

Sisters and Strangers: *Hannah Arendt & Lucy Dawidowicz*

BY NANCY SINKOFF

Two Jewish women, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Lucy S. Dawidowicz (1915-1990), played pivotal roles in the crystallization of Holocaust consciousness in postwar America. Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) and Dawidowicz's *The War Against the Jews, 1933-1945* (1975) helped shape public and academic discussions on the relationship of Jews to political power, anti-Semitism and the "Final Solution," and the response of Jewish leaders to the Nazi campaign to annihilate the Jews of Europe.

Arendt's and Dawidowicz's conflicting perspectives on the destruction of European Jewry recalled longstanding debates in the Jewish community—questions about whether Jews should maintain principal loyalties to fellow Jews or embrace the universalist perspective of the Enlightenment, and whether they should assimilate and pursue individual freedom or maintain a distinctive collective and national identity. These timeworn questions continued to preoccupy Jewish intellectuals throughout the 20th century. The fact that women, Arendt and Dawidowicz, were advancing different sides of these debates appears significant to us now, yet in their own time neither emphasized her sex as a significant element of her thought process or public role.

Although a decade and a continent divided their births, Arendt and Dawidowicz shared several biographical experiences. Both worked in postwar Europe with Jewish refugees; aided in the restitution of Jewish property looted by the Nazis and others; and traversed the circles of the Jewish intelligentsia in New York (including such luminaries as Salo Baron, Norman Podhoretz,



Hannah Arendt.
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Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe, and Marie Syrkin). Arendt and Dawidowicz likewise wrote in English for the American and Jewish audiences, as well as in their respective mother tongues, German and Yiddish.

Indeed, we might well understand Arendt's and Dawidowicz's worldviews as two sides of the fabric of Ashkenazic civilization torn by the advent of modernity. Many West European Jews encountered the modern world as individuals for whom the bonds of traditional ethnic and religious life had already largely dissolved. In contrast, for a sizable proportion of Jews in Eastern Europe, these bonds were still essentially intact, even though traditional religion was rapidly becoming displaced by Jewish nationalist ideologies of one kind or another. Paradoxically, these "Western" and "Eastern" identities were constructed in close relationship to one another. Beginning in the late 18th century, the ideas of the European Enlightenment and the political process of emancipation propelled German-

Lucy Dawidowicz.
American Jewish Historical Society.



speaking Jewry to define itself in sharp contrast to "backward" East European Jewry; while many Jews in the East, especially by the late 19th century, wished to avoid the fate of excessive "assimilation" associated with their Western brethren.

Curiously, the writings and the personae of these two remarkable thinkers represented a perpetuation of this old conflict, now transposed to the world of New York Jewish intellectuals.

Born in Hanover, Germany, Arendt studied philosophy at the Universities of Marburg, Freiburg, and Heidelberg, but fled her native land after Hitler came to power. She went to Paris, where she worked for the Zionist organization Youth Aliyah, serving as general secretary of its French branch until 1938. In 1941 she escaped to the United States, where two years later, she began writing for English-language journals, including *Partisan Review*, the all-important organ of New York intellectuals. From 1944 to 1948 she

was research director of the Conference on Jewish Relations and chief editor of Schocken Books. From 1949 to 1952, Arendt was executive director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. (JCR), a U.S. government organization founded in 1947 and empowered to restitute Jewish cultural property stolen by the Nazis. Literate, literary, and engaged with high culture, particularly politics, in 1967 Arendt began teaching at the New School for Social Research, a progressive institution that was home to several prominent German-Jewish refugee intellectuals. This position solidified her reputation as a cosmopolitan for whom Jewishness had ceased to be the primary loyalty.

Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), which considered Nazism and Soviet Communism analogous forms of state terror, was hailed as a brilliant study of the horrors of modern bureaucratic society. But *Eichmann in Jerusalem* ignited a storm of protest among her peers, who criticized the book's two central claims: first, that Nazism had been the product of the totalizing bureaucratization of modern life and not of ideological hatred of the Jew; and second, that the Jews of Europe, particularly their leaders, had been complicit in the Final Solution. Even some of Arendt's closest friends were shocked by what they regarded as the book's dismissive tone and callous assumptions about the options available to the victims facing Nazi brutality.

Dawidowicz's identification with the Jews of Poland anchored her perspective on the destruction of European Jewry. Born in New York to a Polish Jewish immigrant family, Dawidowicz attended a public school and college, and also received a supplemental Yiddish education through the politically non-partisan Scholem Aleichem Folk Institute dedicated to the principles of Diaspora Nationalism. In 1938, she sailed to Poland to be a graduate fellow at the Vilna YIVO, the independent Yiddishist institution devoted to the study of East European Jewish life. Fleeing Poland in late August 1939, Dawidowicz returned to Europe in 1946 to work with displaced persons in the American zone of occupied Germany. After helping to salvage YIVO's plundered library, she sailed back to New York City and went to work for the American Jewish Committee in its research division, out of the public eye. In 1967, she published *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe*, an anthology of East European Jewish autobiographical writing, followed by *The War Against the Jews*, works that emphasized the vitality, diversity, and spirit of Polish Jewish culture. In 1968, she began teaching at Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women, inaugurating the formal study of the Holocaust on the American college campus.

In contrast to Arendt, who famously had expressed discomfort with national belonging in a letter to her friend Gershom Scholem,

for Dawidowicz cosmopolitanism that made no room for Jewish distinctiveness was anathema. Indeed, it is likely that Dawidowicz wrote *The War Against the Jews* as a counterpoint to Arendt's claims in *Eichmann*. "Part One, The Final Solution," posited that Hitler's ideological anti-Semitism, already evident in *Mein Kampf* (1925-1926), defined the blueprint for the extermination of the Jews. "Part Two, The Holocaust," argued that European Jewry, in particular the vast community of Polish Jews that comprised almost one-quarter of the world Jewish population in 1939, had met Nazism with political, cultural, and spiritual resiliency in order to assert the collective Jewish will to live.

As postwar political thinkers, both Arendt and Dawidowicz were preoccupied with the security of the Jews in the modern world. Yet their conclusions regarding the role of Jewish leadership (the *Judenräte*, or Jewish councils) during World War II were diametrically opposed. In *Eichmann*, Arendt claimed, "Wherever Jews lived, there were recognized

Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis." Dawidowicz fired back in *The War Against the Jews*, "For all their weaknesses, failings, and wrongdoings, [the Jewish leaders] were not traitors... No Jew ever hoped for a New Order in Europe. The officials of the *Judenräte* were coerced by German terror to submit and comply. To say that they 'cooperated' or 'collaborated' with the Germans is semantic confusion and historical misrepresentation."

The New York intellectuals celebrated Arendt in 1951 with

Origins and then anathematized her when *Eichman* appeared. They barely knew Dawidowicz before 1967, but increasingly looked to her as the authentic interpreter of the European catastrophe and East European Jewish culture as they began to embrace Jewish particularism in the 1970s. Juxtaposing the reception of Arendt and Dawidowicz by the New York intellectuals anchors all their experiences in the much larger story of the complex ways in which Ashkenazic Jewry, both Western and Eastern, encountered the modern world.

The Arendt-Dawidowicz divide was part of a long history of Jewish intellectual negotiations with Enlightenment universalism and Jewish national identification. In the mid-20th century—and far away from the European Jewish heartland—these two unusual Jewish women were part of that contunium.

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