation of the poem – the flamboyant, young activist, a superb orator, would recite it whenever given a platform – appeared. (No better analysis exists of the transmutation of Bialik’s poem into Jabotinsky’s Russian than Michael Stanislawski’s.) In the pogrom’s wake, Bialik’s was but one of many dozens of poems in Russian, Yiddish, and Hebrew about the massacre with several blended into synagogue services, especially in the United States, already by fall 1903 and the onset of the High Holy Days. Once Bialik’s was published late that year all others were essentially shunted aside. (26)

The prophet-like figure Bialik would now rapidly become in the Jewish imagination – he echoed, no doubt intentionally in his Kishinev poem, Alexander Pushkin’s “The Prophet” the brief, powerful work consigned to memory by countless Russian readers – was vastly different from the convivial, somewhat coarse, often slovenly, largely self-taught young man (in 1903, he was 29) his Odessa friends knew so well. Chaim Tchernowitz, an Odessa-based writer and educator then quite close to Bialik – he was also among the kindest, least carping figures in this circle of relentlessly lacerating intellectuals -- admits in his memoirs that the Bialik whose reputation so soared in these years bore little resemblance to the rough-and-tumble man with whom he spent so much time. His vaulted reputation as a Talmud scholar, a “matmid” or Talmudic devotee, itself the title of one of his most beloved poems, Tchernowitz says was inconceivable, for example, since the poet was so hungrily in need of company that rarely was he ever alone. (27)

What it is that Bialik made of his time in Kishinev was what consolidated this reputation, one that has remained sturdy ever since -- its ongoing potency confirmed by how entire schools of Hebrew poetry have, over the years, erupted in reaction to its grip. Those five weeks in Kishinev would leave, and not only because of his great poem, a profound imprint on his life and yet because some details associated with this stay were deemed by those now ever-watchful over him at variance with his reputation they were, with his own connivance, sidelined or silenced. Silence, particularly shamed silence is one of Bialik’s most abiding, poetic themes and Tel Aviv University’s Michael Gluzman has astutely

shown how his earliest revelatory piece of prose writing – the lengthy autobiographical letter he composed while still in Kishinev for Joseph Klausner, then at work on what would be the first biographical sketch of the poet -- was studded with elisions, major and minor. These included Bialik's transmutation of a shameful childhood experience that now, having heard so much from Kishinev's raped Jewish women, he conflated with an episode in his own past. And in keeping with this keen self-protection, he would lock away the extensive notes he took while in Kishinev, much to the surprise of his loyal assistant Pesakh Averbach who admitted in print some years later that he had no idea why they'd never seen the light of day. (28)

Greatest of all elisions was the removal from his official biography – until, that is, the open secret, known in literary circles but kept under wraps long after the poet's death, was revealed after the demise of his widow Manya -- that Bialik had fallen in love in Kishinev with a painter, four years his senior and married with a child, Ira Jan, or Esfir Yeselevitch, for whom he almost certainly composed the most passionate of his poems. It is likely that he considered seriously joining her in Palestine; she left her husband and daughter soon after they met, started laboriously to teach herself Hebrew -- she came from a Russian-speaking family, her father, a doctor, one of the Jewish notables who hosted Bialik during his Kishinev stay – and then left for Palestine where she would be its first professional female Jewish painter. Bialik had at the time tentatively agreed to teach at a new school in Palestine slated for orphans of the Kishinev massacre. Even the size of his salary was negotiated. (29)

Only a handful of letters of what was an extensive correspondence survive – all hers, none his – and these, too, were hidden away for many years by Bialik’s archivists; assiduous literary historians Ziva Shamir, Nurit Govrin and others, have poured over them gleaning whatever nuggets they might contain. All agree that Jan’s love for Bialik was deep, and longstanding; few disagree that Bialik loved her too, although he resisted the Palestine venture, chose Warsaw instead where he would edit the journal *Ha-Shiloach* together with Klausner. His love-poetry while fiercely erotic also suggests a certain revulsion at sexual passion, at least the act of sexuality that may well have intruded on this, perhaps the one, truly deep romantic relationship he would enjoy with a woman. (30)

