

*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



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com/>

©2023 Translation Robert Brym and Eli Jany. ©2023 Introduction and notes Robert Brym



This work is licensed under an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Yankev Leshchinsky, *The Last Years of Polish Jewry. Volume 1: At the Edge of the Abyss: Essays, 1927–33*. Edited by Robert Brym; translated by Robert Brym and Eli Jany. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0341>

Further details about the CC BY-NC license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0341#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-990-3

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-991-0

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-992-7

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-993-4

ISBN Digital ebook (AZW3): 978-1-80064-994-1

ISBN Digital ebook (XML): 978-1-80064-995-8

ISBN Digital ebook (HTML): 978-1-80064-996-5

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0341

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](https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item_id=24526&ind=123).

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

## 8. Three-quarters of the Jewish population lack enough to live on

---

Before the war, the number of rich and middle-class Jews experienced healthy growth. In recent years, too, hundreds of Jews have become rich, built factories and houses, and climbed to a high step on the social ladder. However, these cases are now much less frequent than before the war. Downward mobility is more frequent. The number of rich and middle-class Jews has declined. Wealthy men now fall to the ground precipitously—they fall, sink, and enter the ranks of the poor.

While in Poland I travelled to Otvotsk for a few days to write a couple of articles. Otvotsk is a spa near Warsaw frequented almost exclusively by Jews. The Jewish guesthouses, which are by no means inexpensive, are always full, summer and winter, so it was interesting for me to take a little census at the table where I sat.

Near me sat a Jew, about 45 years old. At first he did not know who I was and I did not know who he was. I had come straight from Lodz, and I told him how antisemitic the Jewish factory owners were in the way they handled Jewish workers. It seems I touched a sore point because he shot back as follows: “One cannot work with Jewish workers. They think more about how to become owners than about work. A contract is not a contract. They do not keep their word. One cannot rely on Jewish workers because they rush to a strike as if it were a dance party.” As he fulminated, he mentioned that he owned a large steam mill but hired no Jews.

I let him pour out his heavy heart and then began to tell him about a discussion I recently had in a train with a Polish antisemite. The Christian complained that the Jewish merchant does not think about the quality of his merchandise, only about earning more profit. The Jewish merchant does not keep his word. If he can sell at a higher price

to customer B merchandise that he has already promised to customer A, he will find a thousand excuses not to keep his word. He does not think about tomorrow or the day after. He profits even if it comes to blows, and in the end come bankruptcies that ruin the entire trade. The rich miller felt that the Jewish worker is a close relative of the Jewish merchant, really his own flesh and blood, with the same strengths and shortcomings. He then turned the conversation to another theme.

Later I learned that this angry rich factory owner had spent 10 or 12 years as a salesclerk in a mill. He belonged to a socialist party and defended workers' interests reasonably well. He had the good qualities of the Jewish worker. He was well versed in business, no less than the owner. He knew all the firms from which the owner purchased and all the customers to which he sold. He believed in the value of strikes and was the owner's bane.

In the end he became an owner himself, a large, rich, growing factory owner with strong hands and broad ambitions, with the entrepreneurial energy of ten men and hatred for workers, especially Jewish workers. His business grew during the war and the flood of paper money. I spent time with this newly rich man on several occasions. He complained about the crisis, but one got the impression he felt satisfied with the last ten years. The moral of all our talks was that one must be a decent human being, and if one is not a simpleton one can make a living.

I give this example because it is certainly typical. In Poland there are hundreds of newly rich Jews who arose in the bad years, when tens of thousands were downwardly mobile and lost their pre-war assets.

Here in the hotel at his own table sits a Jew, about 50 years old, with a perspiring, nearly bald expanse spread proudly over his narrow head as if declaring to the people around him: "For each hair I lost I made thousands of *zloty*." No matter; for such a price it is worth losing the most beautiful hair. I am not ashamed of my baldness.

