The Eclipse of Humanity: The History of the Jews in the Holocaust – The World before and German Jewry

by

Amos Goldberg

The following is an excerpt from the CD Rom:

THE JEWS OF EAST CENTRAL EUROPE BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

Ezra Mendelsohn

Introduction

The inter-war years in East Central Europe, a short but well-defined period no longer than a single generation, witnessed the dramatic and unexpected triumph of the national principle and the formation of such new states as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, and Lithuania. During these years previously subjugated nationalities struggled to overcome staggering difficulties and to establish viable states which, so it was hoped, would never again be brought under foreign domination. That their efforts, made possible by the collapse of German, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian power, were doomed by the rise of Nazism and of the Soviet Union should not obscure the considerable achievements of the 1920s and 1930s as the largely peasant peoples of East Central Europe firmly established their national identities and made strong claims for equal acceptance in the family of European nations. Indeed, despite the general failure to cope with seemingly intractable economic, social, and political problems, and despite the rise of local fascist movements in the 1930s, in some ways this period constitutes a golden age wedged between pre- World War I oppression and post-World War II Communist domination.

For the student of modern Jewish history, East Central Europe during the interwar years is of particularly dramatic interest. For one thing, these years may be justly regarded as a period of grim rehearsal for the tragedy of East European Jewry during World War II. In most of the new states, relations between Jews and gentiles were bad from the very beginning (Czechoslovakia and the Baltic States are notable exceptions), and in all of them these relations deteriorated sharply during the 1930s. In Hungary Jewish emancipation was actually revoked, while in Poland and Romania the emancipation won in 1915-1919 proved to be no guarantee of equality. Almost everywhere the "Jewish question" became a matter of paramount concern, and antisemitism, a major political force. One of the main efforts of this workshop will be to explain the obsession with the Jewish question and to describe the impact of antisemitism, both on the various Jewish communities and on East European politics:

A second major consideration is internal developments within the Jewish communities. During the 1920s and 1930s modern Jewish political movements, largely the creation of Tsarist Russia, flourished in Eastern Europe as they never had before and as they never would again. In some countries, most notably Poland, secular Jewish nationalism and Jewish socialism were transformed almost overnight...
into mass movements that were able to wrest control of the Jewish community from its more traditional leaders. The Jewries of Poland, Galicia, Lithuania, Bessarabia, and Bukovina underwent what might be termed a process of politicization and nationalization not unlike that which was affecting their gentile neighbors. Even the Orthodox population, traditionally strong in Eastern Europe, organized itself into modern political parties which adopted many of their secular adversaries' characteristics. Along with the striking politicization of East European Jewry went efforts to implement the tenets of the now triumphant ideologies. In fact, East Central Europe between the wars was the major testing ground for modern Jewish politics: thus the remarkable, though ultimately unsuccessful, efforts to establish extraterritorial national autonomy for the Jews, one of the chief aims of most Jewish nationalist parties; thus Zionist efforts to promote mass emigration (aliyah in Hebrew) to Palestine, which for the first time became a practical option for large numbers of Jews fleeing Eastern Europe. And then there was the attempt made by the Jewish left both to promote a proletarian Jewish culture and to forge alliances with the non-Jewish left in order to topple the "bourgeois" states of the region and to replace them with socialist or Communist regimes. Finally, the anti-nationalist Orthodox Jewish parties sought to perpetuate the old Jewish way of life by establishing new institutions and by instituting working relationships with the various regimes.

Aside from Jewish politics, this book will devote considerable attention to other internal developments within the various Jewish communities. The demographic condition and demographic decline of East European Jewry will be discussed, as will the more important process of economic decline, which resulted by the 1930s in the impoverishment of hundreds of thousands of Jews in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic States. An additional theme emphasized here has to do with the different though related processes of acculturation (by which is meant the Jews' adoption of the external characteristics of the majority culture, above all its language) and assimilation (by which is meant the Jews' efforts to adopt the national identity of the majority, to become Poles, Hungarians, Romanians "of the Mosaic faith," or even to abandon their Jewish identity altogether). Were the Jews in these lands growing closer to their neighbors, or further apart? And did the Jews' willingness or lack of willingness to acculturate and assimilate have any impact on attitudes toward them? These are among the most vital questions the historian of post-emancipation Jewry can ask, along with the no less important question as to the efficacy of the various Jewish political proposals for solving the Jewish question.

