Modernity as Anti-Nostalgia

The Photographic Books of Tim Gidal and Moshe Vorobeichic and the Eastern European Shtetl

Rose-Carol Washton Long

By the early 1930s in Germany, many photographers of Jewish background were considered to be on the cutting edge in fields of art as well as commercial photography. Much has been written about the success of exhibitions such as Film und Foto of 1929 as well as of the numerous photobooks such as August Sander’s 1929 Anlitz der Zeit (Face of Our Times) that organized photographs sequentially around a particular theme. However, for most of the fourteen years of the Weimar Republic (1918–33), photography did not have the stature that it has today. The so-called “fine arts,” as the fields of painting, sculpture, and architecture were labeled, were considered far more important than the applied arts, which then included photography. It wasn’t until the end of the twenties that photography in all its dimensions began to be recognized as a significant field for artistic expression. In addition to German-born photographers and critics, a number of central and eastern European Jews, many of whom had abandoned the lands of their birth for Germany after the First World War, attracted by the economic and creative freedom of the new republic, subsequently contributed significantly to the acceptance and expansion of the field of photography.

The German-Jewish theorist Walter Benjamin, in his 1931 essay “Little History of Photography,” helped to legitimize the new medium by emphasizing photography’s greater effectiveness for reaching an audience than that of painting. Benjamin explained that the easy reproducibility of photography – due to its technological basis – not only allowed this medium to circulate widely and inexpensively but also afforded it the possibility of revealing the underlying structure of the modern world. As an idealist inspired partly by Communist theoreticians, Benjamin sought a visual form that could propel his world view of unbalanced class and economic struggle into a powerful, modern mass communication. In his 1931 essay, Benjamin praised two related but divergent approaches as modern: one, the seemingly straightforward portraits...
by August Sander, published in Anlitz der Zeit, a volume that Benjamin called “a training manual” for sociological descriptions of class, and two, the experimental work by the Hungarian émigré and Bauhaus instructor Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who advocated a new way of seeing – a new vision – by shooting from uncommon angles and using montaged images cut out from newspapers. Benjamin particularly drew upon Moholy-Nagy’s work and theories as explained in the Bauhaus educator’s book, Malerei, Photographie, Film (Painting, Photography, Film), which had gone into a second edition in 1927. The differing approaches of both photographers, Benjamin concluded, “unmasked” rather than aestheticized the present, and as a result allowed their works to create a dynamic and powerful vision of modernity.2

This essay addresses the photobooks of two assimilated, German-trained photographers, Moshe Vorobeichic and Tim N. Gidal, and their variant thematic and stylistic portrayals of eastern European shtetls3 that paralleled the divergent approaches described by Benjamin. Inspired by Zionist dreams of a revitalized Jewry as well as by the photographic practices of 1920s Germany, Vorobeichic in Ein Ghetto im Osten: Wilna (A Ghetto in the East: Vilna), published in 1931, and Gidal in Zikhronot mi-Polin ha-yehudit (Memories of Jewish Poland), published in 1932, used opposing stylistic strategies in their photographic


chronicles of their respective origins in Lithuania and Poland, believing that in doing so they were assisting with the modernization of Judaism (figs. 1 and 2).4

The photobook most commonly associated with the representation of shtetl life5 is Roman Vishniac’s The Vanished World, published in 1983, although the photos were taken in the mid- and late thirties.6 As most scholars are now aware, Vishniac was commissioned by the American Joint Distribution Committee, a relief agency designed to assist Jews threatened by antisemitism, poverty, and other destructive events throughout the world. Though not mentioned in The Vanished World, Vishniac later alluded to the commissioned aspect of this work. These photographs were to be used for fund-raising efforts and tended to emphasize the intense poverty of eastern European Jews. Although the photos have been acclaimed by many for portraying a vivid and elegiac representation of shtetl Jews, many scholars have critiqued this photobook for not presenting the multiple types and classes of Jews in eastern and central Europe.