Who is he? A former salesclerk from Gensha Street, Warsaw's textile centre, who, during the war, furtively traded in packages of textiles. After the war he opened a textile business of his own. During the period of high inflation, he bought many houses in Berlin for pennies and now they are worth millions. He now resides in Berlin three months a year and trades in everything. If a wagonload of eggs is available, he trades in eggs, if pig bristles {for brushes}, then it's also okay. And lending money

with interest or for business partnerships is of course good. The textile business in Warsaw is still in business; it is the prayer and study house that renders all his other businesses kosher. This Jew perspires a lot, but it is a completely different type of perspiration than that of the 70-year-old man who must haul a basket of coal up three stories.

Of 20 guests in the hotel I counted six who became rich after the war. One difference between them and the other 14 is that, before the war, when a Jew's net worth exceeded 100,000 rubles, things continued smoothly. In 90% of cases, growth was assured, and he was certain to become very wealthy. It is utterly different now. The status of half of those who became well-to-do after the war soon falls to that of modest owner or poor man. They make a racket for a few years and their heads spin—not just theirs, but also (and even more) the heads of their wives and children. They learn quickly how to live well, having bigger expenses than rich people had before the war. Then, suddenly, they make a reckoning and find that they have exhausted not only their own assets but also their borrowed money, and they have no way out of this predicament. These entangled rich men are the first candidates for suicide.

In a big city like Warsaw it is difficult to ascertain how many Jews become rich and how many become poor. It is difficult to calculate even for a smaller city. Nonetheless, one can offer a rough sketch that approximates reality.

Consider Pinsk, where there are now around 20 rich Jewish wood merchants. Today, "rich" means having 100,000 or more *zloty* in assets, that is, from \$10,000 to \$15,000. A couple of wood merchants have even more, up to \$25,000. Who are they? Just four of them became rich in the pre-war years, while 16 became rich after the war. Who are the *nouveau riche*? One is a former carpenter, a second a former furrier, a third a former worker on a ship. Well, the tailor and the ship worker at least understand a little about wood and lumber, but how does a furrier enter the trade in wood? It is really a puzzle. However, during the period when the value of money fell, many tricks were played, the statuses of people were rearranged, and worlds were turned upside down.

In Pinsk before the war there were ten Jews who each had assets of a million rubles (that is, \$500,000) or more: two bankers, two factory owners, two ship owners, and four large merchants. Now there is just

one millionaire, the owner of the match factory, and he does not live in Pinsk.

Before the war there were up to 50 Jews with assets of 50,000 to 100,000 rubles. This prominent group of wealthy men kept on growing. Precise research would allow us to show that nearly every year before the war two or three people were added to this group. Today, this group has nearly disappeared. The rich men are now those with assets of \$10,000 to \$15,000, and their number is also not large. Before the war one could count a few hundred Jews in this category.

The number of rich Jews and even those who are simply well-to-do has shrunk. The sums that the wealthy own are much smaller than before the war. And the people changed a great deal. From one-half to three-quarters of them entered the *nouveau riche* category after or during the war. They are former salesclerks or artisans, small players with sharp elbows for pushing ahead and long noses for sniffing out a little business under the table.

In Pinsk I was shown an attractive little two-story brick building, recently constructed. In the first story, textiles were sold, and in the second, ready-to-wear clothing. Who are the owners? They are two former salesclerks who, during the war, did not flee although the owners for whom they worked became paupers. They had good relationships with their Jewish and Christian clientele. They started off small but took advantage of the time when the country was flooded with paper money, not only profiting but also constructing buildings and investing in things that maintain their value. The two partners now have the largest and best textile store in Pinsk, and they bless the war, which turned Pinsk on its head, causing the elite to fall to the ground and those on the bottom to rise to the top. This did not occur to all those at the bottom, but a small number of them managed to work themselves up.

Mendele {Moykher Sforim} describes how in {the fictional} Kabtsansk, a wealthy Jewish man emerged overnight, like a cucumber. Just yesterday there was no sign of it and the next day a green cucumber lies in the garden enjoying the warm sun that gave it life and juice. Today's wealthy Jewish men obtained their wealth just like that, but with great effort. Trading in textiles or lumber or grain during the war was a risky enough business, and commerce in the period of high inflation made people nervous wrecks. Today's new rich men therefore have hardened

nerves and character. They can pride themselves on the fact that wealth does not fall from the sky, nor does one become rich by miracles. It is a hard undertaking. One must risk one's life. One rides high a hundred times and falls off the horse a hundred times. One is hurled from heat to cold and back again. It is a business that demands patience, daring, talent, and enormous gusto for taking risks.

