

*THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY*  
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 1

AT THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS: ESSAYS, 1927-33



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## 6. Jews are collapsing in the streets from hunger

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I have no mother!  
I have no father!  
I'm hungry!  
I'm barefoot!  
Jews! Give me work!  
Jews! Give me work!

In a Warsaw courtyard that looked like a narrow box with high walls, a tall young man stood on spindly legs, his skinny arms hanging by his sides, and shouted—shouted as if he were tearing out pieces of his innards and hurling them at the high, deaf stone walls. He grew tired, rested a few seconds, caught his breath, extended his thin neck, and again cried from the depths of his sunken stomach:

I have no mother!  
I have no father!  
I'm hungry!  
I'm barefoot!  
Jews! Jews! Give me work!  
Jews! Spare me some change!  
Have pity!! Have pity!!

For several minutes he shouted to the deaf walls of the narrow box, and nobody responded.

I accompanied the young man along the street for a while, unable to tear myself away from him. To this day his visceral cries haunt me. To this day I see his burning, agitated eyes. This thin, withered figure, these desperate cries without impact and without conviction that there might be any response, this exhausted, weakened face with its two agitated sockets seemingly searching through darkness—this image has

subconsciously developed in my eyes into the symbolic figure of Polish Jewry.

I have just spent five days in Warsaw. Of these, three were during the Lemberg pogrom.<sup>1</sup> In Warsaw they beat Jewish students at the university and technical school. In the streets one could feel the tense psychological state of Jews awaiting a pogrom. The first pages of the newspapers described how waves of pogroms were flooding the streets of Krakow, Czestochowa, Vilna, and Lublin and threatening to flood the whole of Poland. Jews grew quieter, anxiously focused, and apparently *ashamed*. Ashamed of their own weakness, helplessness, and exhaustion; ashamed of their absurd fate of forever being brutalized...



Fig. 5 *A woman sitting next to a corpse in the street* (undated), Lvov, Poland. ©Yad Vashem Photo Archive, Jerusalem, [https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item\\_id=100293&ind=66](https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item_id=100293&ind=66)

I have been to Poland several times in recent years and seen with my own eyes how three million Jews are being suffocated, but never before had I been seized by such sadness, such grief. Never before did I experience such a depression, such an urge to run through the streets of Jewish

1 {On the evening of 26 November 1932, students from the local Lviv Academy of Veterinary Medicine got into a fight with Jews at a café. A Polish student was injured and died, precipitating widespread anti-Jewish rioting by students.}

cities all around the world shouting, "Help! Save them!" It was not just because I was there during the pogrom. Even before the pogrom, as I wandered aimlessly around the Jewish streets, I gazed into the worried faces of the bustling, Jews with long caftans. I encountered the beards of two elderly Jews hitched to a wagon of coal, hunched over as they dragged the heavy wagon along. I met the yearning eyes of the helpless, abandoned youth. Even before the pogrom, the streets of Warsaw plunged me into a dark depression from which I cannot free myself to this day.

Is this just my own personal impression? Perhaps my soul is ill and I see pitch blackness, despair, and helplessness where there is only everyday poverty, as exists among all nations? Alas, it is not so. Alas, my soul is not ill and I would much rather have seen rays of light and hopeful faces—but I did not encounter any. I searched but could not find them.

Let us take a look at some facts in order to understand the situation of Polish Jewry and get a sense of its tragic grief.

"In the gateway of the house at 3 Twarda Street, the porter Borekh Shtikgold suddenly collapsed. The doctor from the first aid service called to the scene established that the cause of Shtikgold's loss of consciousness was exhaustion due to hunger" (*Haynt [Today]*, 6 October 1932).

"Thirty-seven-year-old unemployed mechanic Yankev Bornshteyn passed out from hunger on Sunday afternoon. He was revived and escorted to the third precinct" (*Folks-tsaytung [People's Newspaper]*, 4 July 1932).

