# *The Last Years of Polish Jewry*
## by Yankev Leshchinsky

## Volume 1

## At the Edge of the Abyss: Essays, 1927-33

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# 1. On the Sociology of Polish Jewry

## A. Introduction

After World War I, Polish Jews played the leading role in world Jewry. Russian Jewry became isolated from the mainstream of our national and social life. American Jewry did not yet manage to crystallize itself nationally and culturally to a degree that would allow it to play the role that its size and favourable political situation might justify. The three million Jews of the revived Polish state thus remained the most important centre of our dispersed people.[1]

However, if one contemplates the issue more deeply, it immediately becomes apparent that it is not only these coincidental circumstances that caused Polish Jewry to play the leading role in world Jewry. There were many more important reasons that gave Polish Jewry the moral right to claim spiritual and political predominance, notably its treasury of national creative energy, which enriched the life of Jews in all corners of the world, including the land of Israel, and that provided the content and sap for all our national-political and spiritual-cultural movements. Polish Jewry suffered least from the whole assimilationist epoch and asserted itself as the most nationally conscious, militant, and proud part of world Jewry.

What are the factors that led the assimilationist catastrophe to be weakest and the national legacy to be the most influential among Polish Jews? What factors enabled the national legacy to be richer, more conservative and more creative in Poland than elsewhere?

We use the past tense because, regardless of the number of Jews who will remain alive in Poland, the old spirit of Polish Jewry has

1 {Throughout, footnotes in braces have been added by Robert Brym. In 1933, about 2.8 million Jews lived in the Soviet Union and 4.5 million in the United States.}

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unquestionably been annihilated. All roots of the centuries-long national traditions have been so completely ripped out and all vestiges of them have been so utterly washed away that it is difficult to believe in a rapid revival of Jewish national life in Poland. People who have lived through three, four, five and often more expulsions; who have lived through three, four, five and often more transformations; who have seen with their own eyes the murder of children and parents, brothers and sisters, and have personally encountered the Angel of Death ten times a day—these remnants of Polish Jewry were physically unable to rescue the previously mentioned treasury of national creative energy from the catastrophe, especially because their number is so small.

Unfortunately, the time has therefore arrived to make sense of the historical factors that created and sustained the extraordinarily rich national energy of Polish Jewry.

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Just 170 years ago, Polish Jewry constituted almost the entirety of world Jewry, not taking account of Sephardic and Arabic Jews, who then played a minor role in the life of the Jewish people as a national unit. On the eve of the first partition of Poland in 1772, 70% of world Jewry and more than 80% of Ashkenazi Jews—the main if not the only bearers of the Jewish people's national continuity—lived in Poland. All the large and small Jewish settlements that grew up in the past 150 years in Europe and in all corners of the world are biological and cultural branches of the Polish-Jewish tree, the only tree in the diaspora that managed to be suckled by one and the same ground for a long and uninterrupted period of nearly a thousand years.

Continuity and rootedness, deep traditionalism, effective inertia, healthy religious and national conservatism, an especially vital national instinct and an especially outspoken, almost conspicuous national pride, an admirable sense of national responsibility, and a maximal national discipline in comparison with all other diaspora communities—all these characteristics of Polish Jewry were to a great extent an organic result of their long and uninterrupted life in one and the same territory, under one and the same sky, beside one and the same Vistula.

Only in this way can one explain why Polish Jews are so spiritually bound to Poland, its landscape and folk culture. Their destiny is not just

economically and politically linked with the fate of the Polish people. It is difficult to find among Jewish writers from other countries the romanticism regarding the landscape and the enchantment with rivers that one finds in Sholem Asch and many other Polish-Jewish writers. The Polish sky, the Polish forest, the Polish field, the Vistula's waves—all this charmed and captivated not only the refined souls of writers but all of Polish Jewry and thus endowed this branch of our people with a special grace.

However, this physical-environmental factor did not exert an assimilative influence in the national sense. It influenced the national character of Polish Jewry, imparting lines and wrinkles similar to those of the Polish people—but not more. Other factors outweighed it, factors that helped to influence the crystallization and consolidation of Polish Jewry as a separate national group and that led to the more intensive development of national unity and feeling of responsibility on the part of this branch of the Jewish people.

## B. Population density and geographical segregation

The most influential factors were the simple number and density of the Polish Jewish population. In no other part of the world (aside from the small and unimportant settlement in Carpathia[2]) did the Jews make up such a high percentage of the population or form such a dense, concentrated community, the members of which embraced each other and, of their own volition, ghettoized themselves from the surrounding population.

In large parts of Poland, Jews always lived near a heterogeneous mix of nationalities, a conglomeration of two and often three peoples: in the western region, Poles and Germans; in eastern Galicia, Ukrainians, Poles and Germans; in the eastern region, Lithuanians, White Russians, Poles and slivers of Russians. The battle of languages and cultures among these surrounding peoples must have weakened the assimilative power of each on the Jewish population. The unceasing and growing fight of the most backward national groups for their national existence, language, and culture despite their poverty and primitiveness must have

2 {Southwestern Ukraine.}

awoken in the Jewish masses the appetite to defend their own language and culture and not give way to the stronger and richer culture of the dominant Polish group.

A minority in the country, Jews had long comprised a plurality and often a majority in most Polish cities and towns, especially in the peripheral territories of Ukraine and White Russia, where, on the eve of the war,[3] they remained a majority in many cities and towns, and the Yiddish language dominated. This circumstance was often transformed into complete national separation because in the main streets and markets Jews often made up 100% of the population. The non-Jewish population lived almost completely on the periphery of cities and towns, that is, in agricultural areas. They visited the Jewish streets and the Jewish market only for business, to sell their produce and buy various things. They lived completely apart. They served God separately, sent their children to different schools (if non-Jews sent their children to school at all), celebrated different holidays on different days and read different books (if they read books at all). Understandably, there could be no talk of biological proximity; converts were spit out of the Jewish community.

Segregation was typical not only in small towns but also in middle-size cities. And the picture is not of a distant past; until 1920, it is accurate for all areas of former Tsarist Russia, where there was still no compulsory public education. For Galicia, the picture is a little less stark—there was a high level of segregation but at least members of different national groups studied together in public school. Yet, although in Catholic Galicia the Jewish population assimilated linguistically much more than in the areas of Tsarist Russia, Jewish religious conservatism was considerably stronger than in Russia.

In the last few decades, segregation in the large cities was not so pronounced and influential. However, even there, entire sections of cities were composed of 80% or even 90% Jews. Most of the Jewish population of large cities lived in completely Jewish quarters. Only a minority, usually consisting of richer and more highly educated Jews, were scattered among non-Jews. In the large city, the Jew certainly took pleasure in Polish theatre, the Polish press, and Polish culture in general, but the density of the Jewish masses created the basis for

3 {Throughout, when Leshchinsky refers to "the war," he means what we now call World War I.}

their own newspapers, theatres and other cultural institutions. For the great majority of big-city Jews, Polish culture was a sort of luxury good. Modern Jewish culture was—or was becoming—their cultural bread and butter.

