

*THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY*  
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 1

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



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## 11. The superfluous

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I do not know whether fish in the sea tremble the whole month of *elul*.<sup>1</sup> However, I have no doubt that most Polish Jews tremble even now, genuinely fearing God and believing that one is whipped in the hereafter for sins and sits in paradise for good deeds. No part of the Jewish people has demonstrated such stubbornness, obstinacy, spitefulness, and conservatism as Polish Jewry.

Overnight, before my eyes, young men in tens of Ukrainian hamlets cut off their *peyes*, shortened their caftans, threw their *tefillin* in the attic, sent their daily and high-holiday prayer books away with the itinerant bookseller, shouted at their grandparents not to interfere in their affairs—and became “gentiles.” They knew Russian, devoured the Russian writers Pushkin and Lermontov, wore Russian shirts, ate pork enthusiastically, and on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur went for walks in the forest around town, grazing on little livers and gizzards that they brought with them from the *kapore*<sup>2</sup> at home. Their fathers and mothers often did not even protest. They groaned and sighed, bemoaning the fact that they did not have enough sense to act accordingly in their young years.

Here, in Poland, they have been cutting off *peyes* for more than a century, tearing strips off long coats, bombarding prayer and study houses with *haskala*, enlightenment, assimilation, socialism, and communism, attacking Hasidic rabbis with large philosophical books and small trashy brochures about the mysteries of the Turkish court. They have been flooding the *yeshivas* with serious and poisonous literature,

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1 {Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the “Days of Awe,” take place in the month of *elul* in the Jewish lunar calendar. According to a Yiddish saying, “Even the fish in the sea tremble as the Days of Awe approach.”}

2 {A traditional atonement ceremony in preparation for Yom Kippur involved the ritual slaughter of a chicken, the *kapore*.}

and setting evil forces on the *yeshiva* students. Yet, every time I come to Warsaw, Lodz, Lemberg, Kiev or Krakow, to Kutne or to Vlotzlavek, I find that the long coat still dominates the picture. The orthodox, religious Jews control the communities. The Hasidic rabbis rule over minds and souls and are followed fervently by thousands and tens of thousands of people, who follow to the point of risking their lives. I still meet eight- and nine-year-old boys with *peyes* all the way down to their necks and young wives with wigs drooping over their eyes. I still see packed little houses of prayer and study. And the dancing and fervent singing in small Hasidic houses of prayer during the Sabbath evening meal resound and overpower the songs and shouts of all national and socialist groups and circles.

Of course, struggling will not help. The Angel of Death of assimilation does its work diligently and thoroughly, especially the Angel of Death of linguistic assimilation. The picture is changing, and the worm eats its way into the body of Polish Jewry. But for the time being, religious Jews are the majority. Polish Jews are the only Jewish community in the world that has a religious youth, a youth that is consciously faithful to the old, deep-rooted customs and defends and promotes them both with the most modern measures and measures employed by their grandparents.

Here, among these devout, God-fearing Polish Jews, and precisely in the month of *elul*, there were so many and such frightful suicides that one cannot keep silent. One cannot and one must not keep silent, even when one knows one can be of no help. One must not tire of shouting that, apart from poverty, hunger, and need, which can certainly lead to suicide, Polish Jews are spiritually sick from despair, hopelessness, lack of prospects, helplessness, disorientation, and lawlessness. In tens of cases one could with a small sum or a brotherly hand save someone from death, perhaps return the appetite and the desire for life.

"I decline such a life! Let me die!"—thus shouted a Jewish girl who had drunk a bottle of carbolic acid and whom a doctor was trying to save. "I decline such a life! Let me die!"—screams out from each Jewish suicide. It seems that people simply no longer have the physical and spiritual strength to struggle for a dry crust of bread and a roof over their head. They can no longer endure the grief of their hungry, blameless children. Dying is the best solution, the only way out.

Here is a characteristic tragedy from Warsaw that cost the life of a very young person, a person who had not yet tasted life's riches. Yosef Vasershteyn and his wife, Pesl, lived at 48 Shliske Street. They were married a mere 20 months earlier and Pesl was just 21 years old. Both of them were merchants in the market.

