The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars

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Jewish Politics in Interwar Poland:
An Overview

To present an overview of Jewish politics in interwar Poland in the brief space available to me is a difficult, if not impossible, task. Simply enumerating all the Jewish political parties, youth movements, and nonpolitical organizations (associations of merchants, industrialists, and artisans, for example) that played a role in Jewish politics would require a good many pages. This kind of list might be of some interest, as it would demonstrate the remarkable richness, creativity, inventiveness, and fragmentation of Jewish political life. But rather than indulge in such an exercise, however entertaining, I propose to attempt an analysis of several aspects of Jewish politics and to consider the "lessons" that the Jewish political experience in Poland offer to those interested in modern Jewish history.

Let me begin by presenting two contradictory descriptions of Polish-Jewish political life. Consider, first, the testimony of Alexander Goldstein, a veteran Russian Zionist who came to Poland in 1930 to collect funds for Keren Hayesod (Foundation Fund). In Grodno he addressed a meeting "so overfilled that several hundred people could not get in." In Vilna, "the poorest and most ruined city" (we should keep in mind that the Great Depression, which so devastated Poland, was now in full swing), "a wave of real enthusiasm" greeted his arrival in town. In Rowne, Goldstein tells us, "My arrival...had the character of a great holiday. Thousands of people met me at the station and followed my auto in the streets...All the meetings I addressed were so overcrowded that hundreds had to be turned away." Three years later David Ben-Gurion arrived in Poland, and

1. Alexander Goldstein to "Dear Friends," May 13, 1930, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter CZA), KH4/B/2164; Goldstein to ?, February 2, 1930, CZA, KH4/B/2161/1. The reader should allow for a certain degree of exaggeration in Goldstein's reports.
he, too, was astonished by the tremendous enthusiasm his presence generated. In Bialystok more than a thousand people were unable to gain admission to a lecture he gave in the morning, which was attended by 1,100 supporters.5

Now consider the remarks of yet another Zionist emissary to Poland, Shmuel Czernowitz, who visited the country in 1927. He writes, “We find everywhere here not a Zionist organization but a corpse, a few Zionists who are ashamed of Zionism . . . we have to begin all over again.” Polish Zionism, the great hope of the World Zionist movement and of the Palestinian Yishuv (Jewish community), was characterized by “complete emptiness, an organizational vacuum.”6 A year later the Hebrew poet and Keren Hayesod leader Leib Jaffe, also in Poland for fund-raising purposes, went to speak with the Polish socialist leader Ignacy Daszyński. The latter, though not unfriendly to the idea that Jews should go to Palestine, spoke with contempt of the impotence of Polish Zionism. Jaffe, unable to contradict him, wrote in shame to Arthur Hamtke that even the Gentiles were aware of the movement’s terrible weakness. His own impressions are summed up in the following words: “I am confronted with such apathy and lack of faith as I could never imagine to myself.”7

What is the historian of Jewish politics (and in particular Zionism) to make of these conflicting reports? The answer is not clear, but the question prompts me to attempt some general comments on the nature of Jewish politics and its impact on the Jewish community. I shall begin with a few remarks on the “political culture” of Polish Jewry, a vague but useful term that provides a framework in which to organize some broad generalizations concerning the essential features of Jewish political life.

My first generalization derives directly from the material cited above. I would suggest that one basic characteristic of Jewish politics in Poland was the oscillation between the extremes of euphoria and despair, a kind of “manic-depressive” quality (although admittedly by the end of the 1930s depression had taken over almost entirely).