"Herman Zelmanovitsh, unemployed, is a frequent visitor to the first aid service. He is regularly found unconscious from hunger on the street. On Sunday afternoon, Zelmanovitsh was found lying passed out from hunger on Kopernika Street" (*Folks-tsaytung [People's Newspaper]*, 4 July 1932).

These kinds of things happen in Warsaw, Lodz, Vilna, Lemberg, and tens of other Polish cities every day. Of course, for every person who collapses on the street, there are dozens who are no less hungry but bear the hunger more easily, hundreds who are three-quarters as hungry, and tens of thousands who do not have enough to eat, who are growing thin and withering away, and who will establish a generation

barely capable of work. Someone who collapses on the street gets noticed and registered. Those fasting in silence or wasting away at home do not. However, one only has to wander around the Jewish quarter of Warsaw for a little while to recognize in the pale faces and extinguished eyes hundreds of candidates for collapsing from hunger, thousands of candidates who are truly desperate for a piece of bread.

Over the two years since I had last visited Warsaw, the face of the Jewish quarter had changed dramatically. The people had grown paler, gloomier, shabbier, thinner, more feeble. This state of enfeeblement is undoubtedly the defining characteristic of Polish Jewry. It is feeble not only in the physical sense of the word, but also in the spiritual sense: abandoned, without a father or a mother, without movements to captivate the masses and give them courage and faith in a better future, without great central leaders to comfort them, without central institutions to which they might direct their cry in a time of trouble. Disorganized, torn apart, despondent, and feeble. We will return to this tragedy of fatherless and motherless Polish Jewry later. First, we will consider some additional facts that demonstrate the state of Polish Jewry.

We have seen how people are collapsing in the streets, a phenomenon that we have not read about in the newspapers of any other nation, despite the fact that there are 30 million unemployed people in the world. The suicides among Polish Jews are also highly unusual. Here are several examples:

"Lemberg. A horrible incident took place in the Jewish quarter on the evening of Yom Kippur. Fifty-year-old Berta Grinboym (3 Reja Street) got dressed, took a prayer book, said goodbye to the members of her household, wished them a good year, and then, instead of going to the synagogue, went out onto the balcony and threw herself off. She is in the hospital with no hope of survival. The cause of her suicide was the severe material hardship she was experiencing" (*Haynt [Today]*, 12 October 1932).

A devout Jewish woman, with a prayer book in her hands, *on the evening of Yom Kippur*—how poisoned must the atmosphere be, how sick the soul of Polish Jewry, how desperate and enfeebled the whole environment, when a person like this throws herself off a balcony at a moment like this.

Here are some additional facts:

“Vilna. The Jewish court intern Shmuel Katsev has committed suicide. The cause was Katsev’s removal from court under the suspicion of anti-government activity. He was arrested. The suspicion turned out to be false, but the court would no longer employ him” (*Frimorgn [Morning]*, 1932, No. 258).

Thus, a young man who has graduated from the juridical faculty and is preparing to become a lawyer is suspected of communism and arrested. This does not seem sufficient to plunge someone into despair. It turns out that the suspicion was unfounded, but this is Poland; a single percentage point of suspicion is enough to block your path to a career. Even without a shred of suspicion, they are still prepared to pile mountains of stones on the path of a Jewish intellectual, and all the more so when you are marred by the taint of political opposition. The young man is removed from court—so he ends his life! Where are the youthful strength, ambitions, obstinacy, and hopes? Where is the feeling of spite that plays such a major role among youth? Where is the hatred and loathing and fury towards the enemy piling stones on your path? All of these things usually give life a sense of purpose, generate wings and energy and spur someone forward to live, to work, to influence, and to fight, but the soul of the Jewish young man in Poland is a desert. His mind is desolate and vacant and his whole being is poisoned. In a feeble mental state, he drags himself and his burden around, and at the first difficult trial, he hands his ticket to the Lord and flees the world.

