POLISH JEWRY: 1919-1939
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(I) PERCEPTION AND REALITY
• Interwar Polish Jewry was a complex society of 3 million people with a 900 year history.
• Our perception of this community is caught between horror at the extreme and unnatural way in which it was destroyed and nostalgia for a harmonious past that never existed.
• But this was a multifaceted society – neither static nor seamless – vital and dynamic precisely because of its fissures, conflicts, and struggles as it searched for new identities in a changing world.

(II) SIGNIFICANCE
(A) THE JEWISH HEARTLAND
• 1939: More than 5 million Jews out of a world population of 16.7 million remained concentrated in the area between the Oder and Dnieper Rivers and the Baltic and Black Seas.
• Here was a community of such size and density, reinforced by such enduring patterns of settlement and emigration and social and economic organization that it became the prototype.
(B) A CRITICAL MASS
• Its descendants would come to include most of the Jews in the former Soviet Union and North America and almost half of the Jews in the State of Israel.
• In their own eyes and the eyes of the world, they epitomized what was “Jewish” even as their institutions, their status, and their sense of themselves were undergoing profound changes as a result of modernization and secularization.
(C) POLISH JEWRY
• 1931; According to the census of 1931, 3,136,000 million of these Jews lived in the Polish Republic, where they constituted the second largest ethnic minority and made up 1/5 of world Jewry.
• This was the very heart of the heartland.

(III) HISTORY
(A) MIDDLE AGES
• Jewish settlement in Poland dated back to the 10th century, with larger waves of immigration during the late 11th to the 15th centuries, in the wake of the Crusades, the Black Death, and the expulsions from Spain and Portugal.
• 1200s: To stimulate the economy after the Mongol invasions, Polish princes invited settlers from Germany to immigrate – among them, many Jews. In 1264, the Statute of Kalisz, granted residence privileges to Jews in western Poland. In 1334, it was extended Jews in the rest of the Polish territories.
• As persecution intensified in West and Central Europe, more Jews moved eastward, establishing communities and helping to settle and develop undeveloped areas of the realm.
(B) EARLY MODERN PERIOD
• 1569: Lithuania merged with Poland, making it the second most populous European country after France and the largest European country after Russia. Jews were in the forefront, settling in and developing the vast newly acquired areas on the “eastern frontier.”
• 17th and 18th centuries: developed a distinctive way of life based on important patterns of social, cultural, religious, and economic organization that originated or came to fruition here.
• Transformed and untransformed, they would persist into the interwar years – the synagogue, the shtetl (market town), the kheyder (religious school), Hasidism, and the yeshiva (Talmudic academy).
(C) 19TH CENTURY
(1) PARTITION
• 1772-1795: Poland-Lithuania was partitioned between the empires of Prussia, Austria, and Russia. The largest part of its territory and Jewish population was absorbed into the Russian Empire.
(2) PALE OF SETTLEMENT
• 1791: The Russian Empire restricted Jewish residence to the territories annexed from Poland in the west and the Ottoman Empire along the shores of the Black Sea in the east – the so-called “Pale of Settlement.”
• 1897: The Jewish population in the Pale stood at 4,899,300 or 11.6% of the Pale’s total population and 40% of world Jewry – the largest concentration of Jews worldwide. At its center were the Polish territories.
(3) JEWISH LIFE IN THE PALE
• 1830s-1840s: The Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment reached the Pale from West and Central Europe.
• 1880s: By this period, due to its influence, Jewish identity was increasingly secularized and politicized, as Jews began to define themselves as a cultural and political collective rather than a religious one.
• This encouraged the emergence of ideologies and movements that responded to antisemitism and government-sanctioned violence in political and ideological terms.

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(a) THE BUND: “The General Jewish Workers Union (Bund) of Poland, Lithuania, and Russia” was founded in Vilna (Vilnius) in 1897, linked the struggles of the Russian Empire’s Jews with the struggles of all the empire’s workers and sought to bring about a socialist revolution.

(b) ZIONISM: Founded in the Pale in 1881-1882, it considered the Jews a “nation in the family of nations” and emphasized the need for a territorial homeland. The Haskalah also influenced the transformation of Yiddish from a spoken vernacular into a literary language.