If the highest step of Jewish economic life fell and grew thinner and smaller, then the lowest step, the poverty step, became much broader and densely populated because it drew on people in all the middle and top steps.

One can imagine economic life as a pyramid with a wide foundation on which the higher steps get smaller as one ascends. For Jews before the war, the middle steps of the pyramid were typically much wider than for other peoples. It is possible that even the highest step was a little wider for Jews. Now, however, the highest step is much more drastically thinned out among than non-Jews. The middle steps also became much narrower for Jews and non-Jews. However, Jews feel the narrowing more than do non-Jews because the middle classes play a larger role in Jewish life. Concerning the lowest step—the poorest masses—the situation among Jews is much worse than it is for non-Jews. The Jews on the lowest step consist of small shopkeepers, minor agents, poorer artisans, and almost all workers. All these classes have in recent years earned barely enough to support themselves or have gone hungry. Among non-Jews, the foundation is composed of workers, peasants, and a small number of urban artisans. Some members of all three groups managed to become officials. They live much better now than before. A small number of peasants entered the liberal professions or became officials, proficient mechanics, workers, traders, or storekeepers. The millions of peasants who own one or two hectares of agricultural land do not live better than the poor Jewish masses in the cities.

Can one measure the number of people who form the poor masses, the breadth of the poverty-stricken foundation on which all the middle and higher classes rest? We will try to do that using Jewish tax lists for Vilna in 1925 and Lemberg in 1928, which we have in our possession. One must note in this connection that the lists consists only of those who own at least a little store or workshop. The poorest are not

included—workers and street people who live off of manual labour or incidental precarious employment.

Those whose gross earnings are less than 10,000 *zloty*, that is, less than \$1,100 a year<sup>1</sup> are certainly impoverished. In Vilna they comprise more than 84% of all Jewish taxpayers and in Lemberg around 55%. There is no doubt that Vilna is much poorer than Lemberg. However, the cited difference is also due to the fact that 1925 was a terrible crisis year while 1928 was a relatively good year.

Around 26% of Jewish taxpayers in Lemberg and 40% in Vilna have gross earnings of less than 5,000 *zloty* a year. Even if all these taxpayers underestimate their income by 50%, and their retained earnings amount to 20% of their earnings, this means that each of them has retained earnings of 2,000 *zloty* or \$220 a year or \$18-\$19 a month.<sup>2</sup> And these are not individuals but entire families, often large families because, especially in this class, they still believe in the biblical injunction to “be fruitful and multiply” since this is their only pleasure in life.

Let us now consider the very rich, those who stand at the top of the structure of Jewish economic life. These are people whose gross earnings exceed 100,000 *zloty* per year—in Lemberg, 4%, and in Vilna, 1% of Jewish taxpayers. The 4% of rich Jewish Lemberg taxpayers make 37% of all Jewish earnings in the city, while the 1% of rich Jewish Vilna taxpayers make 12% of all Jewish earnings. This shows what a terrible abyss separates the most impoverished from the rich in impoverished Poland.

On average, the very rich Jews have gross earnings of 240,000 *zloty* a year. Even if we accept that none of the very rich underestimated their gross earnings and had retained earnings equal to just 15% of gross earnings, they retained 34,000 *zloty*, or 17 times more than the poorest taxpayers.<sup>3</sup>

By American standards, \$3,000 a year is not a large sum, but for Poland it is a considerable amount. However, that is by no means the highest step in the pyramid. In Lemberg, 1% of Jewish taxpayers

---

1 {In January 1928, \$1,100 had the buying power of \$17,876 in January 2022. US Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2022. “CPI Inflation Calculator,” [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm).}

2 {About \$298 dollars a month in 2022.}

3 {It is unclear whether Leshchinsky is here referring to Vilna, Lemberg, or the two cities combined.}



make 20% of all Jewish earnings. Each of these very large merchants or entrepreneurs has gross earnings of 500,000 *zloty* a year and retains 75,000 *zloty*, or 76 times more than Jews in the lowest class of taxpayers.

