

R E V I E W

Łukasz Tomasz Sroka, *Tel Awiw. Nowoczesne miasto starożytnego narodu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Austeria Klezmerhojs, 2022), 451 pp., ISBN: 978-83-7866-546-5

In 2022, Austeria Klezmerhojs Press, a Krakow-based publishing house, published a long-awaited book by Łukasz Tomasz Sroka entitled *Tel Awiw. Nowoczesne miasto starożytnego narodu* [Tel Aviv. A Modern City of an Ancient Nation]. The previous rich output of the author of the discussed monograph and his reputation in scientific circles allowed us to believe that the publication handed over to the readers will present high scientific and erudite quality. This was also the case. At this point, it is worth noting that Łukasz Tomasz Sroka is a Polish historian of the mid-generation (born in 1979) connected with the Institute of History and Archival Studies of the Pedagogical University in Krakow, who, despite his relatively young age, remains the author of several books devoted to the history of Galician Jews and the history of the modern State of Israel. His works have received excellent reviews and opinions from Polish, Western European, American and Israeli university researchers. The most notable are the extensive monographs dealing with the problems of the Jews of Krakow, Lviv and Galicia more broadly. The following books should be mentioned in particular: *Żydzi w Krakowie Studium o elicie miasta 1850–1918* [Jews in Krakow A Study on the City's Elite 1850–1918] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogicznej in Kraków, 2008, 239 pp.); *Polskie korzenie Izraela: wprowadzenie do tematu. Wybór źródeł* [The Polish Roots of Israel: An Introduction to the Subject. A Selection of Sources], co-authored by Mateusz Sroka (Krakow–Budapest: Wydawnictwo Austeria Klezmerhojs, 2015, 710 pp.); and *In the Light of Vienna: Jews in Lviv – between Tradition and Modernisation (1867–1914)* (Berlin–Bern– Bruxelles, etc.: Peter Lang, 2018, 436 pp.). The former work is considered pioneering in the context of research on the history of Krakow's Jews in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The second is a book showing holistically the participation of Polish Jews in the Zionist movement and their influence on the construction of the State of Israel after the Holocaust and The Second World War. The latter monograph was dedicated to the Jews of Lviv during the period of the so-called 'Galician Autonomy' and was published in 2018 by the renowned Berlin publishing house Peter Lang as a part of the acclaimed series 'Studies in Jewish History and Memory'. In recent years, Sroka has also published in Polish and English a critically acclaimed pretext biography of a Krakovian, a refugee from the Krakow ghetto, after the war a key figure in the banking sector in Europe and Israel, now living in Tel Aviv, Marcel Goldman. The book is entitled *Człowiek sukcesu w państwie sukcesów: biografia Marcela Goldmana krakowianina w Tel Awiwie* (foreword by Aleksander B. Skotnicki; afterword

by Leopold 'Poldek' Wasserman, Krakow: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego w Krakowie, 2019, 485 pp.; English-language version: *A Man of Success in the Land of Success: The Biography of Marcel Goldman, a Kracovian in Tel Aviv*, Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2022, 436 pp.). Among the publications produced, as it were, on the margins of Sroka's primary research, we should single out the book entitled *Demokracja izraelska* [Israeli Democracy], co-authored by Krzysztof Chaczko, and Artur Skorek (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018, 384 pp.).

At the beginning of this discussion, it is worth referring to the book's structure. It is remarkably simple. The work is divided into five parts, including an elaborate and exquisitely crafted introduction, three main chapters and a concluding summary. The three chapters are arranged chronologically and are entitled as follows: 'The ancient roots, the modern impulses', 'Jafa; From the founding of the town in 1909 to the end of the Second World War'; and 'From 1947 to the most recent times'. At this point, one could legitimately ask whether it would not have been more advantageous to go for a more sophisticated arrangement based on the most important problematic issues. Although each reader is entitled to his or her own opinion on the subject and can answer this question himself or herself after reading the book, I feel that the proposed structure works, especially if we look at the diverse profile of the readers to whom it is addressed. I am convinced by the author's words in the book's introduction, where he tries to resolve the dilemmas accompanying him in this field:

This book can be read in two ways. The work was written as a historical study of Tel Aviv. However, I have tried to present the results of my own scientific research in a form that is accessible to as many readers as possible. Therefore, in its scientific essence, the lecture adopted the convention of a journey through the city and its history. Thus, the work can be treated as a classic history book, but it can equally well serve as a scholarly guide to Tel Aviv.

Of the three cardinal chapters, the most modest is the first one, which is, in a sense, a form of syncretic presentation of the knowledge about the ancient fate of the Jews and Jaffa dating back 3.5 thousand years and bearing the well-deserved name of the 'mother city of Tel Aviv', as well as accounts of selected aspects of the contemporary 'Gate of Zion', as Tel Aviv was called. One has to admit that the author skilfully manoeuvres between chronologically distant issues, linking them with a common denominator – the diachronic presentation of Tel Aviv's role for the Jewish people.