5 Representations of shtetl life, primarily from regions associated with the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, took the form of commercial postcards, journalistic photo-reports during the First World War, and in the twenties a few photobooks. For a discussion of how the interest in depicting characteristic examples of Jewish life grew out of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ethnographic expeditions to areas relatively untouched by modernization, see Eugene M. Avrutin, “From the Bauhaus to Photojournalism,” in Photography at the Bauhaus, ed. Jeannine Fiedler for the Bauhaus-Archiv (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 73–83 and 264–85 respectively. For Gidal, whose first name is sometime listed as Nachum, see Nachum Tim Gidal, Photographs 1929–1991 [catalogue, The Open Museum, Tefen Industrial Park], curator Natan Zach (Tel Aviv, 1992). The German photo historian Ute Eskildsen briefly mentions and reproduces only a few of Gidal’s works from his photobook in Tim Gidal, Bilder der 30er Jahre: Fotografische Sammlung [catalogue, Museum Folkwang], curator Ute Eskildsen (Essen, 1984). 8 See Vishniac's “Commentary on the Photographs” in his A Vanished World (New York, 1983), caption for fig. 34.

4 Gidal’s photobook has elicited less scholarly attention than Vorobeichic’s, most likely because of the latter’s connection to the well-known art school, the Bauhaus. For discussions of Vorobeichic, who used the name Raviv-Vorobeichic when he emigrated to Israel, see Marina Dmitrieva and Heidemarie Peetersen (Wiesbaden, 2004), 69–84; Carol Zemel, “Imaging the Shtetl: Diaspora Culture, Photography and Eastern European Jews,” in Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London and New York, 1999/2000), 193–206; Herbert Molderings, “Moshe Raviv-Vorobeichic (Moi Vert)” and “From the Bauhaus to Photojournalism,” in Photography at the Bauhaus, ed. Jeannine Fiedler for the Bauhaus-Archiv (Cambridge, MA, 1990), 73–83 and 264–85 respectively. For Gidal, whose first name is sometime listed as Nachum, see Nachum Tim Gidal, Photographs 1929–1991 [catalogue, The Open Museum, Tefen Industrial Park], curator Natan Zach (Tel Aviv, 1992). The German photo historian Ute Eskildsen briefly mentions and reproduces only a few of Gidal’s works from his photobook in Tim Gidal, Bilder der 30er Jahre: Fotografische Sammlung [catalogue, Museum Folkwang], curator Ute Eskildsen (Essen, 1984). 8 Gidal’s photos for the illustrated press are mentioned in a few studies; see Klaus Pohl, “Die Welt für Jedermann: Reisephotographie in deutschen Illustrieren der zwanziger und dreissiger Jahre,” in Ansichten der Ferne Reisephotographie 1850–Heute, ed. Klaus Pohl (Giessen, 1983), 96–127. Gidal himself has written numerous books on photography, including Tim N. Gidal, Chroniken des Lebens: Die moderne Fotoreportage (Berlin, 1993); idem, Die Juden in Deutschland von der Romerzeit bis zur Weimarer Republik (Gütersloh, 1988), esp. 374–81 and 415–19. In order to illuminate the difference between the two photobooks under discussion and Vishniac’s volume, a comparison of representations of a similar subject should be informative. Gidal’s title of his image (fig. 3) of a laborer resting in a wagon, for example, is straightforward and descriptive – Lublin: Waggoner Waiting for a Customer – while Vishniac’s title for his image (fig. 4) – The Man Had Lost His Legs in a Russian Pogrom Thirty Years Before. Warsaw, 1937 – is emotionally loaded.8 Not only does his title emphasize the central figure’s helplessness, but Vishniac also contrasts the rumpled elderly man to a fashionably attired younger man who is actively walking out of the picture. Gidal’s attention to the physical details of the wagons surrounding his resting figure produces a less empathic, more matter-of-fact rendition, that is related to the theme of respite from active labor. By the time Vishniac photos were published after the Second World War, the shtetl way of life had been obliterated

6 Although some of the images in The Vanished World were published in 1947 by Schocken under the title Polish Jews, acclaim for these photos did not occur until much later; see Eugene Kinkead, “The Tiny Landscape,” in Roman Vishniac (New York, 1974), 8.