Table 1 Polish cities with more than 20,000 Jews, 1931 census

| City | Total population | Jewish population | Percent Jews |
|---|---|---|---|
| Warsaw | 1,171,898 | 352,659 | 30.1 |
| Lodz | 604,629 | 202,497 | 33.5 |
| Lvov | 312,231 | 99,595 | 31.9 |
| Cracow | 219,286 | 56,515 | 25.8 |
| Vilna | 195,071 | 55,006 | 28.2 |
| Bialystok | 91,335 | 43,150 | 47.2 |
| Lublin | 112,285 | 38,937 | 34.7 |
| Czestochowa | 117,179 | 25,588 | 21.8 |
| Sosnowiec | 108,959 | 20,805 | 19.1 |
| Subtotal | 2,932,873 | 894,752 | 30.5 |
| Rest of Poland | 28,982,906 | 2,219,181 | 7.7 |
| Total | 31,915,779 | 3,113,933 | 9.8 |

Source: Głównego Urzędu Statystycznego [Central Statistical Office]. *Drugi Powszechny Spis Ludnosci* [Second Population Census] (Warsaw: 1938).

Residential segregation is not specific to Polish Jews. We find it among Jews in the whole world and among other peoples too. However, nowhere else did it assume such proportions and have such an uninterrupted history. Nor did it elsewhere have such a broad, isolated economic basis, which not only strengthened and intensified the physical separation but rendered it richer and more fruitful.

The extent and duration of population concentration coinciding with socio-economic isolation played an enormous role in consolidating and cementing the Jewish minority as a national unit. These factors created a more or less healthy basis for maintaining the Jewish religion and other national life forms and transforming ancient religious cultural values into modern national cultural creations. Not only did Yiddish stubbornly persist among the great majority of the Jewish population. It also demonstrated a relatively high level of creativity and resistance to the flood of surrounding assimilative forces and a comparatively robust

capacity to develop in modern circumstances and compete with the dominant political and cultural language of the majority. In no other place in Eastern Europe where, not long ago, Yiddish dominated as much as in Poland—not in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia or Carpathia—did it engage in such a stubborn struggle for existence, and nowhere else did it manifest such distinct and clear potential for organic growth as a modern cultural instrument of the broad Jewish masses.

One can say the same about the Hebrew language and Hebrew culture. In all the previously mentioned lands there were also many *cheders* and *yeshivas*[4] where Torah and Talmud was taught, but only in Poland did the ancient Hebrew culture grow organically into Modern Hebrew culture.

Let us present some figures to illustrate the spatial segregation of Polish Jews from the surrounding Polish majority.

In 1857, of 181 urban settlements in former Congress Poland,[5] 88 (48.6%) had a Jewish majority. One hundred and twenty (66.2%) were more than 40% Jewish.[6] We will see that, because Jewish storekeepers and craft workers made up 90 to 100% of this urban population, and because the Christian population was then still employed in agriculture or in jobs in which Jews were not involved, such as heavy construction, unskilled work and so on, nearly the entire population of small and middle-size urban centres was Jewish.

In 1897, of 110 urban settlements in Congress Poland, 57 (51.8%) had a Jewish majority and 81 (73.6%) were more than 40% Jewish. The number of urban settlements with a high percentage of Jews became much smaller in the twentieth century but in Congress Poland in 1921, 99 of 196 urban settlements (50.5%) were more than 40% Jewish.[7]

In Galicia in 1880, of 125 urban settlements, 55 (44%) were more than 50% Jewish and 82 (65.6%) were more than 40% Jewish. And in Galicia,

4 {The *cheder* was a religious primary school. The *yeshiva* "trained young men to study formative texts and traditions, especially the Babylonian Talmud, the commentaries on it, and the legal decisions that depended on it" ("Yeshiva." *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (2010), https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Yeshiva/The_Yeshiva_before_1800.}

5 {Congress Poland was established in 1815 as a putatively sovereign state but it was under Russian tutelage. It consisted of the eastern part of today's Poland along with southwestern Lithuania and part of the Grodno province of Belarus. In 1831 it effectively became part of Russia.}

6 Bohdan Wasiutyński, *Ludność żydowska w Polsce w wiekach XIX i XX* [The Jewish Population of Poland in the 19th and 20th Centuries] (Warsaw: 1930).

7 Ibid.

where Ukrainians also lived in the cities, Jews were even more often a national plurality. Of the same 125 urban settlements in 1921, 57 (45.6%) were more than 40% Jewish.[8]

In the White Russia region, the percentage of Jews in urban settlements was even larger. According to the 1897 Russian census, the urban population of Grodno province was 57.7% Jewish and the urban population of Vilna province was 43.0% Jewish. In Minsk province, which was almost completely absorbed by Poland after World War I, Jews formed 58.8% of the urban population.[9] Following are data for individual cities in this region:

Table 2 Percent Jews by selected city, 1897 and 1921

| City | Percent Jews, 1897 | Percent Jews, 1921 |
|---|---|---|
| Brest | 75.4 | 53.1 |
| Pinsk | 74.2 | 74.7 |
| Bialystok | 63.5 | 51.6 |
| Grodno | 59.5 | 53.9 |
| Vilna | 45.4 | 36.1 |

Except for Vilna, the percentage of Jews in the five biggest cities of the White Russian region was very high at the end of the nineteenth century, around three-quarters in two cities. In the smaller cities of this region, the percentage of Jews was even higher because little industry existed there; industry attracted non-Jewish workers in the big cities. One must also remember that the non-Jewish populations of these cities was composed of three peoples—four in Vilna (Poles, Russians, Lithuanians and White Russians).

Even in 1931, when the cities were naturally and by design flooded by a great mass of non-Jews, there were still many cities where Jews constituted a plurality or a majority of residents. Of 192 counties {powiats} in 13 provinces {voivodeships} that had a dense Jewish

8 Yankev Leshchinsky, *Dos yidishe folk in tsifern* [The Jewish People in Numbers] (Berlin: 1922), https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc210949/lestschinsky-jacob-dos-idishe-folk-in-tsifern.