The best known, by far, of all Bialik’s editorial excisions in the wake of his Kishinev stay was his exclusion of all mention of Jewish self-defense in “Be-ir ha-haregah” despite the description of such efforts in his notes. Historian Dubnow, who dispatched Bialik to Kishinev -- with a patronizingly lengthy list of assignments he expected him to perform while there -- wrote years later in his autobiography that never was he disappointed by the decision not to release Bialik’s notations or, for that matter, to use them in any way: his poem, stated Dubnow, told more of the truth and exerted a far greater impact than the information culled from his transcript ever could. (31)

Whether or not it told more of the truth was much debated at the time of its appearance. Critic and short story writer David Frischman, a great admirer of Bialik’s, lacerated him in print on this score. Bialik’s mentor, Mendele Mocher Seforim (the Yiddish and Hebrew writer Jacob Abramovitch) recalling the 1881

Odessa pogrom with great anger several decades later, loathed Bialik's poem that he construed as a personal affront. Many of Kishinev's Jews would continue to see the poem as a bruising insult, penning replies to it at nearly every one of the community's commemorative moments before and after the Second World War. (32)

Bialik's words about Jewish male cowardice stung, as they were meant to do:

"And see, oh see, in the shade of that same corner
under the bench and behind that barrel
lay husbands, fiancés, brothers, peeping out of holes
at the flutter of holy bodies under the flesh of donkeys
choking in their corruption and gagging on their own throats' blood
as like slices of meat a loathsome gentile spread their flesh –
they lay in their shame and saw – and didn't move and didn't budge.,
and they didn't pluck out their eyes or go out of their heads –
and perhaps each in his soul then prayed in his heart:
master of the universe, make a miracle – and let me not be harmed." (33)

Nowhere in his notebooks did Bialik record anything nearly as unreservedly critical of Jewish behavior as Davitt's. In the longest, most heart-wrenching account of multiple rape in his notes, the narrative of Rivka Schiff, he has the victim exonerate her husband from blame: she recounts how he sought to bribe pogromists, how they threatened his life and then how he hid while they fell

upon his wife one after the other raping her. Once the horrors ended, her immediate fear was that he might have been killed. Still, it seems likely that as in Davitt's case, Bialik, too, heard accounts similar to those that so unsettled the Irish radical. Davitt claimed that no fewer than 100 Jews sought him in his hotel room, with many of them sharing with him such tales which may well have been linked to an effort to persuade him to help with their emigration since their lives and that of their families in Kishinev had been rendered unbearable. (34)

No less likely is it that what both wrote down and what it is that Bialik – whose poem is packed with journalistic-like observations, accurate depictions of Kishinev's topography, a keenly precise account of the massacre's pacing – it is not unlikely that Bialik decided to publish was then all-but common knowledge, albeit just the sort of indelicacy that falls between the cracks especially when a beleaguered people, like Jews, is its target. Kishinev's canonic story would rapidly be consolidated -- for Jews across the political spectrum, for the bulk of Russian liberals and radicals, for numerous sympathizers abroad, too. What would emerge would be a strikingly seamless, consensual account much like the one found in Weizmann's autobiography shorn of carping about the rush to safety of Kishinev's wealthier Jews, with Krushevan cut down to size consistent with the belief that the massacre was the work of the government. Now the Kishinev pogrom would be described as set in motion, even plotted not by random pogromists but governmental authorities at the highest levels, above all Minister of Interior Vlacheslav Plehve assassinated one year later, after several attempts on his life, and largely because of his role in fomenting Kishinev's pogrom. (Few, if any, historians now believe Plehve to have been responsible for

the massacre.) Krushevan himself would now be dismissed as a pawn, “a typical *pogromschik*” in the words of Norman Cohn’s influential study; the seminarians, reported widely at the time as playing a major role, disappeared from view almost entirely. Kishinev would become, above all, the most conclusive of all evidence that the Russian state was in the midst of little less than war with its Jews. (35)

Hence the lines separating advocacy from journalism, polemics from history were casually traversed: Dubnow’s was a “historical commission” that, as he tells it, had its work superseded by the proliferation of pogrom press accounts and polemical literature with their resounding denunciations of Russia. Bialik already while still in Kishinev started to transmute his witness testimonies into poetry. Davitt arrived in Kishinev with a large relief donation in-hand from newspaper titan William Randolph Hearst. The *Yiddish Daily Forward* launched the first in a series of major relief campaigns for Kishinev’s Jews that did much to transform the paper, then little more than a publicity sheet for the Socialist Party, into the indispensable fixture it would now become.