To understand the psychology of this young Jewish suicide, one must consider the situation of the Jewish intellectual in Poland, as well as that of the Jewish youth in general. Here, a Jewish young man tells of the seven circles of hell he went through as he took his first strides in life. He is studying at a technical school in Warsaw. He is, of course, put through a great deal of misery by his Polish colleagues. He is not only boycotted but also verbally abused, and sometimes worse. From the professors, too, he often hears that Jews should stick to trade and not study technical professions. He bites his tongue, ignores all the insults, and studies. Before graduating, students are required to work for two months in a factory; otherwise, they are not permitted to take the diploma exam. The director has forgotten about the Jewish student and he is left without a work placement. The young Jewish man runs back

and forth between the director and the manager and finally gets the director to call the state automobile factory, where they agree to accept a trainee.

The young Jewish man is delighted and the following morning runs happily to the factory. He is received very pleasantly and given a questionnaire to fill out. He completes it honestly with his Jewish name and Jewish faith. The secretary takes the sheet, reads it through—and his whole attitude shifts immediately. He is suddenly as cold as ice; he needs to speak to the factory director, so the young man will have to come back tomorrow. The next day, the gatekeeper will not even let him in. He runs back to the technical school and requests, demands, argues. The director responds that the factory does not want any Jews and there is nothing he can do about it. He cannot get into an argument with the factory's director for the sake of a Jewish student. But the student is unable to complete the exam without the work experience. Using his contacts, he eventually manages to get a placement in the municipal bus workshop and writes the exam.

Dozens of Polish students who wrote the exam at the same time as the Jewish man get jobs right away. Meanwhile, he takes his diploma and knocks on door after door, getting rejected each time. After many months of running around, and through a great number of connections and requests, he manages to get hired in the streetcar workshops as an *unskilled labourer*. He is prepared to do anything just to have a job, to end his idleness, to start earning something. He needs a certificate from a municipal doctor showing that he is healthy. On the certificate, the doctor lists illnesses that the young man has never even heard of. The engineering graduate is back on the street, without work and without any hope of finding a place for himself. He is later hired in those same streetcar workshops for *temporary* work. He has the necessary physical strength, but where can he find the courage not to lose faith in himself and throw himself off the fifth-floor balcony?

We have recounted this story in great detail because it is a typical everyday occurrence. This is the fate of the entire Jewish intelligentsia in Poland—and not just the intelligentsia.

Here is a set of truly shocking facts:

The Rovne city hall reduced its number of officials. Of 20 Jewish officials, 14 were fired, more than two-thirds. Of 192 non-Jews, 40 were



fired, just a fifth. Jews make up 75% of Rovne's population. Previously, they made up 9% of city hall officials, after the dismissals, fewer than 4%.

The Otvotsk city hall fired almost all Jewish officials, even though they hired several new non-Jewish ones.

In the Grodno municipal tobacco factory—formerly the Shereshevski factory, where hundreds of Jews had sacrificed their health over dozens of years—they promptly smoked out all the Jews. They recently dismissed 12 Jewish mechanics, several of whom had worked in the factory for more than 30 years. After a great deal of hustling on the part of a representative from the bureau for the right to work and many requests and complaints to the management, they got them to rehire one Jewish mechanic, a 54-year-old man, but only for unskilled labour, not as a tradesman.

On the topic of tobacco, it is worth adding the following. Before the tobacco monopoly was introduced in Poland, the tobacco trade was almost entirely in Jewish hands, with 800 Jewish wholesale businesses. Once the monopoly was introduced, it became necessary to obtain permits to deal in tobacco. Jews were given virtually no permits; of 800 Jewish wholesalers, hardly 30 remained. Recently, they took away the permits of these 30 as well, and thus tore from the Jews a branch of economic life that had formerly been exclusively Jewish; the tobacco manufacturers, tobacco workers, tobacco employees, and tobacco dealers had all been Jews. Now barely a trace remains—the state has taken over the entire branch, and Jews are not allowed to benefit from the state.