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There were, for example, many occasions when Jewish politicians (of various persuasions) were convinced that a "new era" had begun in Polish-Jewish relations: in 1919 after the Allied Powers meeting in Versailles agreed on the need to safeguard Jewish minority rights; in 1922 after the success of the Minorities Bloc in elections to the Sejm (House of Deputies) and the Senate; and in 1926 after Józef Piłsudski's coup d'état. But such joy was almost always followed by despair and by the rather hasty conclusion that the whole political enterprise, the struggle for civil and national rights, was worthless (a sentiment more common, of course, in the 1930s than in the 1920s). The Ugoda of 1925, when Jewish leaders in the Koło Żydowskie (Jewish Parliamentary Club) reached an agreement with representatives of the Polish government designed to improve the Jewish condition, is an excellent illustration of this phenomenon. Grossly exaggerated hopes for a new period of goodwill and cooperation between Poles and Jews all too quickly gave way to utter despair when the agreement failed to live up to the high expectations of its Jewish architects. Another example is the Zionist conviction in 1920, after the San Remo Conference, that a Jewish state would shortly be established in Palestine, followed by gloom when the miracle failed to take place. And then there was the case of the Fourth Aliyah, in the mid-1920s, when the feeling among some Zionists that "the beginning of redemption" was under way was soon transformed into a feeling of helplessness in the face of insurmountable obstacles.

The cycle of euphoria and depression is well expressed in the fate of Jewish political organizations in interwar Poland. The Zionist movement went up and down like a yo-yo—up in the early 1920s, 5. Even Agudat Israel, probably the most stable of Jewish parties, fell prey to despair in the 1930s. Thus the lament of A. M. Rogovy in "Vi Homen dem greger..." Das jiidische tagblat, February 7, 1933, p. 3: "There are no more illusions, one knows that everything, even the strongest words, are nothing more than a voice crying in the wilderness."

6. These expectations are lampooned in a cartoon in Haynt, July 17, 1925, which shows a downtrodden Jew confronted by a smiling Leon Reich, leader of the Eastern Galcian Zionist Federation and a supporter of the agreement. The caption reads: "Er bringt im di yeshme" (He is bringing him salvation).

7. For an example of Zionist euphoria (not limited to Poland, of course), see the April 29, 1920, issue of Haynt. It includes Yitzhak Gruenbaum's article "S'bloyz der shoyfer fun gele." p. 1.

8. So unhappy were some Zionists after the failure of the Fourth Aliyah that they actually placed it "on trial" for its sins against Zionism. This is reported in Haynt, October 12, 1926, p. 4.
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down with a thud in 1926–28, up again in the mid-1930s, and
down again in the late 1930s. The Halutz (Pioneer movement) at-
tracted thousands of recruits and lost them almost overnight.9 Youth
movements rose, fell, and rose again. A similar phenomenon can, I
believe, be observed in the case of the Polish Bund. The Folkspartei
was a force for a few years and then collapsed. And so on.

I would certainly not claim that the “neurosis” I have described
was unique to Jewish politics in Poland, but it was a very striking
phenomenon. What explains it? The “national character” of the
Jews, and more specifically of the Eastern European Jews, may have
something to do with it (as some German-Jewish observers of the
Polish-Jewish scene certainly believed), but I would be happier with
an explanation emphasizing the status of the Jews as a relatively
powerless minority whose political fortunes were inextricably tied
to outside forces over which they had little control. This condition
(shared by other minorities) certainly had something to do with the
cycle of exaggerated hope and deep depression that I perceive to be
an integral part of Jewish political culture.

A second, somewhat related characteristic of Jewish political cul-
ture in Poland is the yawning gap between Jewish political rhetoric
and Polish reality. Jewish politicians and activists propagated slo-
gans and programs that sounded splendid but could hardly be im-
plemented. A few examples must suffice. Some Zionists (associated
with the Tarbut movement) held high the banner of “Hebraization
of the Polish Diaspora” at a time when even Yiddish, the language
of the Jewish masses, was fighting for its life against the ever-in-
creasing inroads of Polish in Jewish public and private life.10 Many
Zionists clung to the hope that the Jewish Question in Poland would
be eventually solved through aliya, although it became more and
more clear as the years passed that the number of Jews departing
for the Holy Land could not possibly decrease in any dramatic way
the number of Jews in Poland, which the Zionists believed was far
too great (this fact was pointed out by many non-Zionists and anti-
Zionists).11 The slogan of Jewish “evacuation” from Poland was put
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9. For Halutz membership figures, see Yisrael Otiker, Tarbut Hehalutz be-Polin,
10. A conference of Tarbut teachers in Wólko in 1936 admitted that the great
hope of Hebraization had not been fulfilled. See “Yediot ha-vaad ha-merkaz,” Merkaz,
11. Dassezyk pointed this out to Jaffe in 1928. See the material in CZA, KH4/B/2/154, as cited in note 4, above.