Bialik’s poem would have been read and recited against this backdrop, this veritable landslide; some later commenting, wryly, on the sparse reportage of Nazi atrocities in the early 1940s insisted that Kishinev garnered in its time immeasurably more attention from the world than did Hitler’s catastrophe. (36) The appropriation of some details of the massacre by Bialik, not others, his decision to spotlight the failings of some of Kishinev’s men while sidelining the resistance shown especially on the pogrom’s second morning was, no doubt,

tinged with his own deeply-felt cultural Zionist inclinations. But now, with the surfacing of Davitt's notations written more or the less the same time as Bialik's stay, it seems likely that this, too, was a part of Bialik's endeavor at piecing together the pogrom's raw data, his culling of reportage unmediated, certainly devoid of contextualization or countervailing evidence. Like nearly all else in the poem, traversing in astonishing detail every quarter of the city and its suburbs, this, too, can be said to have been done with the intention to tell the truth, an expression of the poet's desire to capture the pogrom's terrors as meaningfully as he knew how.

The veritable mountain of factual accounts of the Kishinev pogrom produced at the time, nearly all in its immediate wake and often later, too, larded with polemics, were frequently little less imaginative – if, undoubtedly, less artful -- than Bialik's. His poem was designed to coexist, intimately, in tandem with this textual onslaught, to complement it while at the same time, he hoped, superseding it in resonance and impact. (Bialik was never more ambitious than in this, the most fertile of all periods of his life.) History is best extracted, perhaps, from just this sort of this muddle, this multitude of sources with straightforward accounts like Davitt's *Within the Pale* less sturdily transparent at times than a prophetic-like eruption like Bialik's. In his splendid memoir, among the best of its kind, erstwhile anarchist Victor Serge observes that having attempted the writing of history in the 1920s, "Historical work did not satisfy me entirely....It does not allow enough space for showing men as they really are, dismantling their inner workings and penetrating deep into their souls." (37) Serge then poured himself into fiction, producing eventually his now-classic,

posthumously published autobiography *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* late in his life, by then obscure, a Soviet exile impoverished and living in Mexico. Yet it is this book that remains his greatest historical monument and, in its own way, far more valuable documentary source than his attempt at straightforward historical investigation. Disciplinary boundaries separating history and fiction, reportage and poetry and memoir are crucial, of course, but historical excavation may well be best done when all these, and others too, are ransacked promiscuously in an effort, rigorous, self-critical as well as imaginative, to extract the fullest sense of the inner workings deep in the souls of the past.

* Hasia Diner of New York University was the first to alert me to the richness of Michael Davitt Papers housed at Trinity College, Dublin. Davitt specialist Carla King, of St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, helped facilitate my use of this material. Now, as so often in the past, this essay, too, has benefitted from a critical reading by my Stanford colleague, and friend Aron Rodrigue.

1. Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error*, pp. 254, 343; Jehuda Reinharz, *Chaim Weizmann: The Making of a Zionist Leader* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 149-152, 157-166.
2. Weizmann, *Trial and Error*, 91, 392.
3. *The Voice of America in Kishineff* (Philadelphia, 1903), edited by Cyrus Adler, pp. ix-xxvi; Sam Johnson, "Use and Abuses: 'Pogrom in the Anglo-American Imagination,'" *Jews in the East European Borderlands* (Boston, 2012), edited by Eugene M. Avrutin and Harriet Murav, pp. 158-66.
4. Vladimir Korolenko, *Dom no. 13* (London, 1903); Michael Davitt, *Within the Pale: The True Story of Anti-Semitic Persecution in Russia* (New York, 1903), pp. 268-72; Edward H. Judge, *Easter in Kishinev* (New York, 1992), p. 89.

