

THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 1

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



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9. The destruction of Jewish economic life in Lodz

“The right to work”—this is the great lament of Jewish workers, employees, intellectuals, and the masses who, with each passing day, are pushed further out of the old Jewish professions while being prevented from entering new, modern lines of work. The Jewish masses are simply suffocating in the new social ghetto into which they are being shoved. They are being strangled in the economic ghetto in which they remain trapped.

As I walked along the main streets of Lodz on the day that I arrived, the following phenomenon caught my attention: At almost every gateway, two or three Jewish men stand with a bundle of rope wrapped around their necks. These are Jewish porters, waiting for somebody to summon them to transport a package of merchandise from a factory to a store or from a large store to a smaller one.

The majority are not porters by trade. The latter have an entirely different appearance and work in the factories loading whole railroad cars with merchandise. They are tall young men with broad shoulders, often giants. These men standing by the gateways, on the other hand, look small, thin, and dejected, and it is immediately apparent that they were not born porters. Most are unemployed weavers who have already devoted their last bit of strength to the manufacturers. They are mainly Jewish hand weavers who are without work even as the large factories hum and clatter such a joyous melody for the manufacturers.

These bundles of rope around their necks make a terrifying impression. One must stop and take a good look into the eyes of those wearing the rope around their necks. Alongside me walks a Jewish weaver, a fortunate Jewish weaver who had gotten into a mechanized factory, but who has nonetheless been unemployed for the last three

months. He senses that the ropes are tormenting me, pulling me toward the people wearing them around their necks. He comments, as though to himself, “Yes, they’ve wrapped a rope around the necks of working Jews and keep on pulling it tighter and tighter. They’ve just about strangled them.”

The most terrifying thing is that this rope around the neck of the Jewish worker is being tightened not only by the government, but also by Jews—large-scale Jewish manufacturers, including devout Jews. These devout Jews take the Almighty as a partner in their “noble” trade. They are devout, God-fearing Jews who ostensibly do not want Jews to work on the Sabbath, although their own devout pockets make no distinction between the revenue generated by Sabbath and weekday work. They are virtuous souls who heard back at Mount Sinai that one must keep the Sabbath and then went deaf for the verses about helping a brother. They are Jews with *peyes* and *tsitses* who are frightened of committing the smallest sin, yet their conscience easily bears the death from hunger of thousands of Jewish hand weavers whom they refused to hire when they introduced power looms in their factories.

Whoever has not seen Baluty,¹ the nest of Jewish hand weavers, has not seen the victims of capitalism. In Lodz there are factories, built according to the very latest technology, where 32 looms are run by one worker, where a long hall of 67 by 22 metres is staffed by just 12 people, who only need to monitor and adjust the machines. In the same city, Jewish weavers are dying of hunger, even when the city has a shortage of workers. They work exactly twice as many hours, they sacrifice twice the blood and sweat, standing and working for 16 hours at a time, yet have no money for bread and are literally dying.

I calculated with a Lodz city councillor that Baluty’s population is 3.2 times denser than that of the Christian working-class quarter.² The

1 {Baluty, a neighbourhood of Lodz, was home to many impoverished, working class Jews, including thousands of weavers who worked in cramped apartment sweatshops.}

2 {Leshchinsky writes “32 times denser” but this seems an impossibly high number. Greater London’s most densely populated area (Tower Hamlets, the city’s second poorest borough, covering most of the traditional East End) is only about seven times more densely populated than its least densely populated borough (Bromley, in the Metropolitan Green Belt, the most rural part of Greater London) (Greater London Authority, “Land Area and Population Density, Ward and Borough,” 2022, <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/land-area-and-population-density-ward-and-borough>.)}

director of the city's statistical bureau told me that the mortality rate in this part of the city is higher than in any other neighbourhood. One only needs to visit a few apartments in order to catch the whiff of slow death, of expiration.

I visited approximately ten apartments. The picture is the same everywhere: one room, and in that room one or two handlooms. In the same room there is a small bed with a thin straw mattress and a horribly filthy blanket, a stove for cooking in one corner, and everywhere a horde of pale, skinny children with dirty eyes and crooked legs.