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forward by Revisionist politicians at a time when even the limited aliya of the early and mid-1930s was giving way to virtually no aliya at all. Jewish leaders promoted the idea that Poland should be a "nationalities state" (rather than a "nation-state") at a time when it was perfectly clear that Polish public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to such a definition. Agudat Israel clung to its slogans calling for the preservation of premodern Orthodoxy during a period of growing secularization; the Bund stuck stubbornly (some might say dogmatically) to its time-honored opposition to Jewish aliya to Palestine (to the amazement even of some of its Polish socialist allies) and to its equally traditional belief in the salutary process of Jewish proletarianization, even in the late 1930s. Nor did the Bund and other Jewish political forces ever abandon their slogans calling for some form of Jewish national autonomy, very much of a "nonstarter" in interwar Poland.  

The inflated rhetoric of Jewish politicians was accompanied by another prime attribute of Polish-Jewish political culture, namely extreme divisiveness, factionalism, personal hatreds, and the like. This aspect is very well known, and I do not have to rehearse here the endless procession of splits and the willingness to fight to the end over the finest points of doctrine (of interest, one might have thought, only to the theologian). As the Vilna Zionist leader Yaakov Vygodsky put it, in Polish-Jewish politics every compromise was regarded as "the greatest sin." Nahum Sokolow remarked in 1933, during a visit to Poland, that "Polish Zionism is like a page of Rambam" (this was not meant to be taken as a compliment). "I could learn this great toyre," he continued, "but I leave it to you." It does, in fact, require something of a talmudic mind to understand the differences between Left Poalei Zion and Right Poalei Zion in Eastern Galicia, Right Poalei Zion in Congress Poland, Zeirei Zion, Hitachdut, and Dror (all these parties belonged to the Zionist Left).

12. See the excellent treatment of this subject in Emanuel Meisel, Matanot midre be-malkhei Tzahal (Tel Aviv: 1982), pp. 148-57.
13. See Tzvi Hekselman, "Udvzne politische zikrat," Haynt, April 4, 1923, p. 2, which calls for the transformation of Poland into a nationalities state.
15. Yaakov Vygodsky, in Haynt, April 4, 1934, p. 4.
16. Nahum Sokolow, in Haynt, December 26, 1933, p. 2. Sokolow also said that in Poland there are "more opinions than people." Haynt, November 23, 1933, p. 4.
Factionalism was accompanied by bitter feuds. Yitzhak Gruenbaum accused the Galician Zionists of being shadlanim (intercessors, one of the nastiest words in the Zionist vocabulary) and went so far as to call Leon Reich, leader of the Eastern Galician Zionist Federation, a "traitor" to Zionist principles. No wonder he was prevented from speaking at Reich's funeral in Lwów in 1929. Gruenbaum himself was frequently accused of being a "dictator" by his fellow General Zionists, and when he left Poland for Palestine in 1933, Revisionists shouted at him as he boarded his train, "Down with the traitor Gruenbaum." The Western Galician Zionist Federation waged a ferocious campaign against the "bolsheviks" of the formidable youth movement Hashomer Hazair (which was committed to sending its graduates to Palestine while most Galician Zionist leaders remained in Poland), and the Mizrahi fought furiously against pioneers accused of eating unclean food during their passage to Palestine. Nor should we forget the remarkably nasty things said about the "bourgeois" elements who made their way to Palestine during the days of the so-called Grabski Aliyah of the mid-1920s. On the whole, Jewish politics in Poland resembled the proverbial "war of all against all." This cursed factionalism shocked and dismayed foreign observers and made some of them despair of anything positive ever developing from the undeniably great political energies of Polish Jewry.