7 For some of these critiques, see Alana Newhouse’s discussion of Vishniac and the curator Maya Benton of the forthcoming exhibition of his work at the International Center of Photography in New York, New York Times Magazine, 4 Apr. 2010: 36–43.

8 See Vishniac’s “Commentary on the Photographs” in his A Vanished World (New York, 1983), caption for fig. 34.
by the Nazis, giving his works an immortality that has overshadowed their nostalgically elegiac representations. Moreover, Vishniac’s eventual location in New York permitted great exposure for his photos. Vorobeichic and Gidal, who produced their photobooks about the shtetl way of life before they emigrated to Israel in 1934 and 1936, had a different goal in mind – revitalization, rather than a bid for sympathy and financial support.

Vorobeichic was born in a shtetl called Lebedova near Vilna, Lithuania (then part of Russia) and moved to Germany in 1927 to study at the new art school, the Bauhaus in Dessau. There he was drawn to the work of Moholy-Nagy, who became his instructor, and he frequently appropriated the experimental use of multiple exposures from Moholy-Nagy (fig. 5a), as is evident in his self-portrait of 1931 (fig. 5b).9 Gidal’s parents came from the Polish lands then under Russian rule, and he was born in Munich in 1909. He was able to attend university there and later in Berlin, and alternated between his studies and photo-journalism. Given painting’s privileged position, few Jews succeeded in that medium, but photography – particularly commercial photography – was much more open to outsiders. By 1929, Gidal had begun to have his work represented in the illustrated weeklies (fig. 6a);10 his self-portrait (fig. 6b) from that same year reveals a young man who seems thoroughly assimilated, dressed in modern clothing and staring self-confidently at the camera.

Although these two secular photographers may never have met, they shared a common interest in Zionism – the belief in the establishment of a new, invigorated Jewish identity that could deal with the modern world. For most Zionists, this new and dynamic identity was connected to the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and in the mid-thirties, after the election of the National Socialists, both men emigrated there. However, their...

Fig. 3. Tim Gidal, Lublin: Waggoner Waiting for a Customer, 6th photo in Memories

Fig. 4. Roman Vishniac, The Man Had Lost His Legs in a Russian Pogrom Thirty Years Before. Warsaw, 1927, no. 37 in A Vanished World

9 According to Maia Raviv-Vorobeichic, her father had a close relationship with Moholy-Nagy and visited him in Berlin after the Hungarian left the Bauhaus in 1928; Maia Raviv-Vorobeichic, interview by author, Tel Aviv, 19 Aug. 2001.

10 His photos were published in the Münchner Illustrierte Presse, Kölnische Illustrierte Zeitung, and Die Woche. As a freelancer, he became associated with the photo agency Weltrundschau; see Eskildsen in Tim Gidal, 7–8.
Modernity as Anti-Nostalgia

Fig. 5a. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, untitled (Multiple Portrait), 1927