The situation of the Christian workers is undoubtedly sad enough. And yet the Jewish workers envy them. First of all, the Christian works in a large factory, which is usually the very last to close, only shutting down when an economic crisis reaches its peak. The small factory or the handloom mill, on the other hand, is the first to cease operations. The Christian worker at the large factory is insured against unemployment and receives support for 17 weeks. The Jewish worker is employed in a small workshop with fewer than five workers and is therefore uninsured. As a result, he begins to go hungry the day he loses his job.

Another important point: the Christian worker's wife or child is also working. Often, one of them works for a state enterprise, on a railroad, or for a municipal enterprise, on a streetcar, in the sewage system, the water system, and so on. It is very rare for all of them to lose their jobs at the same time. Among Jews, the father bears the burden practically on his own, and if he falls, the entire family is ruined.

Walking the streets of Baluty, one sees at every turn groups of Jewish workers, among them many with beards, the fathers of large families. They stand there worried, preoccupied. They cannot afford a single crumb of bread. It is a fact that the peasants who bring their milk, butter, and potatoes to the market in the Jewish workers' quarter have lately been carting their wares back home to the village.

I step into the apartments. Here is a room with two looms. Lying on a dry, thin straw mattress in which there is no longer any straw, a paralyzed woman shouts. She begs God to send the Angel of Death for her as quickly as possible. Her husband died several months ago. Her two sons, hand weavers, went off into the city to look for work. They stand by a gate somewhere with rope around their necks. But very often, the neighbours tell me, they return without a penny, and the paralyzed woman receives nothing. Her cries can be heard the whole length of



Fig. 6 A street scene, in the Baluty neighbourhood (1930s), Lodz, Poland. ©Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, <http://polishjews.yivoarchives.org/archive/index.php?p=collections/controlcard&id=23676>

the hallway and the women in neighbouring apartments complain that their children cannot sleep at night.

Here is a second apartment. There is no door. The hole is covered with a sack. Inside is a young woman with four small children. It is cold and the little ones are bundled up in a tattered, dirty blanket. Her husband is on the street. He does unskilled labour for municipal enterprises. The Lodz city council has a socialist majority, and an unemployed Jew can get hired for public works projects. He works just three days a week and earns 23 *zloty*, or \$2.50 per week. They are the rich ones of this hallway.

Here is a third apartment. This is the home of a “manufacturer,” who has two handlooms and employs a worker. Nobody is working now. He buys wool himself, works it, and sells to stores. A tall Jewish man comes home from the *besmedresh* {prayer and study house} with his *tales* and *tfilin* in hand, speaks little, and makes it clear through his behaviour that he, the “manufacturer,” is not—God forbid—to be lumped together with the “proletariat.” The woman of the household stands cooking a large pot of potatoes in the same room as the looms.

We continue on our way. Neighbours come out and accompany us. There is only one topic of conversation: Where can one get power looms, and how can one learn to work them? Admittedly, the factories with power looms are also currently shut down, but their workers still had "lucrative" years when they worked without interruption, whereas even in a good year, the hand weavers are without work for nine months. When they are earning, they make just half as much as the workers in the large factories, and when they are not, they are so utterly abandoned that they may as well lie down in the street and die. A power loom or a position in a factory with power looms—that is the dream, the fantasy of everybody languishing and slowly dying in Baluty.

The Joint and ORT have made headway on behalf of Jewish hand weavers and have certainly played a significant role in the hiring of several hundred of them in factories with power looms. In order for weavers to get the chance to use power looms they must learn the necessary skills in the Joint's and ORT's instructional factories; and Jewish manufacturers must hire Jewish workers, since Christian manufacturers certainly will not. However, one can count on one's fingers the number of Jewish manufacturers who do not exclude Jewish workers. To this day, the majority of Jewish manufacturers do not allow any Jews to cross the thresholds of their factories.

The custom of firing Jews and hiring Christians in their place during the transition from handlooms to power looms became the norm in Lodz years ago. The Hershberg and Birnboym firm owned a large factory in Lodz with exclusively Christian workers. The owners were Reform or assimilated Jews. Hershberg decided to open a special factory for Jewish workers. He established a small factory where Jewish hand weavers learned to operate power looms. Gradually, it became a large factory with 166 power looms, all operated by Jews.