Jews must pay taxes, license fees, and various other contributions to the state, but they are forbidden from benefitting from it. Not only are they barred from jobs in the administration, the official apparatus running the state, but they are also prevented from working in the state factories, sweeping the municipal streets, and serving as railroad porters. This *hunger principle* with respect to three million Jews is being carried out more consistently, mercilessly, and thoroughly than any other state principle. Compromise is acceptable when it comes to many issues, but not when it comes to giving Jews a livelihood, not when it comes to loosening the rope around the Jews' throats, not when it comes

to allowing the tiniest hope to arise in the Jews' hearts that they may one day have equal rights.

*Equal rights.* The Polish government promptly pulls out the constitution and unfurls it before the world, pointing to where it states clearly and simply that all citizens are equal. Jews are indeed citizens like all others—just not when it comes to carrying baggage on trains, working in a state tobacco factory, measuring and chopping wood in a state forest, selling state sugar, tobacco, salt, or crude oil, and certainly not when it comes to collecting taxes from the population, when it comes to teaching children, even Jewish children in state schools. In sum, one trifling little thing has been taken away from the Jews—a living—and now they are crying out, and collapsing in the streets, and throwing themselves off their top floors in order to break every bone in their bodies, and falling into a depression that screams from tens of thousands of faces on every street in every city of reconstituted Poland.

The Polish government can boast that it has put an end to antisemitism on the streets; they are no longer pulling out beards and *peyes* or throwing Jews out of railroad cars. The current government has one other great merit. A Jew can make a complaint in the dozens of administrative offices and they will hear him out, receiving him politely with a kindly "hello" and a warm "goodbye." Here, however, lies the current regime's cynicism. They lead the Jew to the gallows with a smile on their face and tighten the rope around his neck while acting as though they have invited him to a dance.

After all, what could be more cynical than firing Jewish teachers from schools attended exclusively by Jewish children? What could be more cynical and more merciless than complaining that Jews are too involved in trade while at the same time creating a network of laws meant to suffocate the Jewish artisan and doing everything possible to prevent the emergence of a new generation of Jewish craft workers?

Let us consider one example. The Polish budget allocated more than 20 million *zloty* to professional education. Of that, less than 100,000 *zloty* went to Jewish professional schools, less than 0.5%. This despite the fact that Jews comprise more than one-half of all artisans in Poland and that at least one-half of the license taxes, which are specifically allocated to professional education, are paid out of Jewish pockets.

Every representative of the Republic of Poland in every city of the world shouts that the constitution gives Jews full rights--and they are not lying! One brilliant Polish ambassador in London, a city where Jews really do have equal rights, even had the audacity to claim that the Polish government cannot let things get any better for the Polish Jews, or else Jews from every corner of the world would come rushing to Poland.

Jews in Poland have equal rights—a holy truth, written in the holy constitution, enacted in a holy moment in the life of the Polish nation, the moment when it was liberated from its oppressive yoke after 150 years. Then along came 350 Jews and 150 Christians to take the medical faculty examinations. Out of 150 Christians, 100 passed (two-thirds) and out of 350 Jews, 20 passed (less than 6%). At the dental institute, 350 Jews and 200 Christians took the exam. Out of 200 Christians, 96 passed (48%) and out of 350 Jews, just 18 (5%). Of course, the Polish government cannot be blamed for this. After all, Jews have full rights. If they are blockheads and fail the exams, it must be their own fault...

If we add to all of this the following letter from a Jewish student, it will become entirely clear why Polish Jews are so discouraged, depressed, and enfeebled: "Several days ago, when I was walking along the street with a woman, my student cap was hurled into the mud and I was slapped shamefully for no reason other than because I am a Jew. I am around 30 years old, but that unforgettable evening was the first time that I have felt that I am a Jew, a Jew who hates Poland and Polishness, a beast who wants revenge."