Fig. 5b. Moshe Vorobeichic, Self-portrait, 1931

Fig. 6a and b. Tim Gidal’s photos in an illustrated weekly and his self-portrait, 1929
pictorial memoirs of 1931 and 1932 recall the complex and divergent concepts within Zionism of what constituted the “new modern Jew.” Zionism had a very diverse membership – from the fervently religious to the most avidly secular. In Germany, only a small percentage of Jews – 7 percent – were actively involved.11 Most intellectuals and upper- and middle-class persons from Jewish backgrounds were more interested in assimilating, and equated modernity with the process of becoming cultured Germans.12 Even recent secular emigrés such as Moholy-Nagy from Hungary showed no interest in returning to their Jewish roots, neither in work nor in lifestyle. Although pogroms – the brutal raids on shtetls and Jewish quarters of small cities – were much more common in eastern Europe, anti-Semitic actions were still quite evident during the twenties in the Weimar Republic. Jews were blamed for profiteering, for the failure of the empire, and so on. Even in intellectual circles, negative stereotyping was the rule, not the exception. For example, the Bauhaus chronicler Oskar Schlemmer referred to Moholy-Nagy, who had converted to Protestantism in 1919, as having a “typical Jewish manner,” which he equated with arrogance.13

A number of German-Jewish intellectuals reacted to the increased antisemitism after WWI by making exploratory trips into Poland and Lithuania to study their roots among the Ostjuden – as the so-called eastern European Jews were labeled then.14 Among those who made this trip was the novelist Alexander Döeblin who, before he wrote the forward to Sander’s Anlitz der Zeit, published an account of his journey to eastern Europe.15 Both Gidal and Vorobeichic followed in that direction. Gidal, who had belonged to a radical Zionist youth group called the Blau-Weiss that focused on training its youth in agricultural projects,16 traveled to Jewish Poland in the summer of 1932 with two other Zionist friends. He later wrote about this trip: “My friends and I went to Jewish Poland, because we wanted to get to know the Eastern Jews intimately. We had known them only from books.”17 Shortly after this trip, he collected the photos that he took with his Leica and was able to publish them as a photobook. Vorobeichic returned to Vilna in the spring of 1929, prompted by a visit to the synagogue library in Dessau when he was studying at the Bauhaus.18 He too used a Leica and, according to the historian Herbert Molderings, brought his works to a Zionist Congress where they attracted the attention of an editor working for Füssli-Verlag in Zurich, who published the photographic series two years later.19

Even though Vorobeichic concentrated on the Jewish quarters of Vilna, and Gidal photographed the Jewish population in a number of small Polish cities and villages, including Lowicz, where he had numerous relatives he had never met before his trip there, both books capture

11 See chart in Hagit Lavsky, Before Catastrophe: The Distinctive Path of German Zionism (Detroit and Jerusalem, 1996), 34.
12 Among the many studies devoted to this subject, see Donald L. Niewyk, The Jews in Weimar Germany (Baton Rouge and London, 1980), esp. chap. VI, 125–63.
13 Oscar Schlemmer to Otto Meyer, 29 June 1930 from Breslau (unpublished typescript, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin) in which Schlemmer wrote about his former Bauhaus colleague and later crossed out the following words: “der arroganter denn je, von ich kann mir nicht helfen, so typisch jüdischer art, die er dann sich bemüht, mit nettigkeit zu bemänteln” (more arrogant than ever, who, I cannot help myself, in a typical Jewish manner, which he then strives to disguise with amiability). Schlemmer’s use of the phrase that he “can not help himself” provides a clear reference to his inability to resist using common negative stereotyping of the time. The published edition of Schlemmer’s letters and essays does not contain this reference.
14 For a discussion of the apotheosis of the Ostjuden, see Steven E. Aschheim, Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923 (Madison, WI, 1982; paperback ed., 1999), esp. 185–214 (page citations here are to the 1999 edition).
15 For a brief analysis of Döeblin’s 1925 Reise in Polen, see Aschheim, 305–6.
18 Dmitrieva reprints a brief section of Vorobeichic’s remembrance of this incident from an unpublished manuscript by Maya Raviv; see Dmitrieva, “Die Wilna-Fotocollagen,” 74–75.
19 Molderings, “Moshe Raviv-Vorobeichic,” 75.
a lively local culture as well as incredible poverty. At the same time, the books reflect numerous prototypes from both contemporary experimental and commercial sources. For his cover image (fig. 1), Vorobeichic framed the major synagogue in Vilna with sharp-angled dark shadows that recall the work of his Bauhaus teacher Moholy-Nagy. Gidal’s cover (fig. 2), on the other hand, records in a seemingly straightforward Sander-like manner six boys solemnly facing the camera. In his more compact project, figures dominate almost all of the 16 photos included. In Vorobeichic’s work, even though architectural motifs are used for about one-third of the 64 images, figures are dominant as well.