(D) 20TH CENTURY: THE SECOND POLISH REPUBLIC

- TREATY OF VERSAILLES (1919): At the end of World War I, Poland emerged again as an independent state – the Second Polish Republic – cobbled together by the Allied Powers from "Old Poland" and parts of the defeated German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires.
- A MULTI-CULTURAL STATE: This new state was a multicultural/multi-religious/multi-linguistic state, Ethnic Poles made up 2/3 of the population and Ukrainians, Jews, Byelorussians, Germans, Lithuanians and others made up the remaining third.
- NATIONAL MINORITIES TREATY (June 28, 1919): In order to have its independence recognized and to enter the League of Nations, Poland had to sign the National Minorities Treaty. Ratified by the Polish Parliament on July 31, 1919 and implemented on January 10, 1920, treaty granted full civil rights to all non-Polish “national minorities.” This included the right to preserve and cultivate their national character and languages, attend state run public schools or maintain in their own state-accredited schools, and elect their own representatives to municipal and national governments.
- WARS (1918-1921): The new republic was not consolidated until 1921 because it was drawn immediately into two wars that erupted in the wake of World War I and the Russian Revolution.
  1. POLISH-UKRAINIAN WAR (1918-1919): Fought against the (West) Ukrainian People’s Republic for control of Eastern Galicia.
  2. POLISH-SOVIET WAR (1919-1921): Fought in alliance with the (West) Ukrainian People’s Republic against Soviet Russia and the Soviet Ukraine because of conflicting expansionist goals by all concerned. In both conflicts, Polish Jews fought alongside Polish non-Jews in defense of the republic.

(IV) DEMOGRAPHY AND SETTLEMENT

(A) POPULATION SIZE: World’s largest Jewish community
  - 1931: 3.13 million
  - 1939: 3.25-3.5 million

(B) NATURAL GROWTH: High birth rate
  - Large families (especially among observant Jews)
  - Low infant mortality rate
  - More children living to maturity

(C) AGE: Getting younger
  - 1931: 30% under age 15

(D) SETTLEMENT PATTERNS: “Quintessentially urban”
  - 60%-70% in cities
  - 30-40% in towns and shtetlekh: especially in the east, where they made often up 30%-70% of the population.

(V) ECONOMY

(A) PARTICIPATION: % Jewish participation in Poland’s economy (1931 census)
  - 71%: Retail trade
  - 50%: Clothing and leather industries
  - 50%: Doctors and lawyers (private practice)

(B) OCCUPATION: Jewish occupational structure (1931 census)
  - 96%: Non-farm occupations
  - 42%: Industry, mining, and crafts
  - 36%: Trade and trade-related (middlemen)

(C) EMPLOYMENT: % Polish labor force employed by Jewish firms (1931 census)
  - TEXTILES, FOOD, MINING
    - 1929: 30%
    - 1939: 40%

(D) PROSPERITY: Getting poorer

(E) PATTERNS: The family economy
(VI) SOCIETY

(A) CHARACTERISTICS

(1) DIVERSITY
• Spoke with many voices.
• Articulated competing dreams for the future.
• Supported a wide array of institutions, organizations, and services.

(2) COMPLEXITY
• Dense network of national and local agencies and organizations.
• Centralized, professionalized, politicized.
• Staffed by poorly paid but devoted and idealistic individuals.
• Supported by American and Polish Jews through international, national and local campaigns.

(B) EDUCATION PATTERNS

(1) ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS
   (a) Attendance
   • 20% of Jewish students attended Jewish-run private schools
   • 80% of Jewish students attended Polish public schools
   (b) Jewish private sector education
   • Yiddish-language schools: TSYSKO, (Bund, Yiddishist)
   • Hebrew language schools: Tarbut (Zionist)
   • Polish-language schools; Private funding
   • Religious schools: Day schools, after-schools (Agudas Yisrael, Mizrachi)

(2) SECONDARY SCHOOLS
• State run gymnasias and lycceums discriminated against Jewish students
• Jewish-run institutions were expensive and required families to be able to do without the student as a wage earner.
• Some Jewish students attended Jewish-run vocational schools

(3) UNIVERSITIES
• Jewish students were enrolled in universities in numbers disproportionate to Jewish representation in the population.
• Early 1920s: Jewish students represented over 1/3 of all university students
• Later 1930s: A lower percentage because of intensified antisemitism.

(C) SOCIAL SERVICES

(1) “TOZ” (Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdowia Ludnosci Zydowskiej or “Society for the Safeguarding of the Health of the Jewish Population”)
• Established in 1921
• Affiliated with the international OSE/OZE organization.
• Partially supported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC).
• Maintained clinics, hospitals, visiting nurses, convalescent homes, summer homes, and day care centers.

(2) “CENTOS” (Centralla Towarzystw Opieki nad Sierotami or Central Federation for the Care of Children and Orphans)
• 1924: Founded to consolidate all organizations taking care of Jewish orphans and abandoned children
• Also supported by the AJDC.
• Maintained orphanages and “summer colonies,” provided food, clothing, vocational training, and sports activities, and oversaw health and hygiene.
• In 1936 helped 27693 children.