This letter was printed in a Polish weekly. The author of the letter goes on to say how he volunteered as a boy in the Polish army and fought the Bolsheviks for his Polish fatherland in 1920. He was a fierce Polish patriot because he had been raised in a completely assimilated family where he had not been shown a single letter of the Jewish alphabet. As if to spite him, this Polish patriot has an ugly Jewish nose, as he himself expresses it, and on the streets of liberated Poland's capital he was reminded that he is one of the patriarch Abraham's grandchildren.

How many of these Polish patriots with ugly Jewish noses have in recent years in liberated Poland's universities been reminded with clubs and knives that they are Jews! And here we arrive at the incidents in Lemberg. What can we learn from these incidents?

First, that the broad masses of the Polish nation—not to mention the workers—remain indifferent to calls for pogroms. This is certainly a great comfort, a great consolation. I am not trying to fool myself; I am well aware of how deep the antisemitic poison lies within the Polish masses, and the Polish socialists are unpardonable for doing nothing to enlighten the masses or to eradicate the antisemitic venom. On the contrary, with their tactic of keeping themselves at arm's length from the Jewish workers' movement and their fear of advocating openly and more frequently for truly equal rights for Jews, they have stoked antisemitism among the working masses. They are allowing a snake to grow that will eventually repay the Polish socialists with its venom for their sins. Nonetheless, facts are facts: both last year and this one, when the academic hooligans—sons of landowners, manufacturers, clergymen,<sup>2</sup> and high-level officials—were running around with clubs and knives looking for Jewish heads to split open and calling on the masses to take revenge on the Jews, the hungry and desperate masses stayed calm and did not lend a hand in this thuggish patriotic work. This demonstrates that the Polish masses are at a much higher political level than in Ukraine and White Russia, where there have always been enough volunteers to rob and beat Jews.

Second, the recent incidents in Lemberg teach us that the regime explicitly *wanted* a pogrom against Jews. The *Forverts* was entirely correct when it wrote during the pogrom that, if the communists had tried to start a demonstration, or if the Ukrainians had had the audacity to carry a few national flags through the streets of Lemberg, the Lemberg police would have been strong enough and determined enough to immediately shut down such anti-patriotic displays. It turns out that beating a few hundred Jews is not an anti-patriotic enough display for the police to promptly mobilise all their forces. Holes in the heads of a few hundred Jews are not enough of a danger to the fatherland for someone to start shooting, or at least firing cold water from fire hoses, at the knife- and club-wielding patriots.

Everyone in Lemberg is convinced that sending out the fire fighters to blast a stream of cold water at the several hundred student hooligans

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2 {According to the 1931 census, 15% of Poland's population was non-Catholic and non-Jewish. The great majority of the 15% were Eastern Orthodox. Eastern Orthodox clergymen could have wives if they married before ordination.}

would have been enough to extinguish the pogrom fire. Jewish delegations ran to the governor three times a day, telling him terrible things, bringing facts about hundreds of wounded Jews, yet the head of the city remained unmoved, each time emphasizing that, after all, a Pole had been killed, and for that reason, for that reason....The conclusion was clear: they had to allow the landowners' and clergymen's sons to take revenge for their colleague who was killed in a fight over a prostitute. They had to allow them to live it up and get their fill of Jewish blood.

Why did they have to allow this? There are various explanations. Some say that even in the Warsaw inner circles they thought that the students should be allowed to let off some steam. That way they would have less energy to fight against the government. Others maintain that the governor himself has tight connections to the student hooligans and their families, so he went soft on the students to avoid taking a stand against his own kith and kin.

Whatever the case, pogroms are happening in liberated Poland. They are unlike the ones in Tsarist Russia, but they are still pogroms with hundreds of people wounded.