East Central Europe is a notoriously difficult region to define, and it has been defined differently by different scholars (1). Of the lands lying between Germany and Soviet Russia, the following are treated here: Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Here resided the major Ashkenazi (i.e., of German origin) Jewries, almost all of which, except for pre-World War I Romanian Jewry, had previously resided either in tsarist Russia or in Habsburg Austria-Hungary. The relatively small Jewish communities of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia are not included, both because of their size and because they contained a strong Sephardic (i.e., Spanish) component (2). Even within this rather limited area there was enormous diversity, both in general and among the various Jewish communities. Considering first the general context, we are confronted with a complex picture of different religious, cultural, and political traditions along with different social patterns and widely varying degrees of economic development. The predominant religion was
Roman Catholic (in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Lithuania), but Romania was largely Greek Orthodox. The Uniate church was important in certain regions in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania, while there were significant Protestant enclaves as well, represented by some German minorities) as in the Baltic States) or by non-German remnants of the once powerful Reformation in Eastern Europe, as in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Religious loyalties, in this part of the world, sometimes implied other loyalties as well-to Rome and the West, as in the case of the Catholic Poles, to Moscow and the East, as in the case of some Ukrainians in Subcarpathian Rus and Bessarabia, and of some Belorussians in Poland. The existence of strong Catholic, Uniate, Orthodox, and Protestant churches lent to the area the character of religious pluralism, which did not, however, as the Jewish experience demonstrates, necessarily result in an atmosphere of religious tolerance. The same may be said of the ethnic diversity of the regions; the mix of Slavs, Magyars, Romanians, Balts, and Germans by no means encouraged national tolerance, as we shall have occasion to observe during the course of this study.

Religious and ethnic diversity was paralleled by economic and social diversity. The western regions of Czechoslovakia, namely, Bohemia and Moravia, were among the most advanced in Europe, and such cities as Budapest and Riga were hardly less modern than was Prague. On the other hand, East Central Europe contained some of the most primitive economies in Europe, in such areas as Subcarpathi, eastern Galicia, and Bessarabia. The gentry-peasant societies of the more backward lands of the region stood in sharp contrast to the bourgeois character of the Czech lands. Political divisions were no less apparent, the most striking being between former Russian and former Habsburg territories. The Baltic States, central and eastern Poland, and Bessarabia had all been part of the tsarist empire and were strongly influenced by its autocratic political traditions. The Czech lands, Slovakia, Galicia, Subcarpathian Rus, Transylvania, Bukovina, and, of course, Hungary had all been part of the Habsburg empire. Here a further division is necessary, namely, between those territories which had been a part of the Hungarian half of the Habsburg empire (Transylvania, Subcarpathian Rus, and Slovakia) and those which had not been. These divisions had important cultural as well as political implications, since they determined in which regions Russian, German, or Hungarian culture was widespread.

Despite this evident diversity, certain shared characteristics imparted to East Central Europe a large measure of unity. Most obvious was the fact that, with the already noted exception of the Czech lands, this was an economically and socially backward region which did not make great economic progress during the interwar years. The majority of the inhabitants were peasants, the percentage of city dwellers was low, and cities were often regarded as foreign enclaves by a hostile peasantry and by the gentry-derived intelligentsia. There was little industrialization, and the commercial class was often "non-native." The old elites -- landowners, the clergy -- retained considerable power, although they had to share it with the emerging intelligentsia and bourgeoisie, and sometimes even with the rapidly organizing peasantry. To the problems of how to overcome backwardness and poverty was added another shared by most East Central European lands-political inexperience.

The new states faced the extraordinarily difficult task of nation-building after centuries of dependence, a task made all the more difficult by the degree of external hostility to their still fragile independence. The Baltic States had virtually no
memories of independence; there had never been a Czechoslovakia, and Poland had been wiped off the map of Europe in the late eighteenth century. Romania had existed as an independent entity before World War I, but after its great postwar territorial acquisitions it was a virtually new state. Hungary had been an equal partner in the prewar Habsburg empire; now, greatly reduced in size, it too was something of a new state. Similar problems, together with similar economic and social structures, helped to produce a fairly homogeneous political situation in the region. All these states were anti-Communist and anti-revolutionary, and most perceived the Soviet Union as their most dangerous antagonist. Most began their lives as democracies, at least on paper, and all, with the familiar Czechoslovak exception, moved to the right during the interwar years. This was only to be expected, given their anti-Soviet orientation, the control exerted by the traditional elites, and the weak if not nonexistent traditions of democracy and liberalism. In most of these lands the principal political struggle was not between left and right (the left tended to be quite weak), but rather between right and extreme right. The principal internal threat to the stability of such countries as Poland, Hungary, and Romania in the 1930s emanated from the so-called native fascist movements, such as the Iron Guard in Romania and the Arrow Cross in Hungary. This struggle, in which the Jewish question played a great role, had fateful consequences for the local Jewish communities.