In their photobooks, both photographers had to deal with the complex issue of whether a specific Jewish type existed – that is, was there an identifiable representative of a common Jewish spiritual and ethnic heritage? They were not the only ones thinking about this issue, as the search for a collective face or body to represent a particular characteristic of a group was commonplace in Germany during the twenties, permeating the popular press and scientific or pseudo-scientific journals. The cultural historian Richard Gray and many others have commented on the variety of studies in Weimar Germany given over to the identification of psychological traits by means of the physical body. Gray demonstrates this type of attitude with images from pseudo-scientific studies, which, for example, related thin bodies to an aesthete mind-set and thick, solid bodies to superior athletic performance. Because of the perverse application of these ideas by the Nazis, we are much less aware of how widespread the attempts were to catalogue ethnic, national, and racial physiognomic traits of all groups during the Weimar period.

For both Vorobeichic and Gidal, the Jewish type was predominantly represented by a male figure associated with the traditionally pious through beard, peaked cap, and long coat (figs. 7 and 8), even though they were aware of Jews in contemporary clothing living in these areas. Vorobeichic used the words “Jewish type” in a number of his captions and he often added some additional

20 Vorobeichic would also have absorbed the Heimat or homeland photos of Vilna by the Polish photographer, Jan Bulhak, whose romanticized documents of Vilna appeared before World War I; see Jan Bulhak: Fotografia polska (Jan Bulhak: Polish Photography) (Warsaw, 2000) (Polish).


22 Richard T. Gray cites Ernst Kretschmer’s 1922 study Körperbau und Charakter in his book About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz (Detroit, 2004), 136, 193–94.

23 Among the captions in which the word “type” appears are the following:

No. 21 “Typen im Synagogenhofe” sits below two photos of elderly men with peaked caps and long flowing beards; nos. 48 and 49 “Typen der Judengasse” sits below the familiar representation of a male lined face, peaked cap, and flowing beard as well as below photos of women with lined faces and heads for the most part covered by shawls.
signifier of religion, such as titling the photo of an elderly man with cap and white beard *Talmud Hours* (fig. 7) to remind us of the tradition of continued study of biblical interpretations. Gidal’s signifier of this religious type is more frequently contrasted with younger, less traditionally-minded Jews. Close to the end of his photobook, in a work simply titled *Warsaw: On a Street Corner* (fig. 8), Gidal places an elderly pious Jew in the center of the composition, contrasting him with two clean-shaven younger men who appear on either side. Interestingly, the secular youth in a cap looks quizzically at his elder while the other youth in the hat and coat of the Orthodox is looking away from the center. In their quest for a modern representative of eastern European Jewry, both photographers deviated not only from the soulful drawings that accompanied such literary descriptions of the east as Hermann Struck’s sketch from Arnold Zweig’s 1922 travel record, but, as we will see, also from commercial photography used for inexpensive travel souvenirs and newspaper accounts. Comparing, for example, an image Vorobeichic titled *The Jew* (fig. 9b) to a Struck portrait (fig. 9a), we notice how vigorous and vital Vorobeichic’s Judaic representative appears, especially when viewed next to the stooped and slightly hunched figure drawn by Struck.24 Believing that the tools of photography were more dynamic and hence more modern than drawing or painting, both photographers often gave their images of eastern Jews dignity by emphasizing their upright posture and straightforward gaze. Unlike the commercial postcards of Jews (see fig. 16b) or the photographic accounts taken during World War I,25 both men used close cropping (and