9 Yankev Leshchinsky, *Yidn in der shtotisher bafelkerung fun umophengikn poyln* [Jews in the Urban Population of Independent Poland], 12, 27 and 34.

population (Warsaw, Lodz, Kielce, Lublin, Cracow, Bialystok, Vilna, Novogrodek, Poleskie, Lemberg,[10] Stanislav, Tarnopol and Volhynia), Jews formed an absolute majority in 28 and a plurality in 23. In 53 counties (27.6% of the total), Jews constituted most of the urban population. In 9 of 11 counties in Volhynia province, Jews formed a majority of the urban population, and in the province as a whole, they constituted 55.6% of the urban population.[11]

## C. Socio-economic segregation

The spatial separation of Polish Jews from the surrounding non-Jewish population was consolidated by their socio-economic distinctiveness. Until the Polish middle class arose in the second half of the nineteenth century, Jews formed a unique socio-economic organism. For centuries, they constituted such a large proportion of the merchant class that one could be fully justified in thinking that all merchants were Jews. Because of this, it was often asserted that all Jews were merchants. That was never the case, least of all in the nineteenth century, but this error was natural because, even 20 or 30 years ago, Jews in large parts of Poland made up 90% or more of all merchants.

For decades, even where non-Jewish merchants were emerging, almost all of them entered only one branch; they became owners of food stores. Only after World War I did they begin entering the main branches of mercantile activity, previously leaving textiles, haberdashery and leather and hardware sales in Jewish hands. Foreign trade was almost completely Jewish-controlled. Only very recently, when the Polish government began to regulate and plan economic life in general and the export-import trade in particular, at least to a greater degree than internal trade, did the non-Jewish (mainly Polish) exporter and importer emerge.

Let us illustrate this phenomenon with some figures, not exhaustively but just to sketch some general patterns.

10 {Lemberg when controlled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Lwów when controlled by Poland, Lviv when controlled by Ukraine, and Lvov when controlled by Russia, was called Lemberik by many Jews.}

11 Ibid.

The number of merchants from Poland who attended the Leipzig fair[12] was as follows:[13]

Table 3 Jewish and non-Jewish merchants attending the Leipzig fair, 1775–96

| Year | Total merchants from Poland | Jewish merchants from Poland | Jews as percent of total |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1775 | 481 | 413 | 86.0 |
| 1790 | 678 | 611 | 90.0 |
| 1796 | 851 | 791 | 93.1 |

Because visitors to the Leipzig fair used to buy textile-haberdashery and metal goods, it is doubtless the case that the percentage of Jewish attendees corresponded to the percentage of Jewish wholesalers of these items in Poland.

Of 1,441 wholesalers in all of Galicia between 1820 and 1827, Jews numbered 1,172 (81.3%). In eastern Galicia alone, Jews were 86.3% of all wholesalers. There were 2,015 shopkeepers and stall owners in all of Galicia in this period, 1,824 of them (90.5%) Jews.

Here are some figures concerning craft workers. One hundred and fifty-one of the 153 glaziers in Galicia (98.5%) were Jews, as were 1,358 of the 1,441 tailors (94.3%), 103 of 127 coppersmiths (81.1%), 42 of 57 dyers (73.7%) and 511 of 733 hat makers (70.0%).[14]

A century later, in 1921, Jews constituted 90.8% of all independent merchants in eastern Galicia and 76.5% in western Galicia. In credit and insurance, the respective figures were 90.1% and 78.8%.[15]

12 {In the eighteenth century, the tri-annual Leipzig Trade Fair became the German centre for trade in English, Russian and Polish goods.}

13 R. Markgraf, *Zur Geschichte der Juden auf den Messen in Leipzig von 1664–1839* [On the History of the Jews at the Leipzig Trade Fair from 1664–1839] (Bishofswerda: 1894), 21–34.

14 Michael Stoeger, *Darstellung der gesetzlichen Verfassung der galizischen Judenschaft* [A Description of the Legal Constitution of Galician Jewry] (Lwów: 1833), 200–76.

15 Yankev Leshchinsky, "Profesioneler bashtand fun yidn in eyrope" [The occupational composition of Jews in Europe"], *Shriftn far ekonomik un statistik* [*Writings on Economics and Statistics*] (Berlin: 1928), 197.

In 1852, Jews made up 96.1% of merchants in the province of Grodno and 88.2% in the province of Minsk.[16] In 1921, the percentages for independent merchants were approximately the same.

Table 4 Distribution of Jews and non-Jews in the Polish labour force, 1921, percent in parentheses

| | Non-Jews | Jews |
|---|---|---|
| Agriculture | 10,197,351 (80.7) | 90,102 (9.8) |
| Industry & crafts | 968,920 (7.7) | 297,447 (32.2) |
| Trade & finance | 194,136 (1.5) | 324,612 (35.1) |
| Transportation | 219,052 (1.7) | 24,808 (2.7) |
| Civil service, professions | 286,025 (2.3) | 40,356 (4.4) |
| Other | 768.232 (6.1) | 146,703 (15.8) |
| Total | 12,615,716 (100.0) | 924,028 (100.0) |

Source: Yakov Leshchinsky, "The development of the Jewish people over the last 100 years," Robert Brym, trans., *East European Jewish Affairs* (50, 1–2: 2020), 160–242 at 202, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2020.1793279.

Even in 1938, after the spontaneous growth of a merchant class in Poland and a decade of the government artificially planting Polish merchants in many districts, there were still entire branches of trade that were mainly in the hands of Jews. Of 6,900 grain merchants, 6,214 (90.0%) were Jews. Of 75,551 clothing merchants, 66,024 (87.4%) were Jews.[17] These figures concern all of Poland. Considering separate districts, one finds that in the western provinces (Posen, Pomerania, Silesia), Jews made up an insignificant percentage of merchants, but they made up 100% of those employed in many branches of trade in eastern Galicia and the White Russian provinces. Also in Congress Poland, until recently, there were tens if not hundreds of places where Jews comprised more than 90% of all merchants, especially in certain branches such as the sale of textiles, haberdashery, and other articles.

Aggregated census data, especially for the entire country, obscure the actual situation. To obtain an accurate picture, one must consider individual provinces and individual social groups. Thus, according to

16 Dr Ignacy Szyper, *Dzieje handlu żydowskiego na ziemiach polskich* [*The History of Jewish Commerce in Poland*] (Warszawa: 1937), 414.

17 *Wiadomości Statystyczne* [*Statistical Notices*], 1939, 5/VI.

the 1921 census, Jews made up 63.5% of those involved in trade in all of Poland. But in the province of Bialystok, the figure was 80.0% and in Pomerania, 5.0%. In the province of Volhynia, the figure was 88.1% and in Posen, 6.0%. One must also consider the participation of different social groups. Here we are reminded that in 1921, Jews made up more than 63% of people involved in trade, but 76.5% of independent operators. The Christian salesclerk working in a Jewish store exerted only a minor influence on the character of the business, and if in a given city 90% or more of merchants were Jews, they very easily could have closed up shop on the Sabbath without having any fear of competition.