(3) FREE LOAN SOCIETIES
• In existence since the early 1800s, but after World War I, they were expanded, centralized, and increasingly supported by the AJDC.
• LENDERS: Community members contributed small amounts of money to provide interest free loans to individuals for businesses, dowries and even for ship passage to emigrate.
• BORROWERS: Were expected to repay the loan in full.

(VII) CULTURE

(A) HEBREW: Never caught on either as a spoken language or as a form of secular written expression despite Zionism and the Tarbut system.

(B) POLISH: Coming into its own with a thriving Polish-language press and theater organized by and directed towards Jews.

(C) YIDDISH flowered.
(1) 1931 CENSUS
• A majority of Polish Jews listed Yiddish as their “mother tongue.”
• LANGUAGE BREAKDOWN (all Polish citizens): Polish = 69%; Ukrainian = 14%; Yiddish = 9%; Belarusian = 3%; German = 2%; Other (Russian, Lithuanian, German, etc.) = 3%
(2) YIDDISH LITERACY: Yiddish was a highly literate language
- A significant body of scholarly research
- A thriving press
- A dynamic publishing industry: fiction, non-fiction poetry; original works and translations
- Films, theater, and popular music

(3) YIDDISH PRESS
- More than 30 daily Jewish newspapers and 130 Jewish periodicals were published throughout Poland.
- Some were national, others were local.
- They represented every orientation and opinion.
- Many towns published weekly newspapers that appeared every Friday and covered local and national events.

(4) YIDDISH THEATER: “GOLDEN AGE OF YIDDISH THEATER”
- Professional theaters in the larger cities.
- Amateur groups in numerous smaller locales.
- Yiddish repertoire featured original productions as well as translations of classics and Polish plays
- Yiddish theater also had close trans-Atlantic ties with American Yiddish theater

(5) YIDDISH CINEMA
- A serious Yiddish cinema was just coming into its own at the very end of the 1930s.
- It was Warsaw based, tied to Yiddish theater and to American-Jewish cinema.

(6) YIDDISH SCHOLARSHIP
(a) WARSAW: Institute of Judaic Studies
- Founded in 1928
- 1936: The Judaic Library and Institute of Judaic Studies were moved to a building designed by Edward Zacharias Eber on Tlomackie Street, near the Great Synagogue.
- 1939: Closed by the Germans, it became the site of Emmanuel Ringelblum’s legal and illegal Warsaw Ghetto activities – the Self-Help Society as well as the secret Oneg Shabbat Archives.
- 1949: Since then, it has housed the reconstituted Jewish Historical Institute (ZIH)
(b) VILNA: Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO)
- Founded in 1925.
- Dedicated to the study of Yiddish and East European Jewish culture.
- Used Yiddish as its official language for business and scholarship.
- 1925-1940: Published over 100 volumes of research studies in the social sciences and humanities.
- Amassed a comprehensive library and archives, gathered by zamlers (amateur collectors) from Poland, Europe, and the Americas.
- Offered courses for teachers from Yiddish-language schools
- Developed standards for Yiddish spelling and translation still used today.

(VIII) POLITICS

(A) SOCIALISM: THE BUND
- In the 1930s, the Bund was Poland’s largest single Jewish political party, with some some 99,000 members.
- The Bund espoused doikeyt: “here-ness”: the belief that Polish Jewry’s problems would not be solved by leaving Poland, but would have to be addressed, here and now in Poland via political and cultural activism.
- The Bund was especially strong in northeastern Poland and in Vilna.

(B) ZIONISM
- In the 1930s, Zionism began to outpace the Bund, especially among young people and especially in central Poland and Western Galicia.
- The many Zionist parties and their youth groups were an important part of the political and social landscape.
- However, unlike the Bund, Zionists were divided along a broad spectrum of ideological orientations from the right-wing Revizionistn (Revisionists) to the left-wing Poalei Zion (Zionist Socialists).
- Still, all Zionists agreed that the Jews had no future in Poland and urged Polish Jewry to prepare for immigration (Aliyah) to Palestine and to support the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.
- Zionist youth groups were especially important in interwar Poland. Large numbers of young people joined them. Hashomer Hatas’ar (Socialist) was the largest, most established, and best funded of the youth groups; but Betar (Revisionist) was rapidly becoming the most popular and one of the fastest growing.

