

Review of *A Border Town in Poland*
Quad, the Oxford University Alumni Newsletter, January 2022

<https://www.alumni.ox.ac.uk/article/off-the-shelf-january-2022>



A Border Town in Poland: A 20th Century Memoir, (Penn Convoy Press, 2021) by Nora Jean and Michael H. Levin (Wadham, 1964).

This privately printed memoir is an important addition to twentieth century history. Hirsch Bieler was born in 1900 in Grajewo, a shtetl (town) in Tsarist Poland on Germany's East Prussian border. He left in 1919 for a better life in Germany and the move lights the touch paper for a series of further moves – and not just the obvious one to America but also the Third Reich and British Mandate Palestine. The book is very carefully researched with terrific visuals of maps and family photos rendered by the editors, to carry along a vivid and energising oral history. What we're given is an extensive memoir by Bieler, transmitted before his death in 1985 and now published in its full glory. It is also a corrective for our overblown times, recounting how the cellar had to be filled with 'potatoes and cabbage and red beets and carrots, staples that would last. If you were rich, you also bought a couple of sacks of winter apples.' Worlds away from today's expectations yet the spirit of community and religion would appear to have made up for the hardships; there was meaning if not wealth, and infinite ingenuity to evade, subvert, smuggle across and ultimately to leave the Russian Pale that confined an estimated 5 million Jews by 1897, and which included this one border town within a thousand-mile slice of territory.