5. On Bialik see Avner Holtman, *Hayyim Nahman Bialik* (Jerusalem, 2009), pp. 17-21; and Ya'akov Goren, *'Eduyot nifge'e Kishinov, 1903* (Tel Aviv, 1991), pp. 9-49. His poem, "Be'ir ha-haregah" (originally published as "Masa Nemirov") has been reprinted numerous times; his entire poetic corpus can be found in *Kol shirei Kh. N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv, 1967/8). On Michael Davitt see Carla King, "Michael Davitt and the Kishinev Pogrom, 1903," *Irish Slavonic Studies*, vol. 17, 1996, pp. 19-43.
6. "Kishineff," New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, NCOF+p.v.344; A. R. Malachi, "Pera'ot Kishinev be-aspaklarit ha-shirah be-ivrit ve-yidish," *Al admat Bes'arabyah*, vol. 3 (Tel Aviv, 1963/4), esp. pp. 64-98; Monty Noam Penkower, "The Kishinev Pogrom of 1903: A Turning Point in Jewish History," *Modern Judaism*, vol. 24, no. 3, October 2004, pp. 187-225.
7. *Sefer Bernstein-Kogan* (Tel Aviv, 1946/7), pp. 135-6
8. On Bialik's notebooks, see Goren, *Eduyot*, pp. 48-49 On Davitt's papers, see Carla King, *Michael Davitt* (Dundalk, Ireland, 1999).
9. See Fishel Lachower, *Bialik* (Tel Aviv, 1934/5), vol. 2, pp. 424-26; David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (Cambridge, Mass, 1984), pp. 89-92; Steven J. Zipperstein, *Elusive Prophet* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 202-209.

10. Malachi, "Pera'ot Kishinev," p. 67; Dan Miron's introduction to *Songs from Bialik* (Syracuse University Press, 2000), edited and translated by Atar Hadari, p. xxxviii.
11. H. M. Hyndman, *Further Reminiscences* (London, 1912), p. 52.
12. Ibid. p. 55.
13. Michael Davitt, *The Boar War for Freedom* (New York, 1902), p. 28; Davitt, *Within the Pale*, pp. ix, 89; Dermott Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Cork, 1998), pp. 27-32; Lawrence Marley, *Michael Davitt* (Dublin, 2007), pp. 256-9.
14. King, "Michael Davitt and the Kishinev Pogrom," p. 20-24; Richard Gottheil, "Kishineff," *The Forum*, vol. 35, July / September 1903, p. 159.
15. Davitt Papers, Trinity College, Dublin, MS 9577/5.
16. *Sefer Bernstein-Kogan*, pp. 135-36; Davitt Papers, TCD, MS 9578; MS 9501/5301; Davitt, *Within the Pale*, pp. 17-27. Also See King, "Michael Davitt and the Kishinev Pogrom," pp. 29-30.
17. Ibid, p. 101.
18. Davitt Papers, TCD, MS 9577/5.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Davitt, *Within the Pale*, pp. 121-40; M. B. Slutsky, *V skorbuye dnei* (Kishinev, 1930); A. Beilin, *Der kishiniyever pogrom* (Warsaw, 1932). The most authoritative description can be found in Judge, *Easter in Kishinev*.

22. Davitt Papers, TCD, MS 9578.

23. Letter to Sidney Webb, Davitt Papers, TCD, MS 9400/4970

24. Davitt Papers, TCD, MS 9577; King, "Michael Davitt and the Kishinev Pogrom," p. 30.

25. Davitt, *Within the Pale*, p. 170.

26. See, for example, Chaim Tchernowitz [Rav Tsa'ir], *Masekhet zikhronot* (New York, 1945), pp. 116-125 Malachi, "Pera'ot Kishinev," pp. 1-64

27. Tchernowitz, *Masekhet*, pp. 119-120

28. *Be-'ir ha-haregah* (Tel Aviv, 2005), edited by Michael Gluzman, et. al. pp. 13-36; Michael Gluzman, "Pogrom and Gender: Bialik's Unheimlich," *Prooftexts*, vol. 25, nos. 1-2, Winter/Spring 2005, pp. 39059; Pesakh Averbakh, "Kh. N. Bialik

ve-'ir ha-haregah," *Ha-pogrom be-kishinev bi-melot 60 shanah* (Tel Aviv, 1963), edited by Chaim Shorer, p. 28.