(C) RELIGIOUS NON-ZIONIST: AGUDAS YISRAEL ~ “UNION OF ISRAEL”
- ORIGINS: 1912 in Katowicze, Poland, after the 10th World Zionist Congress defeated a motion by the religious Zionist Mizrachi for the funding of religious schools.
- GOAL: To mobilize orthodox/traditionally observant Jews to promote the supremacy of Torah in all problems facing Jews as individuals and as a nation.
- PROPONENTS: Many Hasidic Jews and those involved in the yeshives, Hasidic rebbes.
- POLITICS: Ran in elections and won seats in the Polish parliament.
(IX) ANTI-PATHY

(A) POLITICS: “Poles vs. Jews”

(1) THE GOVERNMENT
• 1919-1935: Although the protection of the National Minorities Treaty was uneven, Marshal Jozef Piłsudski, the republic’s president from 1926 to 1935 and a strong autocratic leader, was able to rein in antisemitism. But political parties advocating antisemitic policies also emerged. But his death in 1935 freed these parties to press for changes.
• 1936-1939: Inspired by Germany’s Nuremberg Laws, the new government restricted the Jews’ social mobility, stifled their economic viability, and publicly urged them to leave Poland.

(2) NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY (Narodowa Demokracja or ND or ENDECJA)
• ORIGINS AND COMPOSITION: Established in the 19th century, this ultra-nationalist right-wing party, had seats in the Polish parliament., and was popular among high school and college students
• GOALS, IDEOLOGY, TACTICS: Seeking to “Polonize” the national minorities, it questioned Polish Jewry’s patriotism, considered all Jews a global threat, sought to limit the Jews’ civil, social, and economic rights, and encouraged antisemitic actions such as boycotts, demonstrations, and pogroms.

(B) LAWS: Anti-Jewish measures

(1) BUSINESS, COMMERCE, AND COMMUNITY
• All shops required to include the name of the owner on their business sign, making Jewish-owned businesses easy targets for boycotts and attacks.
• Kosher slaughter of animals was banned.
• Laws requiring businesses to be closed on Sunday hurt Jewish businesses, many of which were closed on Saturday.
• The government interfered in the elections and budgets of the kehiles (Jewish municipal governing councils, preventing them from functioning autonomously.

(2) PROFESSIONS AND CIVIL SERVICE
• Jews were excluded from the civil service, most railroad jobs, state-run monopolies (e.g., the tobacco industry), all public schools, state run financial institutions (e.g., the Bank Polski)
• Jews were excluded from membership in the Polish Medical Association, the Polish Bar Association, the General Assembly of Journalists (Vilna)
• Jewish lawyers were restricted in their ability to get law licenses.

(3) EDUCATION
(a) Secondary schools
• De facto discrimination against Jewish students applying to state-run schools at the gymnasium and lyceum level.
(b) Universities and professional schools
• NUMERUS CLAUSUS: In 1923, Poland tried introduce a formal Numerus Clausus law limiting the number of Jewish students that could attend, but the League of Nations objected. In 1937, a de facto Numerus Clausus was introduced by some universities, limiting Jewish students to 10% (the proportion of Jews in the Polish population), as compared to 20% (and more) before regulation.
• “GHETTO BENCHES”: In 1937, the Ministry of Education granted Polish universities the right to regulate seating of Jewish and non-Jewish students.

(C) ANTI-JEWISH VIOLENCE
• 1935-1937: Violence against Jews was widespread throughout central Poland. Pogroms took place in Przytyk, Czestochowa, Lublin, Bialystok, and Grodno, among other places.
• 1936: 1,289 Jews were wounded in attacks in over 150 towns and villages in Poland.
• August 1937: 400 attacks on Jews in 79 cities and towns.

(X) CATACLYSM

1939: THE LAST DAYS
• AUGUST, 1939: With war looming and the need for a unified front increasingly critical, efforts were made to mend relations.
• For that short time, it seemed as if the Polish Republic’s early promise of equality and fraternity between Poles and Jews had been fulfilled at last.
RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

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(B) FILMS
(1) DOCUMENTARIES
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• The Jews of Poland: Five Cities – Bialystok, Lvov, Krakow, Vilna, and Warsaw (50 minutes, 1938-1939)
• The Lost Wooden Synagogues of Eastern Europe (48 minutes, 2000).
(2) NARRATIVES [OFTEN AVAILABLE SUBTITLED]
• Der Dibuk (1937)
• Grine Felder (1937)
• Mamele (1938)
• Yidl Mitn Fidl (1936)

(C) WEBSITES
• Beyond the Pale: The History of the Jews in Russia (http://www.friends-partners.org/partners/beyond-the-pale/)
• Jews in Poland (http://www.cyberroad.com/poland/jews.html)
• The Lost Wooden Synagogues of Eastern Europe (http://www.woodensynagogues.com/)
• Polish Jews (http://www.polishjews.org/)
• YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (www.yivo.org)