And what did the Jews do? There is consolation to be found in this regard as well: in the Jewish quarter of Lemberg, things were calm! Why? Because the landowners' sons were simply scared to enter the Jewish quarter, where Jewish porters, butchers, and other workers would have lain into them until they wished they had stayed away. A great comfort! A consolation that invigorates us, makes our blood run faster in our veins, and fills our hearts with indescribable joy. The majority of victims were by themselves on streets where Jews are a minority when they were caught and beaten up.

The educated hooligans' fear of the Jewish porters and butchers is certainly a great consolation. But what did the Jewish population do to assert themselves in an *organized* manner? What was their organized protest and fight against the hooligans? *Nothing!* Absolutely nothing! Unless we count the delegations that went running to the governor a few times a day. Back in Tsarist Russia, we were used to bourgeois Jewish delegations running to the governors, pleading for mercy and demanding justice. However, alongside these mercy-pleaders and justice-demanders, there would be other forces, other powers, who spoke the worthier language of revolvers and bombs.

The excuses that a Jewish self-defence organization would provoke the non-Jewish population even further, that it would help the government spin the whole pogrom as an anti-Christian pogrom led by Jews—both of these excuses were always heard in Russia too. These arguments might be right. A Jewish self-defence organization might lead to more Jewish victims than hiding in cellars and attics. Jewish revolvers certainly cost us a great deal, and yet, they did not refuse to make these sacrifices! They understood that these sacrifices were balm for the Jewish soul, that they were the only morally worthy and nationally acceptable response to pogroms!

The self-defence organizations used to emerge *spontaneously*; they were not the result of cold calculations and sober planning, but spontaneous eruptions of the masses, led and organized by the revolutionary parties. Now, both the mass eruptions and the revolutionary parties are missing. This is because Polish Jewry is weakened, dejected, despondent, disorganized, and exhausted. Of course, a distinction must be made between the Jewish working class and the Jewish *bourgeoisie*; among the former, a spark is still glowing, a candle still flickering, but the general despondence and dejection are extinguishing this spark too, smothering the courage of the working class.

The picture I have sketched is very dark, bleak, and hopeless, but God knows that is not my fault; a mirror can only show what is placed in front of it. Contemplating the political conflagration encircling a large portion of Polish Jewry will make one's heart sink even further. We are referring to the fire that has engulfed eastern Galicia, Volhynia, and the Minsk-Vilna region. Yes, in that area there is a genuine conflagration, and no matter how many hundreds more peasants they shoot, how many dozens more villages they destroy, they will not extinguish the national fire of the Ukrainians and White Russians. They are only fanning the flames and there will inevitably come a moment when the fight will assume the form of open war and open uprisings. Rivers of Polish, Ukrainian, White Russian, and Russian blood will flow and everyone will know why. It is also guaranteed that Jewish blood will flow more than anyone else's, although nobody will know why. Jewish blood will be spilled from all sides, because nobody is with the Jews and everybody is against them.

I cannot elaborate here on this national entanglement that has emerged on the aforementioned national borders. I must simply add that it is a tragic irony of fate that Jews, the most neglected stepchildren of the new Republic of Poland, the stepchildren who are persecuted, tormented, and flogged with every whip that Poland has to offer, are the bearers of Polish culture in the Ukrainian and White Russian regions. They are thus digging their own graves, fanning the flames of hatred against themselves, with inevitably fatal, terribly bloody results.

Jews in the eastern Polish regions are isolated from Polish society of all classes and political leanings. There is not a single Polish party or political movement that maintains close contact with any class of Jews whatsoever, leaving Jews feeling orphaned and neglected. In the Ukrainian and White Russian regions, Jews are surrounded by agitated masses who will eventually burst out of their cages and settle their accounts with their tormenters and persecutors—masses who consider Jews to be messengers and agents of these tormenters and persecutors.

This is the atmosphere in which three million Polish Jews are living. This is the tragedy of Polish Jewry's social position in the surrounding society, the desperation of its psychological state. It is therefore no surprise that they walk from one courtyard to the next crying:

I have no mother!  
I have no father!  
I'm hungry!  
I'm barefoot!

