

Fishman, D.E (2017). *The book smugglers: Partisans, poets, and the race to save Jewish treasures from the Nazis*. Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, an imprint of University Press of New England. 322 pp. ISBN 9781512600490. \$29.95

Barbara L. Houssiere, McNeese State University



David E. Fishman, Ph. D.(Harvard) Professor of History at the Jewish Theological Seminary and Director of Project Judaica, presents an amazing story based on interviews, diaries and other archival materials. *The Book Smugglers* is the history of a group of people who saved their most treasured cultural literature from the Nazis. The Nazis selected individuals from the Vilna Ghetto for their knowledge of Hebrew and Yiddish to locate the most unique and valuable books, documents, and artistic works from many Jewish, Russian and Polish collections, ultimately preparing them for shipment to Nazi collections in Germany.

Due to the huge amount of items, only a small percentage of the treasures were reserved. Leather from Torah scrolls was sent to repair German army boots; Talmud printing plates were melted down and sent to armament factories; and the rest was shipped to paper mills, incinerated or buried in mass graves. At extreme danger to themselves, members of the paper brigade courageously smuggled out thousands of documents and other items of significant cultural heritage (often on their person) that were later hidden in attics or underground, entrusted to Lithuanian citizens, or transferred to other countries, believing that future generations would rebuild the Jewish culture.

Other adventures Fishman relates involves the establishment of a flourishing library network inside the Vilna Ghetto. Herman Kruk, a library director from Warsaw

who was visiting Vilna when the war broke out, was asked to become the ghetto librarian. He recalls in his diary, “After the mass roundups and liquidation of Ghetto #2, . . . book loans increased . . . reading was a means of coping – regaining their bearings.” Children were among the most ravenous readers.

Liberation led to another herculean effort to preserve their cultural treasures from the Russians. Abraham Sutzkever, poet laureate of the “Young Vilna” literary group, wrote that he never gave up hope that many of the hidden items would someday be found, “the grains he was planting in the soil of the Vilna Ghetto - planting not burying – would bear fruit in the reconstituted soil in America.”

This book is as much thriller as it is history. Fishman has a great writing style that is easily accessible to casual readers. Although there are elements of scholarly writing, they do not distract the reader. References and additional information are available if readers have had their interest piqued. This is a great addition to History, Holocaust, Jewish, and WWII collections. The emphasis on primary sources makes this book especially useful to undergraduate students researching personal accounts of lesser known aspects of WWII.