24 For the first photo in his book, Vorobeichic montaged a similar Judaic face (albeit more cheerful) next to a cut-out of a Vilna synagogue.
25 The work of Willy Romer provides good examples of the type of photographic records – usually wide views of figures standing or sitting in a shtetl square – taken in the Polish lands during the War. See *Der Fotograf Willy Römer 1887–1979: auf den Strassen von Berlin* [catalogue, Deutsche Historische Museum], curator Diethart Kerbs (Berlin, 2004).
Giving dignity to eastern European Jews was more unusual for a secular Jew at that time than one might imagine, for it was not only German Christians who commented on the negative defects of ghetto and shtetl Jews. As the historian Steven Aschheim and others have reported, many assimilated Germanized Jews were not only uninterested in questions of origins but actively looked down on their poorer eastern Jewish brethren as they streamed westward when the borders changed at the end of World War I. The Czech-German author Franz Kafka commented on how his wealthy religious family resented the impoverished Ostjuden, seeing them as outsiders from mainstream, modern culture, and referring to them as smelly, coarse, vermin-infected, and unkempt. But for Kafka, who was not a Zionist, the Ostjuden were more authentic to their Jewish roots because of their simplicity and poverty.26 The belief that the Ostjuden’s lack of material goods allowed them to be more spiritual dominated the perspective of a number of thinkers, among them Martin Buber. Zweig’s 1922 eastern travel record is filled with romanticized and mythic visions of eastern Jews as one people, holier and purer than the assimilated German Jews, whom Zweig criticized as bourgeois. Yet others interested in the Ostjuden warned against over-idealizing them and making their way of life into a “cult.”27

While both photographers often focused on the piously-garbed Jew who inhabited the eastern regions, neither neglected the impoverished or crowded conditions of the Jewish quarters. Vorobeichic used multiple montages to depict the breadlines for the poor, poignantly captioning the scene Our Daily Bread (fig. 10). Gidal

---

26 Kafka was interested in Yiddish culture, attended the Yiddish theater in Prague before World War I, and believed educating the Ostjuden in Jewish traditions would be beneficial; see Brenner, Renaissance of Jewish Culture, 187–90; Evelyn Torton Beck, Kafka and the Yiddish Theater: Its Impact on His Work (Madison, 1971), 214–15.

27 Aschheim describes both the negative and the romanticized attitudes of Jews in Germany to the Ostjuden; see Aschheim Brothers and Strangers, esp. 196–207. See also the discussion on this topic in Noah Isenberg, “Preface to the English Edition,” in Arnold Zweig: The Face of East European Jewry, ed. and trans. Noah Isenberg (Berkeley, 2004), esp. x–xxvi.
employed a more straightforward format, as in _Lublin: Selling Potatoes on a Street Corner of the Jewish Quarter_ (fig. 11), to document the poverty he witnessed. Even though neither Gidal nor Vorbeichic were Communist party members, they were exposed to much discussion about economic inequalities and class struggles. When Vorbeichic attended the Bauhaus, lively discussions about the new Soviet Union, about the importance of socialism as well as Communism, were part of daily life, especially when the Communist-oriented Hannes Meyer was appointed as the second director of that school in 1928. Gidal worked for left-leaning newspapers, and, as we know from historians such Jehuda Reinharz, one of the aims of a number of German Zionists in the twenties was to align themselves more directly with socialist thinking; hence, both included photos of ragged children (figs. 12 and 13). Vorbeichic’s image reflects more directly the class-conscious photos of impoverished youngsters such as found in the German Communist-sponsored illustrated weekly, the _Arbeiterfotograf_. Gidal’s images of children are less poignant, as the one in front of his family’s rope shop in Lowicz reveals (fig. 13). This child, and those in numerous other photos of children in Gidal’s book, may be shoeless, but neither he nor the others appear as ragged or oppressed as those pictured in Vorbeichic’s book.