Forming nearly the entire merchant class in the country, the Jew naturally must have had some relations with the surrounding population, but these ties had a purely external, business-like character. They did not lead to any intimacy with the surrounding language, which the Jew had to know and did in fact know. Buying and selling took place between two separate population groups that lived in separate cultural spheres, irrespective of the fact that they resided so close to one another and were parts of one economic organism and one body politic.

This situation can be explained not just by the religious difference between the two groups, which remained strong for centuries, but also by the fact that buying and selling took place with an almost completely rural peasant population, with a primitive and backward mass to which one did not need to adapt culturally or even linguistically. It did not matter whether one spoke Polish, Ukrainian or Lithuanian—the two parties understood one another in buying and selling. Business—big business—also took place with rich aristocrats, but these landowners viewed the Jewish merchant from such a lofty perch that it did not occur to them to demand from the merchant better Polish or closer cultural proximity. The Jew, the main buyer from and seller to peasants and aristocrats until almost the end of the nineteenth century, did not need to adapt linguistically or culturally.

Craftwork, the other main economic branch, occupied a large place in Jewish life and kept on expanding over the past 50 years. Overall, the concentration of Jews in crafts was neither as dense nor as isolating as was the case in trade. However, among urban tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, furriers and cap makers, Jews formed a large majority. These

crafts accounted for 80% to 90% of all Jewish crafts workers, so they, too, laid the foundation for a segregated social environment.

Only in the last 50 years and especially the last 20 years in independent Poland did the number of Polish storekeepers and craft workers start to increase rapidly, especially in the big cities and ethnically Polish areas. The exclusivity of Jews in entire branches of economic life began to disappear. But more about this revolution in Jewish life later. Now we will discuss the increase in the number of storekeepers and craft workers among Poles; among Ukrainians and especially White Russians the urban middle class was still in diapers. And in the Ukrainian and White Russian areas of Poland, the urban Jew had much more contact with the Pole than with the Ukrainian or White Russian.

In middle-size and especially large cities, where a chauvinistic Polish intelligentsia and a still more chauvinistic stratum of Polish state bureaucrats formed, many Polish-owned stores opened in the last few years, and Poles were increasingly attracted to crafts. Polish workers' quarters in the big cities became residences for the growing number of Polish storekeepers and craft workers. For the most part, Polish storeowners and craft workers settled in new areas of the city or at least in areas devoid of Jews. Only rarely did a Christian open a store in a Jewish part of town. It was also rare for a Jew to open a store in a purely Polish neighbourhood, not because he could not compete against the Poles but because he was not allowed in due to restrictions

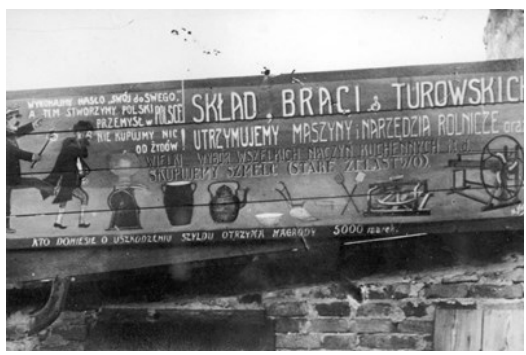


Fig. 1 *A sign on the shop of Torobski, an anti-Semite* (1930s), Mlawa, Poland. ©Yad Vashem Photo Archive, Jerusalem. The inscription on the left advises against buying from Jews, with an accompanying illustration illustrating their appropriate treatment https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item_id=8955&ind=1

of a physical rather than legal nature. The boycott was the least violent method of struggle against the Jew. The less proficient and younger Polish storekeeper defended himself against the Jewish storekeeper by physical means. He also had the support of the government, which offered credit at a reduced interest rate and lower taxes as well as other discounts and privileges.

However, we are interested here not in the struggle of the Polish storekeeper against his more capable and nimbler Jewish counterpart but in the fact that in the large cities and most of the middle-size cities there again formed a Jewish ghetto, a part of the city where Jewish businesses were concentrated. That was the case in Warsaw's Nalewki district and in similar areas of Lodz, Bialystok, Vilna and many other cities. Thus, in the larger cities, most of the Jewish population was segregated from the non-Jewish population. Moreover, the Jewish part of the city made its living not mainly from the local city population but from producing and distributing goods for the entire country and from exporting and importing goods not in proportion to the needs of the city but in proportion to the needs of the country. In contrast, the newly formed Polish city districts made a living almost completely from nearby customers.

There was in most of the big cities a "bridge" between the two national "ghettos." The bridge consisted of the central streets between the two national districts. In a completely natural way, Jews from one side and Poles from the other spread into the central streets between the ghettos. In these bridging streets, the national composition of storekeepers, craft workers and all other occupations such as druggists, restaurateurs and so on, was mixed. Here, competition was open and the protagonists about equally matched if we ignore the privileges that the government granted the Polish side and the pickets outside the Jewish stores that openly and legally called for their boycott.

Thus, during the last few decades, a part of the large city grew up where the assimilated Jew tried to mask his business. If the Jew was not distinguished by his clothes or his language and if he endeavoured to keep as many Poles as possible in his store, the illusion was created that he could grow into the Polish environment, which had the power in its hands to determine the future of the whole country.

In industry, the situation was a little different but essentially the same. Jews constituted a large percentage of owners—in the Bialystok textile industry over the past 20 years, they made up 100% of factory owners.

However, Jews made up only a small minority of all people employed in industry, including workers, and could have been barely visible among the mass of non-Jewish workers. That, at any rate, appears to be the case if one does not investigate their actual social situation. Doing so reveals that in this economic branch, too, Jews were not integrated into the surrounding sea of Poles but formed a Jewish industrial ghetto.

Jewish workers were distributed thusly according to the 1931 census: 82% were employed in craft work and small industry, 15% in middle-size industrial establishments and only 3% in large industrial plants. Among non-Jews the situation was completely different. More than 37% of Polish workers were employed in large industrial plants, more than 20% in middle-size industrial establishments and 42% in craft work and small industry.

Since Christian owners in Poland did not employ any Jewish workers whatsoever, Jewish craft work and Jewish small industry was, if not one 100%, then at least 90% concentrated in the Jewish quarter of the city, in the Jewish ghetto. In Warsaw, for example, there were many Jewish and non-Jewish tailors and carpenters. The Jewish tailors and carpenters were concentrated in the Jewish part of the city, the Christian tailors and carpenters in the Polish part. Jewish owners employed some Christian workers in the Jewish ghetto, but no Jewish workers were employed in the Christian part of the city. Thus, segregation existed here too. The few Christian workers in the Jewish ghetto adapted to Jewish life insofar as they were members of Jewish unions and participated in union meetings, but the great majority of Jewish workers remained in an isolated Jewish environment.