Another major problem which plagued all the lands of East Central Europe was that of the minority nationalities. Despite the triumph of the national principle after World War I, the political boundaries in East Central Europe were not, and indeed could not, be drawn according to strictly ethnic criteria. Most of the countries discussed here regarded themselves as nation-states, but in fact they were not. One-third of the population of Poland, for example, was non-Polish. The minorities were often regarded as threats to the status quo and as disloyal elements interested in redrawing the frontiers in order to accommodate their own national interests. There was something to these accusations. The German minority in Czechoslovakia was transformed into a pro-Nazi force during the 1930s, and the Hungarian minority in Romanian Transylvania wished to live under Hungarian sovereignty. Many Ukrainians of Galicia and other regions in Eastern Europe wanted a state of their own, and some were sympathetic to the Soviet Ukrainian republic. The determined efforts of such countries as Poland and Romania to establish centralized states and to promote the interests of the dominant nationality inevitably clashed with the grievances, real or imagined, of the national minorities. This led to the flourishing of extreme nationalism, which may be regarded as the ruling ideology of East Central Europe between the wars. In this region nation was exalted over class, and unbridled nationalism was rarely tempered by social idealism. Moreover, the existence of the national-minorities problem constituted a standing invitation to intervention on the part of foreign powers interested in upsetting the Versailles settlement. Germany, Italy, and Soviet Russia all promoted various irredentist movements in Eastern Europe, thus greatly contributing to the region's instability.

From the Jewish perspective, the East Central European environment as it has been described here offered little grounds for optimism. Generally Jews have flourished in lands of cultural and religious tolerance, political liberalism, stability, and economic growth. In interwar East Central Europe they were confronted, rather, with chauvinism and intolerance, instability, economic stagnation, and extreme right-wing politics. Moreover, the traditional safety valve of emigration had been blocked by the
new restrictions inaugurated by the United States and other Western nations. Many observers were quick to point out, even at the beginning of this period, that the old multinational Habsburg empire was a much more favorable environment from the Jewish point of view than were the successor states, and some went so far as to insist that even the tsarist empire was preferable. It can be argued, too, that the neighboring Soviet Union was a much more friendly place for the Jews than were most of the new East European states. In the Soviet Union the dominant ideology was based on class rather than nation, the old conservative (and antisemitic) elites had been destroyed, and economic dynamism was beginning to transform a typically backward East European state into a modern, industrialized colossus. In comparing the fate of the Jews in the Soviet Union with that in East Central Europe during the interwar period, one might conclude that in the latter the environment was bad for the Jews while not necessarily being bad for Judaism -- that is, collective Jewish religious, cultural, and even political expression -- whereas in the former Jews as individuals were able to prosper while Judaism as a religion, and indeed all forms of specifically Jewish creativity, withered away. We shall see that in certain countries of East Central Europe, most notably Poland, the hostile environment was no impediment to the flourishing of Jewish culture of either the secular or the religious variety.

