The Last Years of Polish Jewry
by Yankev Leshchinsky

Volume 1

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

Translated by Robert Brym and Eli Jany

Edited by Robert Brym

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Cover photo: *Selling old clothes in a Jewish market in interwar Warsaw* (undated), Warsaw, Poland. ©Yad Vashem Photo Archive, Jerusalem, https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item_id=24526&ind=123.
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7. At night in the old market[1]

It is glaringly apparent to everyone who visits Poland that a frightful panic has spread among the Jews of that country. It is not a momentary, day- or month-long panic elicited by temporary, stormy circumstances that is therefore normal in a certain sense. It is a permanent, resident panic that grips the soul of the masses and dominates it for years, a panic that drives one to disbelief in one's own powers, actions and undertakings, in tomorrow, in a future that is even a little better. A sort of nervous agitation is also glaringly apparent in the psychology of the Jewish masses, reminding one of a pogrom atmosphere, a situation from which one must save oneself by fleeing and rescuing whatever and as much as one can. In particular, there is no time and too little goodwill to work out a collective plan publicly and seek a way out. Therefore, everyone does for himself what he can and as much as he can.

Understandably, every Jewish individual is preoccupied. He runs to work in the workshop or the factory, seeks customers to buy his goods, carries a 40-pound box on his shoulders or, dripping sweat, pulls a wagonload of coal, stands in a store and looks out at a potential customer or pursues a charitable, interest-free loan to pay off a promissory note or pay taxes, hangs around the stock exchange or stands in the bank requesting a loan in order to purchase a permit. The individual becomes too strongly devoted to necessity and the social machine, in which he is no more than a than a small wheel, to allow himself to pause and glance into his own soul and get hold of the worm of doubt that eats at his powers and his belief in the success of all his hustling. But the person who understands well the Jewish-Polish masses soon senses that

1 {Leshchinsky published an earlier version of this chapter in 1931, titling it "By Day in the Old Market." The changed title reflects the deteriorating circumstances and Leshchinsky's darkened mood. Leshchinsky, *Di ekonomishe lage*…, op. cit., 63–70.}

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the hustle is without an inner fire, without wings, more an externally imposed impetus than the pursuit of a definite goal, more mechanical haste than a sure-footed advance along a defined path.

The rush of the Jewish masses on Nalewki Street[2] in today's Warsaw gives the impression of the convulsions of people who are drowning, of people who sway and plod and spin around in one place. No special rhythm has ever existed in the chaotic hubbub of Jewish Nalewki—it is an inhuman jostling that makes it impossible to move left or right, a jam-packed, black mass of bodies that knock against each other and push each other and yet somehow seem not to move from their place. In contrast, before the war one felt a tempo, a momentum, a fluid energy, a streaming force in this cloud of black kaftans. It extended people from one end of Nalewki to the other, flooded all the side streets and led masses of people into the long, narrow courtyards, from which they disappeared into the cellars, holes and attics, crawling out of them loaded down with mountainous packages or two or three stories of boxes on their shoulders, only to tear once again into the thick, dark cloud, tearing it up and pushing it open, forcing it to split apart and make way for them. And with their heavily loaded shoulders these delivery people shouted out and let everyone know that there, in the narrow, dark courtyards, in the cellars and in the attics, heavy toil was taking place, and products for far and wide Russia were being made by human sweat. Now it is also black on Nalewki and still cramped and impossible to turn around, but there is no life—instead of a mobile mass there is a standing bog, and if one falls in one is stuck, unable to crawl out.

Before we seek to clarify these reasons, we will sketch a few pictures torn out of real life, incidents actually seen with my own eyes, that will illustrate the essence of the mood of panic but at the same time will also

2 {Before World War II, one of Warsaw's two main Jewish districts was the area around Nalewki Street, now Bohaterów Getta (Heroes of the Ghetto) Street. Yehuda Layb Volman, "Di narshaver nalevkes" ["The Jewish People of Warsaw's Nalewki Street"] in Melekh Ravich, ed., *Dos amolike yidishe varshe: biz der shvel fun dritn khurbn, 1414–1939* [*The Warsaw that Was: Until the Threshold of the Third Catastrophe, 1414–1939*] Montreal: Farband fun varshaver yidn in montreal, 1966), 244–46}, https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc205773/ravitch-melech-dos-amolike-yidishe-varshe-biz-der-shvel-fun-dritn-hurbn.

give us the keys to the source of panic among various groups, classes and regions in Poland.

In Peretz's *A Night in the Old Market* produced by the Moscow Granovsky Theatre {in 1925}, there is a scene in the cemetery with zombies wandering around, chasing each other, jumping over each other, catching something in the air, vanishing and suddenly appearing off to the side, from a hole, from a dark corner, seeming to fall down from the heavens, circling each other, whispering and grimacing.[3] Figures in the air, waxen faces, hens' feet, the dead but not dead, the living but not living, bones, skin, dead bodies with living souls, grave dwellers and grave guests, grave aristocrats and grave paupers, early arrivals and latecomers—a commotion, a racket, a din, a fair, a real fair but a cemetery fair, a shadow fair.