Hershberg believed that Jewish workers produced more than Christians and he spread this opinion everywhere. The factory existed from 1912 until the war. It was a Jewish factory not only in terms of the composition of its workers, but also in terms of its spirit. The workers received special permission from the factory inspector to work on Sundays and Christian holidays and rest on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. There was a small house of prayer for devout weavers. Even the guard in the sentry box who let the workers in and out was a devout older Jew who would recite psalms when he had nothing else to do.

A little while before the war, a rich, devout young man named Budziner became the general manager. The war began and they reduced the number of workers. The general manager fired Jews and hired Christians. He made the excuse that he was afraid of the Christians! After the war, Budziner remained the sole manager of both factories. He closed the Jewish factory. And to this day Budziner does not employ a single Jew among his 300 workers.

This Budziner is not just any old Jew in Lodz. He is a rich, devout man and a member of the Mizrakhi Orthodox Zionist movement. He is the chairman of the Jewish community council and was a member of the Polish senate. This is someone who plays a large role in Jewish communal life. Is such a thing possible among any other nation? Would they not excommunicate such a person? Among us Jews, however, he receives the finest honours in the synagogue, the community council, and even the senate. True, he has two great virtues. He is as devout as can be and as rich as Korakh.³ But is that really enough for Jews to select him to head the community council and sit in the senate?

Here is a second example: Reb Yekhiel Meyer Pik. He is a Ger Hasid who travels to see his *rebbe* several times a year. He is a member of the *Agudes Yisroel* movement, which wages war for orthodoxy. He has a factory with 120 looms. The master craftsman is a Jew but among 60 workers, there is just one other Jew.

And here is a third—Mr Glikman. He is an active Zionist and a chairman of several Jewish societies, including those in charge of elder and orphan care, among others. He is a real hotshot, and even a bit of a writer, lecturing Jews in a Lodz newspaper and crying that they ought to help sick and old Jews. But among the 200 workers in his factory, there is not a single Jew.

Jews have gotten so used to antisemitism that the most eminent Jewish antisemites occupy the seat of honour in Jewish society and nobody shows them their true place.

This is not just the case with respect to Jewish textile manufacturers. Manual shoemaking is also in the process of disappearing. More and more mechanized shoe factories keep opening, and the manual shoemakers are left without work. In Warsaw, a couple of thousand

3 {A figure in *Bamidbar* (the biblical book of Numbers), traditionally viewed as one of the two richest men in the world.}

Jews made their living as shoemakers, producing goods exclusively for export to the Russian provinces. After the war, this trade went through a terrible crisis because the domestic Polish market did not have sufficient demand for so many shoes. Nonetheless, there would still have been a bit of work, since today's Poland is much larger than former Russian Poland. However, there arose another calamity: mechanized shoemaking.

I know of five Jewish mechanized shoe factories in Warsaw in which 520 workers are employed, not a single one of them Jewish. Jewish shoemakers are dying of hunger; they are ready to do gruelling labour just to earn their bread. Representatives of the Jewish professional union beat a path to the doors of the factories, but the manufacturers will not even speak to them.

A turning point has nonetheless been reached with respect to hiring Jewish workers in large mechanized factories. Currently, up to 800 Jewish power loom weavers work—that is, when there is work—in the large factories of Lodz. In Warsaw, two large garment factories with 400 workers have opened and, thanks to the clever tactics and energy of the administration of the Jewish tailors' union, all 400 are Jews. A few Jewish workers have also pushed their way into a couple of new galoshes factories. Thus far, the results have been minimal, but at least it is a start. A possibility has emerged that Jews might penetrate large-scale industry.

This turning point was reached among both Jewish manufacturers and Christian workers. One manufacturer told me that Jewish workers are now a lot calmer, quieter, and less revolutionary than in the past. Why? Because the Jew has so few job opportunities and factory work is such a struggle to come by that he tries much harder than the Christian to stay in his place and—God forbid—not lose his position. Another manufacturer told me that the Jewish worker is more productive because he needs to earn more. He is more willing than a Christian to work overtime and because of this, the machine is in operation longer. A third manufacturer explained that he hires Jewish workers because he does not want to have a double enemy in his factory. The Christian worker hates him both as a manufacturer and as a Jew, whereas the Jewish worker dislikes him only as a manufacturer.