In Warsaw, which had a big metal industry, there were thousands of Jewish metal workers, but few of them were employed in the big factories, where they would have had to learn the Polish language and customs and adapt to the Polish environment. They worked in small workshops, where they formed the great majority and therefore did not need to adapt to a foreign environment. Some Jewish-owned middle-size and large enterprises employed non-Jewish and Jewish workers. The latter represented only a tiny percentage of the Jewish working class and formed only a minority in their places of work. They were often members of the Polish unions and participated in their meetings, but they made up a tiny

percentage and could not erase the national isolation and the avowedly national character of the Jewish working class as a whole.

The Jewish working class was very radical—their socialism was very internationalist, militantly opposed in principle to Jewish traditions and national legacies—but nonetheless bound to Jewish national life forms and Jewish religious traditions because it was almost entirely segregated. A survey conducted among working youth belonging to the Bund, whose program was openly anti-religious, showed that more than one-half of them prayed daily. The stubbornly religious environment proved stronger and more influential than the party program and agitation.

Unorganized Jewish workers were even more nationally traditional, notwithstanding their radicalism as expressed in their voting or social demands and struggles. There existed a big contradiction between supporting a left-wing socialist and fasting on Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av, but in the life of the Jewish working class in Poland such occurrences were daily phenomena.

The more than 200,000 independent Jewish craft workers were even more isolated from the surrounding non-Jewish world. They were 100% and absolutely in all respects—professionally, socially, politically, culturally, linguistically, and geographically—isolated from their Christian counterparts. This class was largely concentrated in the ghetto and associated almost completely with other Jews. In small towns they did work for people placing individual orders but in big cities they did work for Jewish-owned stores. They bought raw materials from a Jew, borrowed money from a Jewish bank, and sought cures from a Jewish doctor. They read a Jewish newspaper and attended a Jewish theatre, not to mention religion, which was the highest barrier between Jews and non-Jews, especially among members of the Jewish *petite bourgeoisie* such as craft workers and small storekeepers. This environment was the most conservative, not only in religious matters but also in language and culture, because one depended on the other: the more religious, the more nationalistic, the more bound not just to religious holidays and customs but also to Jewish national life forms and manners.

This picture of Jewish socio-economic isolation could be seen clearly in Poland's cities on the very eve of the present war because the penetration of Jewish workers in large industry proceeded terribly slowly and only very gradually changed the general physiognomy of

the historically rooted Jewish economic environment. Living in densely populated ghettos, the large *petit bourgeois* mass of storekeepers and craft workers with their salesclerks and journeymen, who, together, made up no less than 80% of Polish Jewry, created the national style of Jewish life in Poland.

Over the last few decades, in trade, crafts, and especially industry, spatial and social sectors formed where Jews met and came into closer contact with non-Jews in the same branches of the economy. This was especially the case for workers in middle-size and large industry and factory owners, the latter of whom sometimes formed business trusts and partnerships with non-Jews and came into contact with them in industry and trade associations. Because of the government's discriminatory policies there emerged a tendency among the Jewish *haute bourgeoisie* to recruit Polish partners in order to save their enterprises from high taxes or allow them to obtain export or import licenses. However, these few points of contact did not determine the physiognomy of the Jewish majority. The isolating barriers that resulted from centuries of organic development were determinate.

Occupational separateness enriched and deepened residential segregation, laying the groundwork for a distinctly Jewish social differentiation and a nationally coloured economic environment, almost a unique economic unity. The Jewish socio-economic environment in the big cities gave rise to nearly independent institutions; Jews performed almost all functions, from the noblest to the hardest and most poorly paid. If in the Jewish ghettos the night watchmen were Christians, it was not because there were no Jewish candidates for this most difficult and poorly paid job but because the government wanted its own people in every courtyard, and every watchman was also a secret police agent.

The 50,000 Jews in crafts and small industry in Warsaw or the 30,000 in Lodz worked only for Jewish employers who purchased their raw materials and sewing accessories only from Jews, sold their manufactured goods almost entirely to Jewish storekeepers from the same city or province and borrowed money only from Jews or from Jewish cooperative funds. As a consumer, the Jewish worker purchased only from Jewish storekeepers and craft workers. And this all took place in a spatially segregated district with its own newspapers and theatres, houses of prayer and study, Hasidic houses of prayer, synagogues

and teachers, *yeshivas* and *cheders*, tens of Jewish economic, political and cultural organizations and unions. This environment, laden with religious and national content, influenced the mind and the spirit of the Jewish worker much more than did the pamphlet's internationalist socialist agitation. This environment exerted an even more conservative influence on the large *petite bourgeoisie*, no member of which endeavoured to tear himself away ideologically from his ghetto roots. However much modern life demanded new ways of living, new ideologies, new fundamental beliefs and cultural tendencies, they grew up from the old ways of living and as a natural continuation of them. Therefore, there was no sudden jump from the ghetto to a completely foreign world, no sudden discarding of the entire historical legacy onto the garbage heap, no instant inner and outer metamorphosis, no uprooting from the ground such as took place in other countries.

## D. Political segregation

One must add socio-political isolation to the geographical and socio-economic segregation of Polish Jewry. Not only was it impossible for Polish Jews to be active in non-Jewish political parties (which was possible even in Tsarist Russia); they were also in separate economic organizations.

Where there are large Jewish masses, it is natural for Jewish political parties and social and economic organizations to spring up. That was the situation in Tsarist Russia and at one time in Austria. But in both those countries there were parts of the Jewish population, especially among the intelligentsia, who found it more appropriate and comfortable to join the political parties of the majority. Most of them were highly assimilated Jews or those for whom the small Jewish street was simply too narrow. Jews were very active for many years in the Polish Socialist Party, which played the main role in the freeing of Poland. {Herman} Diamand and {Hermann} Lieberman were for many years the representatives of the Polish working class in the Austrian parliament.[18] For tens of years, Felix Perl was editor of the official organ of the socialist party. But in Poland there was not one liberal bourgeois

18 {When Galicia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.}

party such as the Kadet {Constitutional Democratic} Party in Russia in which Jews could be active. Even the Polish Socialist Party, which had to take the atmosphere into account in independent Poland, made less of an effort in recent years to put Jews in responsible posts, deciding *de facto* that Jews should not join the party in large numbers. This does not mean that the Polish Socialist Party was antisemitic. To the contrary, it energetically fought against antisemitism. However, taking account of the sentiment among the masses, it considered it politically more expedient that Jews should join the Jewish socialist parties rather than a general but essentially Polish party.