One recalls this scene after spending some time in a market in one of the Jewish cities—in Warsaw, Vilna, Bialystok or Lemberg. The picture becomes especially pronounced when one first goes out to such a market on a Sunday, when the long rows of low booths lie as still as tombstones, dead, as if they are hiding something underneath, and afterwards one goes to the same market on a weekday or especially on a fair day and one sees old Jewish women wrapped up in rags; young women with pale, emaciated faces beside a few empty bottles; young women protruding from between strangely coloured pairs of pants and jackets hanging from the booths; boys hopping around with old galoshes in their hands, whispering to you the secret that in a nearby courtyard they can sell you all these goods for a pittance; a hunchbacked old man sitting in a corner repairing shoes; an old woman, half-woman, half-witch, asking you to sample her hot, fresh beans; a mass of persons, perhaps women, perhaps men, throwing themselves at you with requests, proposals, blessings, curses and wild proclamations, the sense of which is difficult to understand. And the deeper one goes, the denser the encampment, the more entangled the skein, the louder the ruckus, the more difficult it is to breathe—a cemetery fair with shadow people and ethereal figures, rag people who move, speak, trade, wander, gesture with their hands and their other limbs. But they do not live.

3 Alexis Granovsky and Joseph Gordon, "'Night in the Old Market'. A Mystery in Two Parts after I. L. Peretz," *The Drama Review* (29, 4: 1985), 110.

Not just hundreds but thousands of Jews suckle on this thin cemetery-market's breast. One can estimate that one-eighth of the Jewish population (and no less than one-quarter of Jews considered to be employed in trade) "lives" off these booth-tombstones. And because associations and organizations are now very much in style in Poland, these cemetery people have also organized themselves everywhere in small-merchants' unions.

We will spend only an hour with the reader in the Lvov office of the small-merchants' union. There we will acquaint ourselves with some of this world's living dead. It is Saturday night. The office is packed with Jewish men still in their Sabbath kaftans, threadbare and faded. Their faces are as worn as their kaftans. In a corner, a bunch of women stand separately. They are short, dirty and wrapped in odd shawls so one cannot see their faces. I go into a separate room with the chairman. One by one the applicants are let in. There stands before us a small, thin woman with a large shawl covering her eyes. As she launches into a long, heated speech she starts to move the shawl up and down and we notice that the scrawny, dried up old Jewish woman whom we thought was more than 50 years old is actually still a young woman, between 30 and 35, with young, fresh, lively eyes. She spoke in a way that was a pleasure to hear. But at the same time it made our hair stand on end. She began as follows:

> Jews, you are merciful sons of the merciful! Will you then allow a poor widow to fall into the netherworld? Jews, a poor person like me is as good as dead, but I am not yet dead, and my four children also do not want to die. They eat and peck, but when there is no bread, they eat me, and I will surely soon be dead. Jews, put yourself in my situation, my children have no father and no breadwinner, so be merciful like a father to his sons. Be their father!

I quote almost word for word the language of this young women because I wrote it down that evening. She really poured out everything using Hebrew words and entire biblical quotations, and not just any words and quotations grabbed out of the air, as it were, but always words and quotations that found their mark, truly appropriate to the essence of the matter. When the chairman stopped her and asked her to lay out her request it emerged that she needed to pay the municipal tax collector six *zloty*, and if she didn't pay this "large" sum of money by Monday

her "store" would be confiscated—her store consisting of a market stall, which she takes home with her daily, and which is probably worth a total of 10–15 *zloty* from which she and her children "live."

What sort of tax is this? The woman is obliged to pay an annual municipal tax of 60 *zloty* for the right to be a storekeeper in her market stall. She did not pay the tax at the beginning of the year, so the city threatened both to confiscate her "store" and prevent her from working as a storekeeper until she managed to obtain a waiver through a Jewish councilman to obtain the major concession that she would pay the debt of 60 *zloty* over ten months. She had already paid six *zloty* a month for several months on her own. But the last month was especially difficult, so she did not manage to save that sum.

Her husband has been dead for four years. He left her with four tiny children and a promise that in 120 years they would sit together in paradise. Even when he was alive, she was the main breadwinner because the husband studied Torah and earned only a little from tutoring. He was religious and is certainly in paradise, but the misfortune is that his wife, poor soul, is sinful and still lives in this world, and the good children also live and want to know nothing about any crises or tax collectors and want at least a piece of dry bread. How are these weak, innocent babies to blame if there is a crisis in the land and their mother does not earn enough to feed them?

The woman gave a very simple answer to my question of what a crisis is, much clearer than science offers. A crisis exists, she said, when everyone is buried. If I alone were a pauper, things would be bad for me, but it wouldn't be so terrible. I could receive a few *zloty* from someone and borrow some goods to sell. But in a crisis, things are so terrible one might as well stretch out and expire.

