The Last Years of Polish Jewry
by Yankev Leshchinsky

Volume 1

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

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Introduction

Robert Brym

Works of high sociological merit share three features. They identify social-structural forces that are largely unknown to the casual observer. They provide an historical appreciation of the origins of those forces. And they empathically portray the impact of those forces on people's everyday lives. This and a companion volume[1] qualify as works of high sociological merit, so defined. They offer the richest available sociological account of Polish Jewry in the interwar period. Moreover, they do so with the poignancy that comes from the reader knowing that this second largest but "most nationally conscious, militant, and proud part of world Jewry" (p. 1, below) was fast approaching the end of its 1,000-year history.[2]

1 Yankev Leshchinsky, *Erev khurbn: fun yidishn lebn in poyln, 1935–1937* [On the Eve of Destruction: On Jewish Life in Poland, 1935–1937], (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in argentina, 1951), https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc208374/lestschinsky-jacob-erev-hurbm-fun-yidishn-lebn-in-poyln-1935-1937.

2 Some 380,000 Polish Jews survived World War II, around 11.5% of Poland's 1939 Jewish population. Most of the survivors fled to Russia. Many of them returned to Poland in the war's aftermath. However, they were often greeted with hostility, especially when they sought to reclaim property; Poles killed an estimated 1,500 Jews between the end of the war and 1947. The Communist Party sharply restricted organized Jewish life in 1949. The end of Stalinism and a brief period of liberalisation beginning in 1956 unleashed an outburst of antisemitism from below that resulted in a wave of Jewish emigration. A wing of the Communist Party initiated an anti-Jewish campaign in 1968 resulting in a second emigration wave. By 2021 only about 4,500 Jews remained in Poland. Michael Checinski, 'The Kielce Pogrom: Some Unanswered Questions ', *Soviet Jewish Affairs* (5, 1: 1975), 57–72, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501677508577206; Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia: A Short History* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2013), pp. 380–462, https://doi.org/10.3828/liverpool/9781906764395.001.0001; Paul Lendvai, *Anti-Semitism without Jews: Communist Eastern Europe* (Garden City N.Y.:

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0341.13

Yankev Leshchinsky, the author of this volume, was born in 1876 in Horodyshche, Ukraine—a *shtetl* (a small town with a large percentage of Jews) about 160 km (100 miles) southeast of Kiev.[3] At 18, having rejected his traditional Jewish upbringing and education, he ran away to Odessa. There he joined the followers of cultural Zionist Ahad Ha'am and studied as an "external" student, completing the eight-year Russian gymnasium program in three years. In 1901 he spent six months attending classes at the University of Bern, Switzerland, where he came under the sway of Russian socialists.

By 1903 Leshchinsky had become a leading figure in the young labour Zionist movement. For the rest of his life he vacillated between labour Zionism and left-wing Jewish diasporism, the latter of which held that Jewish life could flourish and help to achieve justice and equality outside a Jewish homeland.

Leshchinsky became head of the Berlin office of the New York Jewish daily *Forverts* (*Forward*) in 1921. It was the most widely read Yiddish newspaper in the world, with a circulation of more than 275,000 in the late 1920s and early 1930s. While chapters 2, 3, and 7 of this volume are revised from a book Leshchinsky published in Berlin in 1931,[4] most of the essays were originally written for the Yiddish press. Many of them consequently have a journalistic flavour—but they are all informed by Leshchinsky the social scientist, who, after all, was appointed head of the Economics and Statistics section of Vilna's famed Jewish Scientific Institute (YIVO) in 1925.

Leshchinsky was arrested by the German police in 1933 because of his work for the *Forverts*, but after four days in prison, pressure by the US State Department led to his release and expulsion from Germany. He continued his work for the *Forverts* in Warsaw until, in 1937, his reportage

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Doubleday, 1971); Sergio DellaPergola, 'World Jewish Population, 2021', in *American Jewish Year Book 2021*, vol. 121, ed. by Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), p. 387, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-99750-2_8.

3 For brief overviews of Leshchinsky's life and work, see Gur Alroey, ' Demographers in the service of the nation: Liebmann Hersch, Jacob Lestschinsky, and the early study of Jewish migration', *Jewish History* (20, 3/4: 2006), 265–82, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10835-006-9006-3; Gennady Estraikh, 'Jacob Lestschinsky: A Yiddishist Dreamer and Social Scientist', *Science in Context* (20, 2: 2007), 215–37, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889707001251.