Empty slogans, dogmatism, endless splits—Polish Jewry enjoyed no monopoly over these facts of political life. Nonetheless it is remarkable to observe a beleaguered minority, rather homogeneous in its social structure, so much at odds with itself. Explaining this state of affairs, among other things, were the lack of political responsibility and experience that constituted the inevitable condition of a politically weak (though economically influential) minority. It was this state of politicians, like even less edifying culture, again mind the emerging verbal muds scene. The Revi ha-yayim) were used in the polit role of the politicians and the Jewish Home State of the general tenor life. And it was their neighbors. which should be psychological dependencies among them.

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17. "'Der proses Gruenbaum-Reich farn kongres-gerikht," Haynt, August 8, 1929, p. 3; Haynt, December 3, 1929, p. 1.
19. On accusations against Hashomer Hazair, see the material in CZA, Z4/334/1. On the issue of pioneers and tzofim food, see Jaffe to Bernard Hausner, November 20, 1933, CZA, KH4/B/2171.
20. See, for example, Gruenbaum's speech, as reported in Haynt, March 4, 1925, p. 4.
21. Jaffe is eloquent on this point. See also Czernowitz's letter to Jaffe of January 29, 1927, in which he bemoans the "disputes and dissolution" that lead to apathy and worse. CZA, KH4/B/21140.
22. See Yehoshua.
23. On the fate of Zef" Haim, CZA, KH4/B/2169.
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was this state of affairs that drove the true moderates among Jewish
politicians, like Yehoshua (Osias) Thon, nearly mad. 22

Even less edifying was a fourth characteristic of Jewish political
culture, again closely related to those mentioned above. I have in
mind the emergence, in the 1930s, of physical violence (as opposed
to verbal mudslinging) as part and parcel of the Jewish political
scene. The Revisionists (and especially their organization Brit Ha-
hayal) were usually singled out for their particularly conspicuous
role in the political riots of this period, but others—halutzim (Zionist
pioneers) and Jewish communists, for example—were also involved.
In the 1930s fund raisers working for Keren Hayesod were beaten
up by Revisionist sympathizers, and when Ben-Gurion visited Po-
land in 1933, he had to be protected by scores of bodyguards. 23

This aspect of Jewish political life was, of course, a reflection of
the general tendency toward violence in Eastern European political
life. And it was surely less pronounced among the Jews than among
their neighbors. But it was, for all that, an important phenomenon,
which should be understood in the context of economic decline, of
psychological despair, and perhaps also of strong acculturating ten-
dencies among the youth.

Let me conclude this section by mentioning a more "positive"
characteristic of Polish-Jewish politics, namely its "heroic" nature.
I have in mind the courage of Gruenbaum speaking in a hostile
Sejm in defense of Jewish rights, of Bundists standing up to the
hooligans of the extreme Polish Right, of Rabbi Yitzhak Rubinstein
denouncing antisemitism in the dark period of the late 1930s. This
aspect of Eastern European Jewish politics—standing up to the hos-
tile Gentile world—may perhaps be understood as the other side of
the coin of Jewish political dogmatism and lack of realism. It was
associated, I think, with another heroic aspect of Jewish politics,
namely the obsession among some Jewish political organizations
with the need to create the "new Jewish man" (or woman) who
would, among other things, be able to look the Gentile in the eyes
and win his (or her) respect. This motif was particularly evident in
the Bund and in the Zionist youth movements, both of the Left and
the Right.

It would surely be of great interest to consider the influence of

23. On the fate of one unfortunate Keren Hayesod worker, see the material in
CZA, KH4/B/2169.
these characteristics of Polish-Jewish politics on postwar Jewish politics, particularly in Israel. But that would constitute another article. I must go on now to discuss another question touched upon in my introductory comments, namely the impact of Jewish politics on Polish-Jewish society.

How deeply rooted in Jewish life were the various Jewish political organizations? Did they win over the hearts and minds of large sections of the Jewish public? Did they succeed in mobilizing great support? It is far from easy to answer these questions. What follows are a few thoughts on the subject.