A change has also taken place among the Christian working masses. Thanks to the initiative of the Bund at every convention, congress, city

council, and city hall, the Polish socialist worker has finally shifted his position on this issue a little. In 1924, when a Bundist started to speak at a congress of all professional unions about admitting Jewish workers everywhere on an equal basis with Christians, several workers made antisemitic speeches, arguing that Jews could only be found loafing around Nalewki Street, not working. At the latest congresses, there have been no such speeches. The congresses now pass resolutions demanding equal rights for Jewish workers.

In the factories of Lodz, where Christian workers used to go on strike the moment a Jewish worker appeared, the mood has also changed considerably. The Polish workers have come to understand that Jewish workers also have a right to work. Of course, this is far from a unanimous position among Polish workers. Not long ago, the union of antisemitic Polish workers carried out an anti-Jewish demonstration in Lodz, with placards bearing the words, "Down with the Bund and with Jewish workers, who are stealing Christian workers' jobs!" Nevertheless, this iron wall has now also been breached.

The drive of the Jewish masses to work in general, in large factories in particular, is so strong, so intense, that it was inevitable that they would achieve something. How can this be explained? By the immense impoverishment of the Jewish masses.

The standard of living among Jews has declined sharply, and many claim that Jewish labour is now cheaper than Christian labour. Previously, it was always the opposite—Jewish labour was more expensive. But Jews are in such a desperate position, their selection of livelihoods so limited, that they must go to work under the harshest conditions and for the cheapest prices.

It is characteristic that, despite the terrible economic crisis and the immense unemployment, Jews are flocking to ORT courses and asking to learn a trade. A large percentage of them are children of merchants and intermediaries. Out of 242 students, male and female, studying in various ORT trade courses in Lodz, 127 (more than 50%) are the children of merchants, intermediaries, and salesclerks—and that is now, at the time of the most terrible economic crisis.

Let us calculate the level of unemployment among Jews in the two largest Polish centres, Warsaw and Lodz. I acquired these facts in the central bureaus of Jewish professional unions and confirmed them in conversations with the managers.

In Warsaw's knitwear industry, 1,500 of 2,000 Jewish workers (75%) are unemployed. Among the 7–8,000 Jewish tailors in Warsaw, more than 4,000 (55 to 60%) are unemployed. The same is true of 1,600 out of 2,000 gaiter makers (80%) and 1,600 out of 2,000 shoemakers (80%). Out of 2,500 metalworkers, only one-third work a full week; 600 are completely unemployed and 1,000 work half a week. Among 800 leather workers, 70% are unemployed. Thus, in these trades alone, there are more than 10,000 unemployed Jews in Warsaw. We can therefore calculate that the total number of Jews facing unemployment reaches 14–15,000, and including their families, around 50,000. Jewish workers are uninsured. They have no savings because they earn next to nothing. They cannot get hired for municipal work. What option do they have left? Is it any wonder that suicide rates are rising?

Aside from the workers discussed above, there are several thousand Jewish artisans who work at home for the warehouses. They too are impoverished, and a large number are also without work. We can calculate that these artisans plus their families total 20–25,000 people. Thus, among the working class, there are 70–75,000 people going hungry. If we now recall the large mass of small shopkeepers, market stall keepers, and other market vendors who do not earn enough to make a living, our minds are truly left reeling.

In Lodz, there are up to 6,000 Jewish workers in the textile industry, around 4,000 of whom (65%) are unemployed. Of 7–8,000 tailors, 5,000 are unemployed. In all other trades combined, there are up to 5,000 workers, of whom up to 3,000 are unemployed. Thus, in Lodz, there are approximately 12,000 Jews facing unemployment, or 30–35,000 when we include their families.

In Warsaw and Lodz, there are more than 20,000 Jewish salaried employees, of whom approximately 5,000 are unemployed.

Thinking about the vast army of unemployed Jews is enough to make one's hair stand on end. They are absolutely defenceless and receive no support from the government. They have only one way out: death from hunger or suicide.

Unemployment, as with the economic crisis in general, has certainly also impacted the Christian population, but their situation is not as desperate. Eighty percent of the non-Jewish population makes a living from agriculture. It is undoubtedly a great catastrophe for them

that grain prices are so low that they lack money for clothing, farm improvements, and so on. However, they are not going hungry.