If East Central Europe was far from being a unified region, despite certain characteristics common to most of its countries, the same was true of the Jewries of East Central Europe. Not only was there no such thing as "East Central European Jewry," but also it made little sense to speak of "Czechoslovak Jewry," "Romanian Jewry," or even "Polish Jewry." There was a world of difference between the basically middle-class, acculturated Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia in western Czechoslovakia and the poverty-stricken, Yiddish-speaking, Orthodox Jewry of Subcarpathian Rus in eastern Czechoslovakia. And there was little to unite the Jewish community of Wallachia, in old, pre-World War I Romania, with the Jewish community of Bessarabia, annexed to Romania after the war. The same can be said of the Jews of central (or Congress) Poland and of Polish Galicia, or of the Jews in northern and southern Latvia. In fact, only in Lithuania, Hungary, and Estonia were there fairly homogeneous Jewries. Viewed broadly, two basic "types" of Jewish communities in East Central Europe emerge -- a "West European type" and an "East European type." The East European type was characterized by the relative weakness of acculturation and assimilation, the preservation of Yiddish speech and religious Orthodoxy (sometimes of the extremely conservative Hasidic variety), and a lower-middle-class and proletarian socioeconomic structure. A typical East European Jewish community had a high birth rate and a low rate of intermarriage, and, while it was largely urban in nature, many of its members still lived in the old-style shtetl (small Jewish town). In such a community a certain degree of acculturation and secularization had occurred, but such acculturation and secularization, which took place gradually in the context of socioeconomic backwardness and general anti-Jewish hostility, most typically led not to assimilation, but to modern Jewish nationalism of one form or another. There existed in this type of community two legitimate forms of Jewish identity-religious (meaning almost always Orthodox, since Reform Judaism was virtually unknown) and national (usually secular national). Finally, East European Jewish communities usually constituted a rather large percentage within the general population, especially within the urban sector, and played a highly conspicuous role in local economic life, particularly in commerce. In lieu of a "native" middle class, these communities were often correctly identified as
the local equivalent of a bourgeois class.

The West European type was characterized by a high degree of acculturation, aspirations toward assimilation, and a general tendency to abandon both Yiddish and Orthodoxy, accompanied by a readiness to embrace some form of Reform, or liberal, Judaism. From a socioeconomic point of view, such Jewish communities tended to be middle class; from a demographic point of view, they were highly urbanized, though they rarely constituted a remarkably high percentage within the general urban population. The typical West European Jewry possessed a low birth rate and often a high rate of intermarriage; its sense of Jewish identification was usually religious, not national secular.

The West European type of Jewish community obviously closely corresponds to the Jewries of such Central and West European countries as Germany, France, and England. In East Central Europe it was found in Bohemia and Moravia (the so-called Czech lands), in Hungary, in certain parts of Latvia, and in Romanian Wallachia. The East European type was found in Galicia, central (Congress) Poland, Polish Lithuania, independent Lithuania, Subcarpathian Rus, Bukovina, Bessarabia, and southern Latvia. Other regions, notably Slovakia and Moldavia, possessed Jewish communities of a mixed type, somewhere between the Eastern and Western varieties. There is an obvious correlation between the degree of economic development, and the type of Jewry. Usually, though not invariably, the more developed the region, the more Western the type of Jewry; the less developed, the more Eastern. But if all the Jewries in Central and Western Europe were of the Western type, in East Central Europe, geography notwithstanding, there were besides the predominant East European type some Jewish communities quite similar in most respects to those of Germany and France.

The implications of this typology for the internal development of the various Jewish communities of East Central Europe were very important. In the East European communities, autonomous Jewish culture flourished during the interwar years, as did the new Jewish politics. In these communities Zionism, Jewish socialism, and modern Hebrew and Yiddish schools and literature thrived, along with a new Jewish leadership based on mass support from within the community. Here, too, were voiced demands for Jewish national autonomy. In the West European-type communities, on the other hand, autonomous Jewish politics and culture were much less in evidence. Jews participated much more in the cultural life of the majority nationality and were much less attracted to the various forms of modern Jewish nationalism. Their leaders were quite different, as were the policies they followed. It is extremely doubtful, however, if the type of community had much to do with Jewish-gentile relations.

In modern Jewish history in the Western world, the classical pattern has been progression from non-acculturation and non-assimilation to acculturation and efforts to assimilate, from the physical and spiritual ghetto to integration, of one sort or another, into the broader society. In interwar East Europe this pattern is not in evidence. The East European-type communities, despite a certain, and sometimes even an impressive, degree of acculturation during the 1920s and 1930s, remained basically Yiddish-speaking, lower middle class and proletarian, and strongly influenced both by religious Orthodoxy and by modern separatist Jewish nationalism. Once again we may contrast this situation with that of Soviet Jewry; a typical East
European community at the outset of the interwar period, but well on its way to becoming a West European-type community by the end of the 1930s. This dramatic change was a function of the ruling ideology and of the economic dynamism of the Soviet state. In East Central Europe the combination of intolerant, antisemitic nationalism, right-wing politics, and economic stagnation made such a change impossible. In the following pages we shall consider the impact of this state of affairs on the Jews of that region.


Copyright 1983, Ezra Mendelsohn