From the Jewish national standpoint, it was desirable that Jews, including workers, should be concentrated in Jewish political parties. From a political standpoint, however, it was very important for Jews, as a minority, to have representatives in the general political parties; they served as very useful ties between the Jewish and non-Jewish population. They were often the best clarifiers and defenders of Jewish interests in the surrounding political environment. In Russia, {Maksim Moiseevich} Vinaver played this role in the Kadet Party and {Leon} Bramson in the Folkist Party. In Poland, this kind of connecting member was entirely lacking.

Even more important was isolation in economic organizations. Jewish and Polish merchants were in separate associations. The same was true for small traders, craft workers and home workers. Even workers' unions were separate although they were all socialist.

For a time in the liberal professions, there were common organizations, but national competition quickly overcame common professional interests, so Jewish doctors, engineers, technicians, and dentists were forced to establish their own purely Jewish associations.

We can create the following scale of the influence of national competition and antagonism on various social groups in Poland. The influence of the national contradiction was weakest among workers, among whom common class interests always overcame their nationalist antithesis. The national contradiction was stronger among craft workers and still stronger among small storekeepers and market traders. It was strongest and sharpest among members of the intelligentsia, who were in Poland (and perhaps not just in Poland) the most active carriers of antisemitism. The one group in Poland where common class interests

overcame national antagonism was the urban *haute bourgeoisie*. In this upper economic circle, the talent of the person and the prospects of the business are what mattered. However, this group was too small to have much influence on the situation of the country's Jews.

In sum, the national development of Polish Jewry was a result of a whole complex of factors, both of a positive and a negative character. Population density and social concentration created a sound foundation for independent life forms and distinct cultural creations. The repelling forces of the surrounding Polish world did not allow assimilation processes to develop and prevented the dismantling of the Jewish ghetto and the weakening of Jewish forces.

Nonetheless, in Poland, too, assimilative forces were at work, tearing through all barriers and leaping over all fences. But before we review this dynamic side of Jewish life in Poland we must consider some historical factors that made the Polish-Jewish public relatively stable, immune to assimilation and capable of resistance.

## E. The influence of heritage

The national-religious heritage of Polish Jewry helped to ensure that the community would splinter less as a result of the assimilative forces of the nineteenth century, preserving its organized national character more deeply and longer than in the West.

Polish Jewry had lived an organized, autonomous life for centuries. Jews in many countries had autonomous religious communities, but nowhere else were they so broadly organized in districts, centralized across the entire land and laden with as many social, financial, cultural and religious functions as the Polish *kahal*. This alone had a colossal influence on national consolidation and unified discipline. In Poland, autonomy—the historical surrogate for Jewish life organized by means of a state—approached the highest stages of development.[19]

19 {Local *kahals* originated in the 1500s. From the second half of the sixteenth century until 1764 they were overseen by the Council of Four Lands in Lublin, a central body with 70 representatives from local *kahals*. Poles commonly called the Council the Jewish Sejm, or parliament. *Kahals* were abolished by the Tsar in 1844 but most of their functions continued to be performed in the Russian Empire by local synagogue supervisory boards. *Kahals* were not abolished in the Hapsburg Empire.

Jews in the diaspora feel more like scattered individuals than part of a nation; mainly they feel like members of a local community. We are not speaking here about the marginal remains of inherited religious or national feelings. Nor are we speaking of catastrophes that suddenly make every Jew sense his group membership. Rather, we have in mind the concrete, daily dependence of members of the national group on one another, the normal, healthy feeling of belonging that is a product of mundane common interests and experiences, common earthly goals and aspirations. All these concrete daily source of cohesion removes the sense that one lives in a foreign city, a foreign state. National Jewish cohesion among members of the Jewish population in normal times and under normal conditions is only an incidental phenomenon that grows when pogroms, slaughters, acts of violence and incidents of persecution befall the Jews; and it is their "good fortune" that such occurrences repeat themselves with an historical regularity that is seldom seen in the history of other peoples.

Jewish autonomy in Poland could not entirely replace a territory and a state, which create the normal and healthy feeling of cohesion and collective emotion that we spoke of earlier. However, it was so encompassing and enduring, and of such concrete and variegated content in the daily lives of Polish Jews that it exerted an intensive influence and made deeper imprints in their souls than was the case for Jews in other countries.

Enjoying broad administrative-regulatory, socio-economic, financial-fiscal, religious-cultural and educational functions, the autonomous organs nurtured in Polish Jews a deeper consciousness of being tied to the community, of obligation to be concerned for the welfare of the community and to bear the yoke of its continued existence—a deeper and healthier source of national cohesion than that brought about by inertia or catastrophic shocks.

It is enough to mention only the network of educational institutions, from elementary *talmud-torahs* to the most advanced *yeshivas*, that were the responsibility and were funded by local or central organs, to gain an impression of the great influence that these organs must have had on the entire Jewish population. The central autonomous organs supported the

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Consequently, they were able to re-emerge in independent Poland after World War I.}

founding of presses in Krakow and Lublin because private enterprises were not profitable. They supported an entire staff of itinerant preachers and interpreters who spread Torah and Jewish knowledge among the masses and taught them good character traits. Not only did these autonomous organs support some writers, enabling them to publish their books, but they obliged each *kahal* to buy a certain number of *gemoras*,[20] depending on the number of families in the community. Houses of prayer and study were required to have a certain number of religious books available to all who entered. A community of 50 householders was obliged to support the learning of 30 young men. The *kahal* supported the *yeshivas*, and there was a law that the head of the *yeshiva* should be supported so he would have no material worries and would be able to run the *yeshiva* with a calm head and study Torah "day and night." This widely branched education system was not just for children but also for adults, and its remnants were still pronounced among Polish Jewry even in recent years, directed by the publicly recognized organs that functioned for centuries and left a deep impression on the soul of Polish Jewry—an impression of national organization and responsibility, of national loyalty and consciousness, national devotion and sacrifice.

National education in general—and especially among a people without a country—is the most important and influential factor in generating and preserving national consciousness. So long as the old, deeply national education system was dominant among Polish Jewry, there was no sign of assimilation. The segregated, independent education system created a cultural barrier between Jews and non-Jews, a *conditio sine qua non* for one's own national culture. Even if all other factors keeping the Jewish population apart continue to operate, when this barrier falls their influence ceases to foster national creativity and productivity.

## F. The crisis

Two main factors, one conditioning and completing the other, were in the past few decades responsible for creating cracks and holes in the spatial and economic unity and the national-cultural creativity of Polish

20 {The *gemora* is second part of the Talmud, consisting of rabbinical analysis and commentary on the first part, the *mishna*.}

Jewry: capitalist differentiation and the decline of the Jewish educational system.