Just 2% of non-Jews work in commerce, compared to 36% of Jews. Eight percent are involved in industry and, even then, mostly in large-scale industry, which grants all unemployed workers state support. Among Jews, the percentage in industry is 4.5 times greater, but these Jews work only in skilled crafts and small-scale industry, so they are not entitled to unemployment insurance. Fully 6% of non-Jews are employed by the state as officials and workers, and even during the greatest crisis they receive their pay and live in security. Not even 1% of Jews are employed by the state. In Galicia, there are still a few Jewish officials left over from the old days,⁴ but they are gradually being replaced, and the day is not far off when former Galicia will become identical to former Russian Poland, where there was not a single Jewish official.

The role of state officials should not, however, be measured according to their number. Their role is much larger, and the greatest tragedy of Polish Jews is indeed the fact that the state machinery lies in the hands of those who are not only antisemitic, but in general do not have the faintest clue of the complexity of a modern state's workings. All of the state's apparatuses are not only ethnically, but also socio-communally hostile toward Jews. The majority of officials are the children of landowners, the nobility, and newly-rich peasants, all people who are far removed from commerce and industry and hostile toward such livelihoods. They grew up in a milieu that viewed urban occupations with detached antagonism, and in the city, too, they live in an environment disconnected from commerce and industry. People like these are the ones determining the fate of the two fields in which 75% of Polish Jews make their living. It is therefore only natural for the state to wage a constant war against Jews, in whose hands commerce and industry primarily lie. And since Jews are even more involved in commerce than in industry, the greatest fury is directed toward the merchant class, which in Poland is 65–70% Jewish.

The Polish official never comes into any contact whatsoever with merchants, and he therefore has no sense of their good times or their bad. He carries out his duties not as a living person with feelings and sympathies, but as a machine, a cold mechanical apparatus, and for this

4 {Until 1918, Galicia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Galician Jews were officially granted full rights in 1867.}

reason behaves mercilessly and cruelly. In many cities where the Polish population is an insignificant minority and the Jewish population a vast majority, the Polish officials sent there end up feeling like occupiers, like an army that has conquered a foreign land. They give no consideration whatsoever to the interests of the population, focusing solely on the interests of the position entrusted to them.

The struggle among Jews for the right to become state officials is perhaps the most important one in the general struggle for the right to work. The right to work—this is now the urgent cry of the entirety of Polish Jewry. This cry is directed toward the state, the city councils, the manufacturers, and, more than anyone else, the Jewish manufacturers.

It is not only that Jews are not hired as state officials; they are also barred from work as municipal officials, and even from work for municipal enterprises such as streetcars, sewage systems, or water systems. They are not even permitted to clean the streets, although Jews are pleading to do this kind of unskilled labour.

Table 7 Percent Jews and Jewish municipal workers and officials by city

City	Percent Jews	Percent Jews, municipal workers and officials
Warsaw	32.5	3.0
Lublin	34.0	2.6
Ostrovets	33.0	1.1
Aleksandrov	30.0	4.0
Konin	33.0	2.9
Mishtsanov	50.0	1.0
Lipno	25.0	8.0
Khelm	50.0	12.0
Naselsk	55.0	10.0
Navidvar	60.0	11.0
Byala	50.0	15.0
Vladimir-Volynsk	70.0	16.0
Grodne	47.0	10.5
Rovne	75.0	13.0
Hrubeshov	60.0	70.0
Slonim	70.0	51.0

The table immediately above is based on facts assembled by the Bureau for the Right to Work. Only in a couple of cities do Jews comprise a significant percentage of municipal workers and officials. In most cities, Jewish municipal workers and officials are one-tenth to one-fifteenth as numerous as the percentage of the Jewish population overall. The Bundist faction of the Warsaw city council has been fighting resolutely for several years for the hiring of Jewish workers and officials, but so far has had virtually no success. The couple hundred Jews who are counted in Warsaw as municipal workers are employed in the Jewish hospital and orphanage, which are under the authority of the city council.

A kind of alliance has developed between devout Jewish manufacturers and the antisemitic politics of the state and city halls, and it is left to the Jewish masses to fight against it. This fight is a matter of life and death.