Very few working Jews are found in Vorbeichic’s project, and when they are, the three-montaged arrangement of the figures is ironically titled _Daily Reward [Tagelöchner]_ (fig. 14) and the men are portrayed as dispirited, with the oldest man in the center image shouldering the heaviest burden. Gidal, in contrast,

---

29 For examples of photographs, see Joachim Büthe, et al., _Der Arbeiterfotograf: Dokumente und Beiträge zur Arbeiterfotografie 1926–1932_ (Cologne, 1978), esp. 182, 192, 204, 205.
positions his working Jews in a positive manner. In *Lublin Porter Waiting for a Customer* (fig. 15), the porter’s head is upright, his shoulders are not bent, and his crossed feet convey a relaxed attitude as he leans on the doorjamb that serves as a frame and resting place for his body. Gidal seems to reference Sander, whose portrait *Hod Carrier* (fig. 16a) uses the specific environment to provide a clear sense of place and balance in order to convey a monumental but concrete image of a daily laborer. Of course, the fact that Gidal’s relatives in Poland had a small business in rope-making, a dominant occupation for many eastern European Jews, may have given him a predisposition to honor his Jewish brethren as he moved through what he called “the invisible curtain, which had separated West and East.” But his work is neither mythologizing nor reportage, as we can see by comparing Gidal’s porter to a porter from one of the many postcards (fig. 16b) taken before World War I that reveal disheveled figures in torn clothing and rag-bound feet. Gidal’s porter differs markedly in his upright but relaxed stance from these earlier artifacts.

Although Gidal and Vorobeichic were not commissioned to photograph the Ostjuden, their personal decisions may have been supported by the increasing rise of the National Socialists after the 1930 German elections. However, their variant representations of working men may also derive from the different attitude of the Zionists during the Weimar Republic toward the concept of the modern Jew. Gidal’s strategy of projecting strength in his porter rather than victimization may also reflect his basic comprehension of Zionism as enabling a new vision for Jews by revitalizing both the body and mind through agricultural work and sports. His youthful membership in the Blau-Weiss movement reminds us
Both photographers end on a positive note, using, however, quite disparate choices to bring vitality to their vision. Gidal’s last page (fig. 18) depicts the tomb of the Gaon of Vilna, an eighteenth-century rabbi admired for his rationalist views. A man in traditional Orthodox dress places his hand reverentially on the wall. But Gidal also reminds his viewers of modernity by having two men in secular clothing looking at the tomb respectfully but not so overcome by adulation as to touch it. Writing later about his visit to Jewish Poland, he described the incredible mix of attitudes and conditions that he encountered in this area, mentioning “men of faith and hypocrites […] of his exposure to the philosophy of strengthening the body through sports in order to prepare for the rigors of agricultural work in Palestine. During the late twenties, he photographed sports competitions and parades of German Zionist youth organizations such as Bar Kochba (fig. 17).\(^{31}\) Just as he included spirited children, Gidal also included animated rather than victimized women.\(^{32}\) It is perhaps here that the power of Gidal’s vision surfaces, in his ability to envision the complexity of Jewish culture at that time. In this regard his photo-journalist background with its straightforward strategies, like those of Sander, facilitated his vision.

31 For discussion of Bar Kochba and other Jewish sports groups, see Michael Stanislawski, Zionism and the Fin de Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky (Berkeley, 2001), 91–93.