The second person to enter the room was a young man, tall and slim, with a white collar and clean, polished shoes—in short, a dandy. He had once owned a shoe business in the middle of the city and was well-to-do. Five years earlier, during the 1925 crisis, he had to close the business and lease a stall where he continued to sell shoes. Last year he had to give up the store and descend another step. He now carries a few pairs of shoes from his home to his booth in the market in the morning and brings them home at night. His foppish appearance is a refugee from his once golden years. Now he is rolling downhill. He has lost all hope

of improving himself and has reached a point where he is no longer embarrassed about his condition. For years he hid his misfortune from others and held out hope, but he became more and more indebted until he finally said, "enough passing myself off as someone else, enough pinching my cheeks to bring colour to them and trying to fool others! I must admit to poverty and register in the society of paupers, exposed to the whole world without shame!"

And now a year has passed standing at his booth together with all the *agunes*,[4] widows, invalids, old people, worn out tradesmen, ne'er-do-wells, layabouts, and people who were well-to-do owners before the war but are now over the hill—with all the dregs that the dressed up and painted Jewish centre of Lvov spits out and throws into the garbage heap that is called the market. Every person who goes bankrupt and had no sense earlier to make provisions for himself with a little capital, every person who has been pushed out of the ranks, every person who has fallen down never to stand up again, every hopeless pauper, every Jewess no matter how weak and foolish, every useless idiot—all these people who have been spit out from the centre are thrown together on the garbage heap known as the market and elicit envy from antisemites who complain that the Jews have grabbed the entire market, this garbage-can paradise. And every year we see the addition of hundreds of booths, tables, tents and people who do not even have enough to pay the city for a tiny place of business and are "shopkeepers" with a few old clothes or boots that they carry around and try to sell to "make a living."

Lately, even more people have arrived looking for a place in the garbage can. Some Jews had to flee the countryside because Jews were beaten or because the cooperative tore the last bit of bread from their mouths. So, they set themselves up in the Lvov market. A man does not do so himself because it does not befit him, so he places his wife or his daughter in a booth or a table to "earn a living" until he shows what he is capable of. However, in the end he squanders the goods that he brought from the countryside and becomes a denizen of the market himself.

4 {This word has no English equivalent. An *agune* is a married Jewish woman who cannot remarry because she is unable to obtain a rabbinic divorce. Traditionally, divorce must be granted by the husband. In the case of the *agune*, the husband refuses out of spite or has gone missing but his death is unverified.}

And here is the man who has long had tuberculosis, whose irritated eyes scream that he spits up blood. He has been standing for a week by his booth in the cold dampness selling shoes for a total of 46 *zloty*! How much did he profit? Maybe 10 or 15 *zloty*. And he has a wife and two children at home and he himself must drink two glasses of milk every day, for without that he would have been dead long ago.

And what happens later? How does one escape from this grave in which one is buried alive? How does one tear oneself away from the garbage can where the city discards its refuse?

The young man with tubercular eyes spoke as if in a fever. We sat silently as if turned to stone. We let him pour out his heavy heart. We could not interrupt even though we felt that his heated outpouring would cost him more than one glass of blood. He spoke for about a quarter of an hour. He suddenly sat down on a stool and fell silent. Soon he quietly stood up and left the room—asking nothing. The chairman said the following to me:

> With these ones it's worse than with others. They cannot calm down. They feel buried in the market. They keep on shouting from the grave but it doesn't help. It's a grave from which one cannot escape. It is better to lie quietly and not toss and turn.

An elderly Jew in his 60s enters, quietly and embarrassed. He is a shoemaker and he was always a shoemaker. When he was nine years old his father apprenticed him to a shoemaker and since then he has not stopped sewing and patching shoes, formerly for rich people but lately for the poor. But he doesn't complain. He thanks the Lord of the Universe, he is not sinful, but he is old, without the strength to work any longer. He wants to set himself up in the market with some old boots, shoes, and galoshes. He is deaf and believes we are also deaf, so he shouts. He hopes that we can help him rest a little in his old age; he has worked as a shoemaker for 55 years. If he can borrow 25 *zloty* he can establish a used shoe "business" in the market. He is a leather expert and an even bigger expert in boots. He hopes to repay—he will certainly repay—the loan. Why would he not earn enough from a business that allows many Jews to make a living? If there is enough for so many, there will surely be enough for one old Jew who was a shoemaker for 55 years and now wants to rest a little in his final years.

I sat for a few hours in the union office. One after another, Jewish men and women enter. One asks for a few *zloty* to pay taxes. A second requests money for a license, without which his stall will be shut down. A third asks to save him from the tax collector, who has already confiscated his wares. A fourth does not have enough money to buy potatoes early each day from the peasants—he sells them from a wagon that he drives around the city. A fifth, a widow, wants to receive a loan to become a "merchant" in the market. A sixth, the wife of a teacher in a Jewish religious school, wants her daughter, who is already more than 30 years old but cannot get married because she has no dowry, to set up a booth in the market so she can save money for her dowry. And so on.

This social, physical, spiritual and moral refuse comprises up to one-eighth of the Jewish population of Poland's large cities. These widows, orphans, old people, unemployed tradesmen and workers, invalids, physical, psychological and moral cripples, old maids, half-idiotic boys, people who lost their homes during the war, escapees from village life, victims of physical or economic antisemitism—this entire social rabble flows from the city centre to the sewer that is the market.