The second chapter, on the fate of the city between 1909 and 1945, is much more extensive and shows the full extent of the research skills of Łukasz Tomasz Sroka, who specialises above all in the history of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. The book presents the most important episodes in the city's history, focusing on the founding of the settlement during the years of the First World War, which were so crucial for Tel Aviv (the liberation from the Turkish yoke by Field Marshal Edmund Allenby took place at that time) and the rule of the first mayor of Tel Aviv, Meir Dizengoff, considered the 'founding father' of the modern city. Dizengoff held the mayoral office with a two-year break (between 1925 and 1927) from granting Tel Aviv's municipal rights in 1921 until he died in 1936. Here, the author has concentrated mainly on the urban-architectural aspects, which is also something he can hardly be accused of, as this was a golden time of Bauhaus-inspired

building development for Tel Aviv. The section extensively presents Tel Aviv's relationship with Poland in the interwar years, which was characterised by exceptional dynamism at the time.

The book's third chapter is the most comprehensive, portraying the fate of Tel Aviv from 1947 to the most recent times. The reader begins his or her tour of Tel Aviv when the United Nations adopted a resolution abolishing the British Mandate over Palestine and establishing, among other things, the creation of the State of Israel in the former Mandate Areas. It finishes with a discussion of contemporary attractions that may attract the attention of foreign tourists, although how the knowledge is conveyed allows us to conclude that many cognitively interesting messages will also be drawn here by today's residents of Tel Aviv. The added value of this part of the book remains the skilful presentation of Polish-Israeli relations (mainly between Polish Jews and Israel), which, to a certain extent, defined post-war Israel and, above all, Tel Aviv, vividly described by the writer and publicist Aleksander (Aron) Klugman as the 'Polish colony by the Mediterranean'. Assuming that the monograph has the character of a 'scientific guide' – as the author himself described it – where the portrait of contemporary cities plays an important role, it is not surprising that this chapter dominates in quantity.

In conclusion, the book opens with a short but succinct introduction entitled 'Tel Aviv-Jaffa, City of Dreamers', written in June 2022 by Ron Chuldai, Mayor of Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

One of the strengths of the analysed book remains the archival sources used to write it. Unfortunately, many contemporary historians and researchers of the past take shortcuts and produce synthetic works without any in-depth criticism of archival sources, which they do not reach for at all or only sporadically. Works created in this way are incomplete and often deprived of scientific quality, and the knowledge derived from them is superficial and reproductive. The situation is entirely different with regard to the Polish-language monograph on Tel Aviv. In his research, Sroka drew on the archival resources preserved in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa City Archives, including, among others, city council resolutions from 1938 to 1939 and group and community meeting minutes for the period from 1926 to 1935. The foundations on which the author of 'Tel Aviv' also relied are memoirist sources and studies 'underpinned by autopsy', which capture the spirit of the city and eras both before the creation of the State of Israel and afterwards. Among the memoirs and reminiscences used are those that are widely known and popular also among foreign scholars such as: *Pamiętniki Teodora Herzla 1895–1904 w 6-ciu tomach*; *Liczą się tylko wielkie marzenia. Odwaga, wyobraźnia i budowa nowoczesnego Izraela* [The Memoirs of Theodor Herzl 1895–1904 in 6 volumes; Only Big Dreams Count. Courage, Imagination and the Construction of Modern Israel by Shimon Peres; and Writings. The Jewish State], a work by Vladimir Zeev Jabotinsky. However, Lukasz Tomasz Sroka's book is surrounded by less well-known – especially to the Israeli reader – works of memoir. These include Józef Hussarzewski's *Wspomnienia z naszej podróży na Wschodzie 1871–1872* [Memoirs of Our Journey in the East 1871–1872]; or Ferdinand Antoni Ossendowski's account entitled *Gasnące ognie. Podróż po Palestynie, Syrii i Mezopotamii* [Extinguishing fires. A Journey through Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia], which first appeared in print in 1931. The entire memoir layer is strengthened by sources from oral history. Among the witnesses of history whose recollections have been used in the Tel Aviv monograph are: Holocaust survivor Marcel Goldman and his wife Bianka, who

survived the Siberian exile; the long-standing president of the Union of Krakovians in Israel and a great advocate of the Polish-Israeli dialogue – Lili Haber; and the writer, publicist and literary critic Ryszard Lów. The memoirs quoted on the pages of the book are of exceptional cognitive value, and their juxtaposition with other types of sources and the existing literature on the subject proves the author's high erudition. Printed documentation, leaflet publications and, to a lesser extent, cartographic material should also be considered as key sources used to write the Tel Aviv monograph. The group of printed sources included poorly known items such as *New Palestine. An Illustrated Guide*, published in Tel Aviv in 1934, or *Steimatzki's Guide to Palestine*, printed in Jerusalem in 1942 (with a new detailed map of Palestine, a pictorial map of the Old City of Jerusalem and 32 maps and sketches of interesting excursions). Concluding this review stage, it is impossible not to mention the extensive press search. We are referring here not only to contemporary press titles such as *Ha-Arec* or *Israel Hajom*, but also to the pre-war Jewish press. The latter includes the Polish-language *Nowy Dziennik*, founded by the legendary Zionist activist and rabbi Ozjasz Thon, and the Lviv-based *Chwila*, founded by the Jewish writer and literary critic Henryk Heschels.