Over the past 70–80 years, capitalist development ripped parts of Polish Jewry out of the previously sealed collectivity. A Jewish *haute bourgeoisie* emerged. It founded the first banks in Poland and financed the first railroads in the country, tying together the Polish, Russian and international markets. Welcomed with joy and pride, its first generation was quickly torn away from the Jewish economic organism and absorbed into the surrounding Polish society and culture. It was only natural. The economic role of this Jewish class—in banking, railroad construction, sugar and tobacco factories and so on—was too responsible and lofty not to strive to adopt the physiognomy of the majority population, especially because liberalism was then dominant, and hopes were high for emancipation by means of assimilation.

Parallel with, and partly also as a result of, capitalist development, the Jewish professional intelligentsia began to emerge. From its origins, it based its perspective and its ambitions not on the narrow and one-sided economy of the Jewish ghetto but on the expanding needs of the entire country, and therefore in the first place on the Polish majority. This group was welcomed early on by young Polish society with sympathy and friendship.

These two new Jewish groups—the richest and the strongest—began advocating modern, secular education, which then meant rejecting Jewish education, which was strictly religious and thoroughly conservative at the time. It also meant separation from the entire Jewish world because secular education then involved learning the country's language, culture and rites.

The emergence of these two groups took place in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Only after the 1860s, when capitalist development began sinking deep roots in Poland, did they take on a more or less mass character that was able to crack ossified Jewish life.

The great majority of Polish Jewry remained spatially and economically isolated, undergoing capitalist development within its own historically-crystallized ghetto. The one-sided, monochromatic Jewish trade and tavern environment of the eighteenth century broke up and became differentiated. New social classes and strata emerged, notably a middle *bourgeoisie* and a proletariat, the latter consisting of

people who now had few opportunities to become owners. The old classes assumed a modern face, adapting to the demands of the new era.

All this occurred mainly within the Jewish environment. However, the above-mentioned upper classes, although consisting of few people, were highly influential, drawing to them the sympathies and aspirations of a far broader circle. They revolutionized Jewish life, tearing pieces from it and planting them in the outside world.

Gravitation to the ideas of the two upper classes, of being elevated to a higher rung, did not affect only the Jewish middle *bourgeoisie* but also much broader strata. Rising to the *haute bourgeoisie* was often impossible, but it was much easier to become a physician or a lawyer. This meant learning a foreign language and a foreign culture.

The development of large cities was also highly influential in this regard. They gave rise to a new type of customer, the national customer. Intellectuals, office workers, even average big-city dwellers are more nationalistic than rural folk. The school, the newspaper, the theatre and in recent years the cinema and radio are robust nationalizing factors even if they do not set themselves nationalistic goals.

The development of national consciousness for the majority means a loss of national consciousness for the minority. Whoever wants the new type of customer must be more or less like him in language, manners and appearance, and must adapt to his days of rest and forego the Sabbath and his own holidays. The Jewish storekeeper on a central street in a large city must appear completely different that his counterpart in the small town or the countryside, who deals only with rural consumers. In the ghetto, the Jewish storekeeper or the better craft worker dreams of extracting himself from the narrow Jewish streets and opening a business or workshop in the central part of the city, where his prospects are much better. While still in the ghetto, he starts preparing himself in terms of language and appearance for a place in the new, growing market in the city centre. And if he himself has no hope of opening such a store in the city centre, he at least prepares his children for a life outside the ghetto. This means speaking Polish to them and making certain exceptions on the Sabbath and holidays. Some do so with a light heart and others with heartache, but in recent years, even on Nalewki Street in Warsaw, one began to see Jewish stores open for business on the Sabbath.

Simultaneously, Polish competition began to grow rapidly. Small Polish food shops grew into large grocery businesses, and the children of rich Polish grocery store owners started opening haberdasheries and textile stores. Children of better-off Polish peasants and skilled workers no longer all went to work in the factories. They already had an urban education, bigger appetites and higher ambitions. Some became office workers and many were drawn to all branches of trade and craft work. Jews originated and developed these two sectors in Poland, and after decades of involvement, Poles in craft production and trade still remained a minority. Yet, from the beginning, they considered themselves to be the bosses, privileged and preferred. From the beginning they proclaimed a struggle against the Jews, who "grabbed" control of craft production and trade. The entire, nearly completely independent Jewish economic structure began to tremble.

Most Jews remained in the ghetto and began creating defensive positions such as their own credit associations offering inexpensive credit for those in need, but the situation kept on changing. The proportion of Jews in the cities started falling as the influx of non-Jews began to overtake the inflow of small-town Jews. Over the last 20 years, once the Poles achieved political independence, they used their political power widely in the economic struggle. They used all means, kosher and non-kosher, to pull and drag Poles into the cities so as to replace their Jewish character with a Polish face. They tried to Polonise not only cities in Polish districts but also in Ukrainian and White Russian districts. It was not just the government that worked toward that end, but Polish society. An organization was founded in Posen to make inexpensive credit and subsidies available to Poles who migrated to Ukrainian and White Russian districts.

Although Jews remained a majority in many branches of trade and craft production, they nonetheless had to adapt to the population majority, from which their strongest competitors came. There may be just one Polish store for every three Jewish ones, but the Polish store was the strongest and dictated its national role. It did not remain quiet and wait for customers and did not compete on the quality or price of goods. Instead, its owners shouted at the top of their lungs that it is the foundation of the Polish state and the saviour of the country's Polish heritage and appealed to all true patriots not to weaken their conscience

by buying from a Jew. In such a situation it was natural that among members of the Jewish middle class, most of whom were still in the ghetto, a tendency emerged to adapt to the language and appearance of the majority, hoping that by this means they would be able to endure and save themselves from the patriotic pounding on their heads.

All these processes took on clear contours in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, ushering in a new era in the life and destiny of Polish Jewry. But in independent Poland they assumed dangerous forms. It would be laughable if it were not necessary to cry over the fact that the more menacing the tactics of the emerging Polish trade elements to displace Jews became—from inexpensive credit for Polish storekeepers to picketing and assaulting Jewish storekeepers—the more the Jewish ghetto lost its Jewish character, the more Jews tried to adapt to the surrounding Polish world. Every Jew continued to hope that by acting in this manner they would save their economic position. Assimilation thus took on tragic forms. There were no illusions about actual emancipation, of integration into Polish society, of education and respect for humanity, as in Western Europe. Assimilation in Poland was not demanded by a surrounding non-Jewish world promising freedom and equality in exchange. It was assimilation based on fear, driven by the whip of non-Jewish competitors, who shouted that the assimilated Jew is no more agreeable than the beard-and-sidelocks Jew.