God sent Vasershteyn a big deal—Vasershteyn bought tomatoes at a low price and hoped to profit enough to buy food for the Sabbath and Rosh Hashanah, which came right after. But a person plans and the police laugh. Just as Vasershteyn appeared on the street with a basket, he fell into the hands of a police officer, who hauled him off to jail. Street trade is forbidden, and thousands of Jews therefore run around illegally with their baskets—running, hiding, falling into the hands of the police, bribing their way out, and hurrying off again with their baskets over the streets and the courtyards, plying their trade and bringing something home in the evening. May Hitler have no more and may Goebbels be no more satisfied—but one lives! However, Vasershteyn met a wicked police officer and remained imprisoned for two days, Friday and Saturday.

This was not such a misfortune! The young wife immediately knew where she could find her husband and was herself ready to be sentenced. A person does not suffer much from sitting a few days under lock and key. However, tomatoes are more delicate than people are and cannot endure the suffocating and smelly air of a Warsaw jail; tomatoes tend to rot. And Sunday, when Vasershteyn was freed, he brought home rotten tomatoes. That was their entire capital, the only hope of providing for the holiday! They had secured the capital by pawning his wife's one and only coat.

The wife's nerves could not stand it. She tore the clothes she was wearing and tried to jump from the third floor. Her husband stopped her and calmed her. Neighbours brought five *zloty*, providing capital so they could continue their business, but the fate of the wife was already determined: for the five *zloty* she did not buy delicate tomatoes, which rot quickly, but a large quantity of carbolic acid. She drank it so quickly and completely that no medication and no shouts could awaken her. The neighbours say her husband was jealous of her, {believing that} she had overcome all and was rescued.

At 45 Genshe Street in Warsaw lived 43-year-old Yitskhok Berlinerbloj, a merchant. He was married and had a 10-year-old son. He dealt in linen and was known as an honest, decent, and calm man. Four days before Rosh Hashanah, Berlinerbloj left his house, walked two houses down the street, went up to the third floor, and threw himself down so successfully that his whole head scattered into pieces and he died immediately. The cause? Need, fear of the next day, spiritual disorientation, hopelessness.

That same day at 6 Kempne Street, 50-year-old street trader Mendl Gutshtat threw himself from the fourth story. He died in hospital. And at 19 Muranov Street in Warsaw, 20-year-old Yekhiel Skorokhud jumped from the fourth floor. He was an upholsterer. For years he went hungry, but quietly and without complaint. Only at the time of his death did he hit the stones of the courtyard with a thud strong enough to awaken his neighbours at 4 a.m., declaring: "Forgive me for such a life! I decline such a life!" A day later, Ben Tsien Mushinski jumped into the Vistula and drowned. He was an intellectual who sold magazines and subscriptions {for a living}. Lately he had quietly been starving. His acquaintances believe he had long been for the next world, had long regarded himself as superfluous.

The superfluous number not in the thousands nor in the tens of thousands but perhaps in the hundreds of thousands. That is maybe the greatest curse, the most terrifying obscenity—to be superfluous. There are many types, degrees, and stages of superfluity. Some feel superfluous only in Poland, and believe that in another place they can still live and be useful. However, others believe that they are completely superfluous in the world. The most courageous of the superfluous draw the logical conclusion. The weak and the broken drag themselves around but ask themselves what they can accomplish, what they can achieve as a result of their struggle.

Lodz competes with Warsaw. Precisely a week before Rosh Hashanah the 52-year-old butcher Kukhtshik hanged himself in his butcher shop—on a hook on which he used to hang meat. He was once a proprietor but business was poor. He left a wife and several children. He did not utter a word at home, left for his butcher shop early, locked himself from the inside and bid farewell to the world. The family members felt a disquiet, a fear, a call to the butcher shop. They all ran there and met their dead husband and father hanging on the hook where for 30 years he had

hung slaughtered oxen. And in truth, how is a man more important than an ox? Especially a superfluous man?

That same day in Lodz, 23-year-old Hersh Margolis, the son of respectable parents, hanged himself over 50 *zloty*. He left a little note saying that nobody is to blame for his death. Nobody? Yes, the superfluous blame no one, they depart and clean up their path. They leave without anger and without protest—if one does not count their departure itself as a protest.