4 Yankev Leshchinsky, *Di ekonomishe lage fun yidn in poyln* [The Economic Situation of the Jews in Poland] (Berlin: 1931), https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc210942/lestschinsky-jacob-di-ekonomishe-lage-fun-yidn-in-poyln.

led the Polish government to deny him re-entry into the country following a family vacation in Czechoslovakia. In 1938, Leshchinsky arrived in the United States, where he lived for two decades. In 1959, he immigrated to Israel, where he died in 1966.

The translations included here are based on a collection published by Leshchinsky in 1947.[5] The lead chapter was first published in 1944, but the other essays in this volume were written between 1927 and 1933, most of them in the depths of the Great Depression.

After World War I, Poland was a land of deep divisions. It faced the formidable task of integrating disconnected territories that had been tied to the Russian, Austrian, and German economies and that stood at vastly different levels of economic development. Ukrainians, Jews, Belarusians, and Germans made up one-third of Poland's population, and bitter disagreement separated the country's main political parties over the degree to which the minorities should be accommodated.

As far as Jews were concerned, 1927 was a signal year. The Polish parliament declared restrictions on Jewish enrolment in institutions of higher education unlawful. Jews were granted the right to conduct public meetings in Yiddish. A decree permitted the extension and reorganization of Jewish communal organizations. Steps were taken to support Jewish trade. Citizenship issues affecting tens of thousands of Jews were resolved. True, economic antisemitism, notably boycotts of Jewish businesses by private individuals, still took place. Institutions of higher education ignored the decree banning restrictions on Jewish enrolment. Discriminatory tsarist-era laws in former Russian areas were not abolished until 1931. And the government failed to deliver on its declared willingness to fund Jewish private schools. On the whole, however, the various Jewish factions in Poland's parliament were mollified by government policy in the 1920s. The economic front was also reasonably propitious. The Polish economy was devastated from 1914 to 1921 by World War I and the subsequent war with Soviet Russia, but GDP per capita indexed at 100 in 1913 stood at 122 in 1929.[6]

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5 Yankev Leshchinsky, *Oyfn rand fun opgrunt: fun yidishn lebn in poyln* (*1927–1933*) [At the Edge of the Abyss: On Jewish Life in Poland (1927–1933)], (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun poylishe yidn in argentina, 1947), https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc208373/lestschinsky-jacob-oyfn-rand-fun-opgrunt-fun-yidishn-lebn-in-poyln-1927-1933.

6 Polonsky, *The Jews*, pp. 222–3; Piotr Arak, 'The Economy of the Second Polish Republic Collapsed because of Dogmatic Policies', *Obserwator finansowy.pl*, 27

Toward the end of 1929, the Great Depression hit Poland with massive force. Soon, the GDP per capita index plummeted to 91 and the unemployment rate reached 25%.[7] Nonetheless, Leshchinsky initially remained quite optimistic about the prospects for the Jewish community in Poland. In his 1931 book, perhaps written mainly in 1930, Leshchinsky saw the Great Depression as a relatively short-term cyclical problem that, like all economic downturns, would end in due course. He asserted that when that happy day arrived, Jews would inevitably benefit from being well integrated into the Polish economy. They were already big players in the textile industry. Jewish petty traders and artisans were becoming proletarianized, and Leshchinsky predicted that they would be increasingly drawn into large factories as Poland extricated itself from the economic downturn.[8] Government economic policy was also problematic according to Leshchinsky. Excessive taxation permitted a bloated military budget and overinvestment in state enterprises and institutions, draining the country of private investment capital. However, bad policy could be reformed.[9]

Leshchinsky's optimism did not endure much more than another year. In 1932 he wrote:

> 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 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 (p. 84, below).

And a year later he proclaimed:

> One must look reality boldly in the eyes.... Never before was the rebuff and ejection of Jews from the surrounding non-Jewish society so strong:

February 2019, https://www.obserwatorfinansowy.pl/in-english/the-economy-of-the-second-polish-republic-collapsed-because-of-dogmatic-policies/.

7 Joseph Marcus, *Social and Political History of the Jews in Poland, 1919–1939* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1983), p. 23, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110838688

8 The results of the 1931 Polish census, published in the late 1930s, demonstrated that, in fact, few Jewish workers were able to enter large, mechanized industries. Bina Garncarska-Kadary, 'Some Aspects of the Life of the Jewish Proletariat in Poland during the Interwar Period', *Polin* (8: 2004), 238–54.