29. Ziva Shamir, *Li-netivah ha-ne'elam* (Tel Aviv, 2000), esp. pp. 7-50; Lachower, *Bialik*, pp. 442-43.

30. Ariel Hirschfeld, *Kinor 'arukh* (Tel Aviv, 2011).

31. Simon Dubnov, *Kniga zhizni* (St. Petersburg, reprint 1998), pp. 240-43.

32. See, for instance, Shlomo Dubinsky's article on self-defense during the Kishinev pogrom in *Ha-Aretz*, August 10, 1928.

33. *Songs From Bialik* p. 3.

34. Davitt Papers, TCD, MS 9577.

35. Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide* (London, 1967), p. 108.

36. Getzel Kressel, "Ha-pogrom be-Kishinev ba-aspaklarit ha-Velt," *Al admat*, p. 100.

37. Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York, 2012), translated by Peter Sedgwick, p. 304

The Kishinev pogrom, and the notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion that followed it closely, were long thought to have been the work of the secret service of the Russian imperial government. Zipperstein's research reveals that this was almost certainly not the case. An Irish nationalist named Michael Davitt, working as a journalist, wrote a series of sensational articles for William Randolph Hearst's New York American that Zipperstein finds remarkably accurate; a book followed under the title *Within the Pale: The True Story of Anti-Semitic Persecution in Russia*. A Hebrew poet named Hayyim Nahman Bialik's epic, "In the City of Killing," is "widely considered the most influential poetic work written in a Jewish language since the Middle Ages." Start your review of *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History*. Write a review. Feb 10, 2019 Jan Rice rated it it was amazing. Shelves: read-out-loud, them-and-us, book-club-selection, history. The pogrom was instigated by local perpetrators, not the central government, and the shift to blaming the tsar soon led to underestimating and ignoring the local perps -- the main one of whom was Krushevan. The two most important sources are Hayyam Nahman Bialik, the Jewish national poet who wrote, "In the City of Killing," describing the massacre; and Michael Davitt, an Irish revolutionary and a reporter for Randolph Hearst's New York American, who would go on to write *WITHIN THE PALE: THE TRUE STORY OF THE ANTI-SEMITIC PERSECUTIONS IN RUSSIA*, published in 1903. Inside *Kishinev's Pogrom*: Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Michael Davitt and the Burdens of Truth. Tuesday, June 17, 2014. 9:15 a.m. - 11:00 a.m. Violence in Pre-Modern Societies. CHAIR: David Feldman (Pears Institute for the Study of Antisemitism, Birkbeck, University of London). Mark Kabakov (Charles University). Realities and Representations of Violence in Seventeenth Century Ukraine. 11:30 a.m.- 1:15 p.m. The Great War and the Militarization of Ethnic Violence. CHAIR: Stefanie SchÄ¼ler-Springorum (Technical University, Berlin). Brendan McGeever (University of Glasgow). Narratives of Violence in the Soviet Government Responses to Antisemitism and Pogroms during the Russian Revolution 1917-1921. Marc Caplan (Johns Hopkins University). The Kishinev pogrom captured the attention of the international public and was mentioned in the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine as an example of the type of human rights abuse which would justify United States involvement in Latin America. The 1904 book *The Voice of America on Kishinev* provides more detail[14] as does the book *Russia at the Bar of the American people: A Memorial of Kishinef*. [15]. "Inside Kishinev's Pogrom: Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Michael Davitt, and the Burdens of Truth" (PDF). In Freeze, ChaeRan Y.; Fried, Sylvia Fuks; Sheppard, Eugene R. (eds.). *The Individual in History: Essays in Honor of Jehuda Reinharz*.