In the middle lie several classes, poor people and owners, some better off than others. For example, take the poor people who earn twice as much as the poorest of the poor. They earn up to 4,000 *zloty* a year, or up to \$40 a month. In Lemberg they constitute 20% and in Vilna 10% of taxpaying Jews. If we combine them with the poorest of the poor, they make up 75% of all taxpayers in Lemberg and 94% in Vilna. This is the broad foundation of Jewish life, and we estimate that the figures for Lemberg are typical for all of Poland. We estimate that another 5–6% of better-off owners make a living, provide for the education of their children, and, with difficulties, get by. And there are an additional 15% of poorer owners, those who toil bitterly to make a living but have enough to eat and dress themselves. Thus, the table on the next page provides a picture of Jewish economic life in Poland that is perhaps not far from reality.

It is interesting that my calculations based on taxpayers in Lemberg are approximately the same as those provided by the manager of the city tax office in Lodz based on the list of Jewish taxpayers in that city. By his count, the Jewish population in Lodz is composed of the following five classes: the poor who pay no taxes (more than 48% of the total); the poor who pay 5 *zloty* in taxes a year (32.5%); people of middling wealth who pay between 20 and 60 *zloty* a year (more than 13%); the well-off, who pay between 100 and 400 *zloty* a year (5%); and the wealthy who pay between 500 and 5,000 *zloty* a year (more than 1%).<sup>4</sup>

---

4 {Elsewhere Leshchinsky provides the income distribution for Jews in Warsaw in 1925 based on an official source: the poor, earning up to 200 *zloty* a month (72.82% of Warsaw Jews); those just managing to get by, earning 200–400 *zloty* a month (17.25%); the middle class, earning 400–1,700 *zloty* a month (9.18%); people of means, earning 1,700–4,100 *zloty* a month (0.65%); the rich, earning 4,100–8,100 *zloty* a month (0.08%); and the economic elite, earning 8,100 or more *zloty* a month (0.02%). Leshchinsky, *Di ekonomishe lage...* [*The Economic Situation...*] op. cit., 52.}

Table 6 Income groups, Polish Jewry, early 1930s, in percent

Income group	Percentage
Poorest of the poor	55
Middling poor	20
Poor owners	15
Middling owners	5
Well-to-do	4
Rich	1
Total	100

Understandably, neither set of calculations can pretend to be perfectly accurate. However, there can be no doubt that they are close to the truth. And the truth is very sad. One is overcome by a sudden shiver when considering that three-quarters of Poland's Jewish population consists either of poor people, who cannot even afford bread, or at best of those that earn barely enough to get by.

It is a wonder that with such poverty and such a small percentage of comfortable and rich Jews, thousands of Jewish institutions are nevertheless maintained in support of religious, social, cultural, hygienic, and various other needs. It suffices to look at a list of social and educational institutions to understand that millions of dollars (not *zloty*) are contributed to the maintenance of these institutions. Polish Jews support 500 cooperative funds; 520 interest-free loan associations; 280 merchant unions; 500 unions of small traders; 100 workers unions; 320 orphans committees; 37 workers cooperatives; and 900 synagogues, *talmud-torahs*, *yeshivas*, and evening courses. These are only a small part of the institutions maintained by Polish Jews. The religious and charitable institutions are much more numerous than others and require serious sums of money. The 500 Jewish *kehiles* in Poland, concerning which reports exist, have a combined budget of more than 30 million *zloty* per year.

The contributions by class to the budgets of *kehiles* are as follows: The rich contribute 25%, the poor contribute 15%, and the middle classes give 60%. The Jewish middle class in Poland struggles continuously with the general economic crises and with crises that are unique to the

Jews and to the middle class. It nonetheless contributes the greatest part of the budget for both the *kehiles* and all other charitable institutions.

It is interesting that the small merchant is poorer than the artisan. This fact jumps out from the tax lists.