9 Leshchinsky, *Di ekonomishe lage*.

> Cultural autarky seizes ever more peoples, and it is a false hope that Jews will play the same role in the economic development of the Eastern European peoples that they played in Central and Western Europe. It is even more of a false hope that Jews will play a role in the culture of these peoples.[10]

The quickly mounting popularity of the antisemitic political right was largely responsible for the shift in Leshchinsky 's outlook. Boycotts of Jewish businesses spread. A campaign to ban Jews from universities gained force. Jews were almost totally excluded from government employment. Banks strongly favoured non-Jews when it came to granting business loans. Violent acts against Jews became more numerous. The realization grew that Jews, making up just 10% of the country's population, lacked political influence let alone clout. By the time the Nazis took power in Germany in 1933, Leshchinsky among others began to doubt that there was a future for Polish Jewry in Poland and that a Polish-centred Jewish political ideology could change that state of affairs. Nobody could foresee the Holocaust, but some began to understand that the appalling conditions in which Polish Jews found themselves were the result not only of economic circumstances such as the Great Depression and misguided government economic policy but of emergent political and cultural realities that were bound to endure.

The judgment about the future of Polish Jewry that crystallized in Leshchinsky's mind in 1932–33 was not shared by the ideologically committed. Most socialists and communists persisted in their belief that proletarian revolution would rescue Polish Jewry. The socialist-diasporist Bund grew throughout the 1930s. The Zionist movement, too, recruited new members. Emigration to Palestine rose sharply from 1933 to 1936 when Britain relaxed its restrictions on Jewish immigration. Numerically even more significant were the many Jews who wavered little in their certainty that *der oybershte firt di velt* (the One above directs the world) and that adherence to Jewish law would ensure God's beneficence. Leshchinsky was well aware of their enduring influence:

10 Yankev Leshchinsky, 'Ofener un erlikher' [Blunter and More Honest], *Literarishe bleter: ilustrirte vokhnshrift far literatur teater un kunst* [Literary Pages: Illustrated Weekly for Literature, Theatre, and Art], 18 August 1933, 525, https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/?a=d&d=ltb19330818-01.1.1&e=-------en-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI----------1.

"The orthodox, religious Jews control the communities....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" (pp. 136, below).

However, for Leshchinsky and a growing number of Polish Jews, the modern isms that offered them control over their destiny seemed increasingly out of touch with reality. The ascent in Europe of what Kenneth B. Moss evocatively calls extrusionary nationalism caused some independent Jewish thinkers and a growing number of ordinary Jews to reassess whether the glorious futures they had been promised still made sense.[11] They began examining the facts and pondering which courses of action, if any, were still open to their people. Moss shows that only one new ism emerged from this painful exercise: a growing realism. Realism did not produce a new mobilizing program for collective liberation. It did not anticipate the Holocaust. It was simply an attempt to look reality squarely in the eyes and recognize the limitations of old answers to the Jewish question.

True, between the world wars several hundred thousand Polish Jews escaped to the United States, Palestine, Argentina, Canada, and a few other countries. However, one must recall that the number of Jewish emigrants from Poland numbered at most one-half the community's natural increase over those years, so escape could hardly be a solution to Poland's Jewish question. This was especially the case once the Great Depression halted nearly all Jewish immigration to the West. Moreover, it was doubtful whether those who migrated to the liberal assimilative West would be able to reconstitute the conditions that made Polish Jewry the world's most socially cohesive and culturally creative Jewish community. As Moss shows, a growing number of those who managed to leave for Palestine did so on pragmatic grounds, viewing their decision more as an opportunistic escape for themselves and their family members than a reliable collective solution to the Jewish question.

This, then, was the atmosphere in which Yankev Leshchinsky wrote most of the essays in the present collection. When he composed the lead essay of this volume in 1944 the dimensions of the Holocaust were clear,

11 Kenneth B. Moss, *An Unchosen People: Jewish Political Reckoning in Interwar Poland* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674269989

and he was even more certain of the fate of Polish Jewry. He wrote in the past tense because, "regardless of the number of Jews who will remain alive in Poland, the old spirit of Polish Jewry has unquestionably been annihilated. All roots of the centuries-long national traditions have been so completely ripped out and all vestiges of them have been so utterly washed away that it is difficult to believe in a rapid revival of Jewish national life in Poland" (p. 2, below).