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*Meshugaim. The image of misfits in Jewish Yizkor books*

SUMMARY

This thesis examines narration included in Yizkor books that concerns misfits (in Yiddish *meshugaim*), individuals who are in anyway different from the perceived norm, among Jewish communities. The main focus of this work centres around the question how were *meshugaim* portrayed in memorial books, and therefore, what perspective authors decided to pass on to the next generation and the means they use to do so. It should be noted that the main interest of this analysis lays not in objective historical facts but in subjective views of the past.

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first three chapters introduce a wide context of examined narrations, they provide description of source material, methodology and terminology that was used, as well as socio-historical background. The following two chapters focuses directly on narrations included in Yizkor books and answering the main research question – how misfits are presented in these texts.

Chapter one provides an introduction to Yizkor books, which are the source material for this thesis. It characterizes the genre and the structure of those publications, highlighting issues of mythologization and impact of nostalgia on the memorial books' contents.

Chapter two provides the methodological and theoretical approach, that was crucial for analysis of the main problem and validation of sources. Due to the multifaceted nature of the subject the approach had to be interdisciplinary. It incorporated four elements, divided in subsections, as follows. The first one is a narration and its role in human's life. The second is a memory, relations between memory and history, site of memory theory (*lieux de memoire*) and dependence of the collective memory and individual memory. The next one is focused on otherness in social and cultural view. Then the final part presents specifics of the research, its scale, scope and terminology used in the thesis.

Chapter three serves as an introduction to socio-cultural and Judaic tradition and to history of social service in the Second Polish Republic. It pinpoints the role of compassion and charity as essential elements of Judaic religion and how they affect Jewish value system. Then the description of physical and mental impairment according to Halakha is given. As it is proven Halakha does not provide sufficiently strict boundaries of what should and should not be considered as insanity, and to what extent does disabled should be required observe religious precepts. This chapter also considers general condition of Polish psychiatric care, which was

only developed (as a medical discipline) in the second half of XIX century. Relative isolation of small-town Jewish communities resulted in distinct ways of dealing with difficult, indigent and sick individuals. Among them, various charitable organizations that would take care of homeless and paupers were established.

The fourth chapter presents the results of the analysis of the content from chosen Yizkor books texts about misfits. Study of the narrations was based on questions of how they describe *meshugaim* and what information is included in those characterizations. The source material was categorized on the basis of nine main differentiators: nicknames, outward appearance, ancestry, dwelling place, marital status, source of income, misfits' character (a sources of insanity, special talents, symptoms of otherness, attitude towards life), involvement with extramundane (black weddings, gilguls, ghosts, lamed-vovniks) and the misfits place in society (relations with the people in town, anecdotes about misfits). Each part is based on various examples with citations. Collected narrations are diverse, but by collating extracted parts it was possible to pinpoint major similarities, for example in the issues that they raise. Focusing on limited number of issues enabled to interpret the content. By identification of what authors decided to include and what omit one can portrait specific and subjective image of misfits in shtetl.

Last, fifth chapter is devoted to the other side of basis material, namely texts structure, way in which authors convey information about misfits, and finally their attitude to the described individuals. The survey focused on issues such as narrative leading, the time terms and the manner of portraying odd figures (including examples of intertextuality). One should not forget, that Yizkor books are not work of fiction, but rather an applied literature – personal stories, kind of memoir, but most of all, narratives of simple, ordinary man. For this reason, it cannot comply to the general rules of literary analysis. Moreover, it was impossible to phrase single rule, that would apply to every text, without committing a sin of oversimplification and undue generalization. Therefore, like in previous chapter, the study is focusing on main trends which are unique for examined materials and specific examples.

The thesis is supplemented with the introduction, conclusion, bibliography and annex, containing translations of selected memories about misfits from Yizkor books.