Any discussion of the impact of Jewish politics must begin by mentioning the regional factor. I do not have to dwell on the well-known point that Jewish national politics (but not Jewish Orthodox politics) were on the whole much more appealing in the eastern borderlands than in central Poland. There was, by and large, more politicization in the small and medium-sized towns of the kresy than in the big cities in the ethnic heartland of the Polish state. It is perhaps not entirely accidental that the reports by Goldstein and Ben-Gurion quoted above were from such cities as Grodno, Vilna, and Białystok—all located in historic Jewish Lithuania.

Leaving aside regional considerations, there is little doubt that in general there was an impressive degree of politicization among Polish Jews. Sokolow described it well. In the old days, he wrote, Jews would sharpen their minds by studying the rabbinic literature; today they engage in politics. Particularly impressive was the politicization of previously untouched (or nearly untouched) sections of the Jewish population, above all the Orthodox. The success of Agudah in mobilizing support among the Hasidic masses of Congress Poland was significant. The Bund, too, had success in spreading its message among the Jewish working class (this process had begun, of course, well before World War I). There is little doubt that interwar Poland was an ideal environment for Jewish political mobilization (since it offered a combination of democracy, nationalism, and antisemitism) and that Polish Jewry was ideally suited for political mobilization.

24. Documentation on this point is abundant. See, for example, the report of Gershon Elankh, “Darkei tematem be-golah,” in Haaretz, January 7, 1926, p. 16, where much is made of the “emptiness” of Jewish life in Congress Poland as opposed to the kresy.
Jewish Politics

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The doubt that inion among Poli, he wrote, Jews literature; today was the politicized sections of success of Agi- ses of Congress in spreading its ess had begun, doubt that inter-political mobility, nationalism, suited for po-

tical mobilization (since it was a community deeply rooted in Jewish traditional life but undergoing a process of modernization).

On the other hand, historians of Polish-Jewish politics cannot fail to be struck by the endless complaints concerning the absence of "activists" of people to run the schools, the fund-raising campaigns, the party press. Hantke wrote a memorandum on the state of Galician Zionism in 1928 in which he deplored the fact that there were too many "jobs" and too few people. A survey of Polish Zionism in the early 1920s revealed that the whole movement (surely the largest and most influential of all Jewish political movements in the country) was run by a mere handful of party stalwarts. There were, to be sure, a remarkable number of organizations, but their imprint was often extremely superficial. Sometimes they sprang to life during elections, only to lapse back into inactivity after the campaign. There were always leaders prepared to be candidates for the Sejm and Senate, and even for the city council and kehillah (Jewish community council), but this by no means indicates widespread appeal.

I have already suggested one reason for this phenomenon—the frequent collapse of organizations as a result of some external event that led to despair and to the disappearance of party and youth movement activists. The Zionist movement (particularly the Halutz) naturally suffered from the loss of many of its leaders and supporters via aliya. Let me suggest a possible additional factor: the rapid process of acculturation among Polish Jews, particularly in the second decade of the interwar period. It is certainly true that acculturation in Poland proceeded at a slower rate than in the two other great centers of Eastern European Jewry, the Soviet Union and the United States. It is also true that acculturation did not preclude the acceptance of one or another variety of Jewish nationalism. On the contrary. Nonetheless, Polonization as a major sociological process in Polish-Jewish life may have had something to do with the failure of Jewish political parties to root themselves more firmly within the community. This hypothesis should certainly be investigated more thoroughly. It is interesting, in this connection, that in tiny, independent Lithuania, where there was much less Jewish acculturation.

26. Arthur Hantke, "$\text{"}B\text{"}e\text{"}r\text{"}i\text{"}c\text{"}t\text{"}e\text{"}r\text{"} b\text{"}e\text{"}r-k\text{"}e\text{"}n\text{"} H\text{"}a\text{"}j\text{"}e\text{"}s\text{"}s\text{"}o\text{"}d\text{"} W\text{"}e\text{"}s\text{"}t\text{"}g\text{"}a\text{"}l\text{"}i\text{"}c\text{"}e\text{"} n\text{"} u\text{"} S\text{"}c\text{"}h\text{"}a\text{"}l\text{"} e\text{"}s\text{"} $\text{"}$", November 30, 1928, CZA, 24/1586/1.