32 The women Gidal chose for his photos appear to be more secular and less victimized than those chosen by Vorobeichic. In Gidal’s second photo, “Lowicz. Entrance from the market-square to my grandfather’s house,” he features a woman stepping out from beneath the archway of a dark courtyard into the bright light of the market place and the outside world. The first image of a woman in Vorobeichic’s chronicle doesn’t appear until no. 27, “Courtyard Passageway.” After that, many of the others that appear depict a woman sitting before a shop waiting for a customer or are given generic labels such as “Motherhood,” “Maternity,” “Old Jewish Woman,” or “Jewish Type in the Alley” (nos. 36, 42, 43, 46, and 49). In each case, the individual women seem to be bent over and ragged, and have lined, anxious faces.
Fig. 17. Tim Gidal. Parade of a Bar Kochba Group after a relay race. 1932

Fig. 18. Tim Gidal. Vilna: Tomb of the Gaon of Vilna. 16th photo in Memories
Fig. 19a. and b. Moshe Vorobeichic, *The Blind Fiddler*, no. 62 and *The Cantor Gedalke*, no. 63 in *Ein Ghetto*. 
ignoramuses and atheists, socialists and communists, [...] orthodox and assimilationists." He ended by stating that this mixture gave him a sense of "the flow of Jewish life from the past to the future,"33 all of which Gidal attempted to convey in his pictorial memoir by giving weight to the secular and the physical rather than the religious.

In contrast to Gidal, Vorobeichic ended his photobook with representations of joy brought from Jewish culture. In the two facing pages (figs. 19a and 19b) before the last one, Vorobeichic juxtaposed several montaged photos, a street musician playing a violin, producing perhaps klezmer music, and a child and a man and a woman responding. On the facing page, on the upper right, he included three montaged views of his “typical” Jew, who appear to be looking at or listening to music. But the sound of the music playing is conveyed by the presence of a record in the upper left of that composite photo. This circular record is the only clear representation of modernization – of the technological revolution of duplication and reproduction – that Vorobeichic has included in his portrayal. To reinforce his concept of the vitality that might come out of Jewish culture, Vorobeichic concluded his book with an image of his typical Jew – smiling (fig. 20), with a portion of the face sharply shadowed, as his mentor Moholy-Nagy frequently had done. Vorobeichic left little doubt about the mood he wanted to convey: the caption of this image is Fröhlich (Joyous). More cinematic than Gidal, Vorobeichic used a repetition of montaged motifs cut out from pieces of Jewish life to propel the viewer through his book. The number of dynamic, montaged compositions increases toward the end, and suggests that Vorobeichic may have viewed his visual experiments as modernizing interpretations of the folk culture of the so-called authentic Jew of the East.

Gidal’s photographic memoir did not emphasize eastern European Jews as religious or victimized; that is, he did not concentrate on dire poverty or on Jews praying in relation to their synagogue as did Vorobeichic. Instead, he focused on dignifying the multiple aspects of daily life. Neither photographer advocated a return to the traditional lifestyle and religious activity of their eastern brethren – they were not romanticized devotees of eastern Jewry. For Gidal, the concept of a vigorous people not dependent on traditional religious constraints, who could build a communal, socialistic nation, is central to his extraordinary, hybrid portrait of the Ostjuden. For Vorobeichic, the eye of the camera was the athlete, modernizing through its action the Judaic type. Arranging vigorous, dynamic photographs, both men registered their identification with the vital construction of a modern Jew represented either by the structure of the shots or by the image itself.

33 Gidal, “Visit to Jewish Poland.”
In a sense, we can see both artists as paradigms of a committed photography, which as Benjamin described in 1931, would “instruct” the spectator by “capturing fleeting and secret images whose shock effect paralyzes the associative mechanisms in the beholder.”34 That is, for Benjamin the most powerful photograph, whether following a Sander or a Moholy-Nagy approach, would stop and change the customary response of the spectator. While Vorobeichic’s strategy of montaging would have definitely unsettled the spectator at that time, so Gidal’s strategy of giving his images of ordinary Jews a direct sense of power would have also shocked the observer, particularly those accustomed to equating Jewishness with piety and religion. The series of photos which make up these photographic books reveal not only a remembrance of eastern European Jewry but, more importantly, two complex strategies meant to propagate – that is, to construct – a new identity for Jews in the modern world.

34 Benjamin, “A Little History of Photography” (n. 2 above), 526–27.