And so, in independent Poland, a woeful situation emerged. Spatial socio-economic and socio-political barriers between Jews and non-Jews remained. They grew higher because the atmosphere beyond the ghetto walls became laden with such bitter hatred that many non-Jews who had left the Jewish city quarters had to return to the ghetto. Cultural barriers began to crumble a little. The ghetto lost its former unity and strength, and with them its creativity and distinct flavour. The ghetto did not disappear as in Western Europe after emancipation. It was shredded from the inside. Jewish culture was not replaced by a foreign culture. Rather, a sort of cultural synthesis was taking place.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, probably 99% of Jewish children in the world received a national-religious education. The religious barrier between Jews and non-Jews was thick and high, so when Jews learned a new language in the process of externally adapting to a foreign environment, they filled the new language with so much

national-religious content at home that it became a new Jewish dialect. Transitioning to the new language never involved accepting a foreign culture because that was possible only with conversion and leaving one's people entirely. Points of contact always existed with aspects of the surrounding culture, but the roots of Jewish culture always remained firmly planted. Only rarely did they grow over the boundaries permitted by religious Jewry. The type of Jew who grew into a foreign language and culture heart and soul, for whom the foreign language dominated and who dreamt only the dreams of a foreign people yet remained formally a Jew—this atypical Jew was a child of the secular epoch of the nineteenth century.

Polish Jewry had a long sojourn in the country. It was intimately connected with the Polish landscape. It was continuously involved in economic activities that brought it into daily contact with the surrounding population. One-third of the Jewish population had for centuries dotted the countryside as two or three families in a sea of Poles or Ukrainians. Nonetheless, it fostered and developed the dialect it brought from Germany, transforming it into a national language. On the ground of historical Poland this dialect grew into a national instrument which in the recent period played a colossal role in Jewish cultural development.

In every country, with the entry of the first Jewish child in a foreign school, assimilation really begins. Through the school, the Jewish child becomes joined to the foreign language not just superficially but intimately, in spirit. In the youngest, most impressionable years, the Jewish child is pulled into the sphere of the foreign culture, which delights and charms precisely the most capable children, those blessed with refined sensibility and rich imagination.

This assimilation process began in Poland at the very beginning of the nineteenth century. Because Poland was then divided among three countries (Germany, Austria and Russia) and subject to two foreign languages and cultures (German and Russian), assimilation did not quickly become a big influence on the Jewish population. In Posen, the German language achieved dominance over the Jewish population, and the majority migrated to Germany. In Austrian Poland, too, the German language competed with Polish, but the latter won out. In Russian Poland, there was no public school, either Polish or Russian, so the influence of assimilation was weak.

Even in these persistently difficult circumstances, assimilation managed to tear away at a large part of the Jewish intelligentsia, which dived into Polish culture and became organically connected to it. Significant Polish poets and belletrists who occupied prominent positions in Polish literature emerged, not to mention scientists in all fields. It is enough to recall the poet, Julian Tuwim, who was considered the greatest Polish poet of his time, and the belletrist, Józef Wittlin, whose work was published in America. There were many other less illustrious Jewish poets and novelists in Polish literature.

Parallel with this assimilated intelligentsia, the Yiddish ghetto produced a Y. L. Peretz, a Sholem Asch, a Hersh Nomberg, a Yosef Opatoshu, an Isaac Bashevis Singer, a Zusman Segalovitch and tens of other writers of great heft. A network of national cultural institutions that would be a source of pride for any people in its own land was also created.

The situation became completely tragic in independent Poland. Thanks to the growth of the Polish middle classes and the most intense antisemitism, the ghetto began to grow, and with it, isolation. Nonetheless, the tempo of linguistic and cultural assimilation increased. It had nothing in common with nineteenth century Western European assimilation because there could no longer be any talk of growing into Polish culture. The pushback from Polish society simply became too strong. The atmosphere became so poisoned that the most brilliant Jewish child, knowing the Polish language as well as possible, could not grow up to become a Polish poet like Tuwim did 30 or 40 years earlier. However, superficial assimilation was sufficient to interfere with the unity of the Jewish cultural edifice, to weaken the creative zest of the Yiddish-speaking wing that had only just begun to deploy its creative forces. How could this occur amidst strengthened and more extensive spatial and socio-economic isolation?

First, because modern forms of culture jump over the highest barriers and tear into the most fenced-in and remote Jewish homes. The radio, the gramophone and the cinema all assimilate. The distinctive Jesuit school policy of the Polish government played a much larger role. On the one hand, Jewish children had to attend elementary school, and this was very often a Polish public school. On the other hand, Polish Jewry created a large network of national schools with Jewish and Hebrew

as languages of instruction. Nearly 200,000 Jewish children, about 40% of all school-age Jewish children, attended these schools and thus remained isolated from the foreign environment and assimilation. Of course, these schools had to teach all the Polish and general subjects, and the Polish government increasingly forced these schools to expand the influence of the Polish language. Nevertheless, a larger percentage of children received a Jewish education than was the case in any other country. Impoverished Polish Jewry spent 20 million *zloty* annually on Yiddish education, almost as much as wealthy American Jewry, which is 50% more numerous.

All the promises and commitments to give minorities, including the Jews, national schools with instruction in their mother tongue were in fact dismissed by all Polish governments, who persecuted the minority schools, especially the Jewish ones. The elementary education of a large percentage of Jewish children in the Polish language was by itself enough to undermine the dominance of Yiddish that existed just a few decades previously. The tragedy was that the same Polish power that dragged Jewish children into general schools blocked the doors of the high schools and universities to them. Assimilated Jewish youth thus remained frozen out of both cultures.

Here one must state that Polish Jewry was nonetheless the strongest fortress of our national values. Around 58% of Polish Jews still lived in the provinces, where Jewish customs, such as those accompanying Sabbath and the holidays, completely dominated; where the living Yiddish language and the modern Hebrew language inspired all Jewish youth; and where the national movement in all its forms dominated the minds of the entire Jewish population. And even in the larger cities, the traditions of Sabbath and the holidays and the use of Yiddish were strong enough. The Polish Jew did not surrender quickly, demonstrating instead a wonderful stubbornness even in his manner of dress. His strong will to be different and not to dissolve into the surrounding population even outwardly manifested itself at every turn. These inherited traits were strong even among big-city Polish Jews. Large parts of cities like Warsaw and Lodz appeared more Jewish than any city quarter with a large mass of Jews anywhere else in the world. The traditional long black caftan that shouted out the distinctiveness of the Jewish people and intentionally demonstrated their readiness to suffer for being a Jew

was dear not only to the older generation but also to a large part of the younger generation, which could never be ashamed by comparison with Jewish youth in modern dress, even with respect to their general education, not to mention their Jewish knowledge. Polish Jews stood only at the beginning of their struggle for their own life forms in an environment that wanted to denationalize but not assimilate them. And by its traditions, its national stubbornness and loyalty, Polish Jewry was the most capable of working out methods of national life in the diaspora and serving as an example to all other Jewish communities.

We write in the past tense. Will Polish Jewry remain something in the Jewish historical past? Here we stop. May history, that capricious player with destiny, provide an answer…