27. "Anketa a\text{"}l h\text{"}a\text{"}a\text{"}s\text{"}\text{"}s\text{"}d\text{"}r\text{"}h\text{"}e\text{"}n\text{"}l\text{"}t\text{"}v\text{"}h\text{"}e\text{"}m\text{"}n\text{"} t\text{"}a\text{"}r\text{"}p\text{"}a\text{"} $\text{"}$", 1921, CZA, A/127/172.
Zionism was a greater factor within the Jewish community than it was in Poland. 28

Nevertheless, despite the ravages of despair and the impact of Po-
lonization, Jewish politics did make a profound impression upon
some members of one crucial section of the Jewish population,
namely the youth. Indeed, while the Polonization process may well
have reduced the number of young people drawn into specifically
Jewish political movements, and while the number of Jews who
joined the youth movements may not have been all that impressive,
it was they who provided the man power and inspiration to keep
the organizations going in times of general collapse: They are often
described as the only source of light in the midst of darkness—this
was certainly the case if one considers the Zionist movement during
the period of sharp decline between the collapse of the Fourth Ali-
yah and the beginning of the Fifth. 29 Thus Ben-Gurion, dismayed
with the state of Polish Jewry in 1933, consoled himself with the
vision of tens of thousands of youthful idealists and wondered,
"Where does this youth come from, these numerous young people
so blessed with enthusiasm?" 30 It is apparent that Jewish youth
were particularly vulnerable to the appeal of politics, whether Jew-
ish or non-Jewish, since these were times of crisis in the Jewish
world, when parents and the traditional religious leadership were
able to offer little guidance and when youth movements and political
parties often provided a much more attractive cultural and social
environment than was available in the home. Thus the phenomenon
of entire classes of Jewish schoolchildren joining a youth movement
\textit{en masse}. 31 But not all remained, and not all found in youth
movements the solution to their problems as young Jews with little or no
future in an antisemitic state. This is reflected in Ben-Gurion's pre-
scient remark in 1933: "What will happen to this youth? . . . what
can these thousands of people, the best of our youth, expect in the
near future?" 32 This leads to

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32. Ben-Gurion,
33. Polish Con-
tion. See Moshe
this volume.
The impact of Polish oppression upon the Jewish population may well have specific implications for the future. The process may well have generated a particular type of Jew who is, in some cases, more assimilated into Polish society than others.

This leads me to my concluding remarks, and to my final question: What can the historian of modern Jewish politics learn from the interwar Polish experience? Let me suggest a few “lessons.” First, despite the fact that interwar Poland constituted an ideal environment for Jewish Diaspora politics, it can be said without too much fear of contradiction that all the Jewish “isms” failed. Autonomism, Yiddishism, Hebraism, Bundism, Agudism, and Zionism—all proved impotent to one degree or another in the face of Polish reality and the international situation. Second, the search for allies, which played such an important role in Polish-Jewish politics (as it does in Diaspora politics everywhere) was also marked by failure. What all this means is that if we assume that interwar Poland was the great testing grounds for the classic varieties of Diaspora Jewish politics, then Jewish politics failed the test. It may well be that, generally speaking, the only Jewish political doctrine that has really proven itself successful in the Diaspora (though certainly not everywhere in the Diaspora, and not at all times) is that which preaches some form of Jewish integration. In Poland, as is well known, there was no Jewish “integrationist” political force to speak of, and that is no wonder given the fact that most Poles did not think of Jewish integration as possible or desirable. But neither could the various national and Orthodox political solutions put forward be implemented. Therein lies one of the tragedies of Polish-Jewish history in the 1920s and 1930s.

33. Polish Communists (Jewish and non-Jewish) may have constituted an exception. See Moshe Mikhinsky, “The Communist Party of Poland and the Jews,” in this volume.