The multiple portrayal of the fate of Tel Aviv presented in the context of the history of the Jews and the State of Israel is a very strong point of the reviewed book. This asset has not escaped the attention of the monograph's publishing reviewers either. One of them, Professor Jacek Purchla – the founder and, from 1991 to 2018, the director of the International Cultural Centre in Krakow and, from 2015 to 2020, the chairman of the Polish Committee for UNESCO – in his review even stated:

Professor Lukasz Tomasz Sroka's work is based on the assumption that the city's problems should be approached from a holistic perspective. Tel Aviv, as 'the first Hebrew and Zionist city', requires the author to outline a broad perspective and to evoke events from both the history of the chosen people and the short but complicated history of the State of Israel. Professor Sroka masterfully combines the fascinating story of the building of a new city in the desert with the story of the fate of the Jewish people in the twentieth century, often going back into the depths of its history all the way to ancient times. The result is not only the story of an important Mediterranean metropolis but also an accessible compendium of the origins and history of modern Israel.

'A fascinating story' about Tel Aviv and the people of Israel – as Prof. Purchla put it – would perhaps not be so attractive to the general public if it were not for the fact that Łukasz Tomasz Sroka skilfully combined the written word with images, or more precisely with the exceptionally rich illustrative material included in the book. Let me just mention that the monograph uses 238 photographs, uniquely enhancing the narrative expression. The iconographic material used by the author consists to a large extent of historical photographs, only some of which are widely known to the contemporary reader and can be found in the public domain, while others are not in mainstream circulation. The illustrations presented are well-selected. In my opinion, some of them remain crucial to the importance of conveying historical content. Such examples include the photograph by Abraham Soskin depicting the founding of the city of Tel Aviv in 1909 and inter-war photographs from the collections of Zeev Aleksandrowicz, Zoltan Kluger and Zvi Oron-Orushkes. Notably, many of the published photographs depicting Tel Aviv in recent years were taken by the author

himself between 2014 and 2018, proving that the concept for the book was born long before he started writing it. The attentive reader of the book may be intrigued by how the illustrations are presented. They are all kept in black and white tones, despite the fact that many of them were, after all, taken contemporarily and depict today's Tel Aviv. Of course, the economic factor was probably important for the publisher himself. The reprinting of the illustrations in black and white reduced the cost of printing. Paradoxically, however, the formula adopted gives the book a peculiar atmosphere but also adds to the seriousness of its protagonist – the city of Tel Aviv.

Among some inadequacies that may hinder a smooth reading experience is the lack of a collective explanation of the acronyms and abbreviations used in the book, with the result that even a reader who is well versed in history must occasionally walk away from the reading to be able to independently verify this or that abbreviation. However, this remark is largely the publisher's responsibility and not the author himself. Nevertheless, it is advisable that in future work on a foreign-language edition of *Tel Aviv* – which I hope will take place soon – to make up for this inconvenience.

The monograph on Tel Aviv by Łukasz Tomasz Sroka is a complete work, which not only presents the historical events of the city and its inhabitants from the time of its foundation, but also introduces its contemporary characteristics. Thus, the book should be regarded as an interdisciplinary study in which historical knowledge is combined with information from the fields of architecture, art history, literary studies and, finally, political science. The book has an essential character. Through the use of dynamic storytelling, it reads very well, which makes this publication attractive to the reader, both me, familiar with the annals of the past, as well as the more demanding reader. Without a shadow of a doubt, this publication is worth recommending, and its biggest drawback so far remains the language in which it was prepared, which clearly limits its reception in international circles. In conclusion, it is worth noting that, according to the author's announcement on the book's pages, the Tel Aviv monograph opens the Marcel Goldman publishing series entitled 'Cities and Regions of Israel'. One has to admit that the goal set by Łukasz Tomasz Sroka is ambitious. However, following this Krakow-based historian's scholarly output and research activities, one can assume that these are not empty promises. The attractiveness of this series is further enhanced by the fact that, apart from Jerusalem, no academic monograph describing the recent history of Israeli cities has so far been published, a history, I might add, reconstructed based on an extensive source and bibliographical database.

Konrad Meus (Krakow)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6865-2174>