



THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 2
THE PERMANENT POGROM, 1935-37

TRANSLATED
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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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2. Pogrom gunpowder

It would be false, of course, to claim that there are pogroms happening in Poland. It would likewise be untrue to say that Poland's Jewish population is dominated by a pogrom mood. It is true, however, that not one day passes in Poland without someone beating Jews somewhere. It is also true that in that place where they are beating Jews, or on that street (if it is in a large city) where they are assailing Jews and roughing them up, a pogrom mood does dominate. Jews are afraid to be seen in the streets; they hide or organize self-defence; delegations run and plead with the authorities to restrain the rampaging hooligans. In sum, there is a typical pogrom atmosphere.

There is a Ukrainian saying, "*Ne umer Danilo, a bolyachka yego zadavila.*" It means "Danilo did not die, but the pain crushed him." This is also the distinction between pogroms and simply beating Jews in different places each day, between a pogrom mood dominating the entire country and a pogrom atmosphere poisoning life in individual places.

Let us just consider the facts for the last couple of weeks, which can be considered much calmer than the couple of weeks around the High Holy Days. Perhaps the hooligans worked so actively during the end of Elul¹ and the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in order to sufficiently break Jews' hearts and better prepare them to stand before God Almighty. After all, the hooligans cannot be expected to know that even without broken bones, Polish Jews' hearts are sufficiently broken for them to lament and cry before God during the Days of Awe. During the festivals, however, on *Simchat Torah*,² when Jews are not supposed to have broken hearts at all, why did they feel it necessary to break their bones?

Here are the facts. On 23 October 1935 delegations arrived in Warsaw

1 {The final month of the Jewish calendar, leading up to Rosh Hashanah.}

2 {The Jewish holiday that celebrates the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah readings.}

from the towns of Klobutsk and Triskolask, near Tshenstokhov. They complained to the Ministry of the Interior that for weeks the Endeks had been beating, tormenting, chasing, and persecuting the Jewish population. The Jews from Klobutsk provided a list of 150 Jews who had been beaten and wounded, while the Jews from Triskolask had no more than sixty people beaten.

Was there a pogrom in these places? Did a pogrom mood dominate there?

I will not undertake to pass judgement on this question. I believe, however, that the best answer would be offered by the battered ribs and broken bones of the victims and by the terrified eyes and dejected souls of the people frightened of the Endek hooligans' clubs and knives, although they have yet to taste them.

Here is news from Lublin on 15 October: in the streets, and especially near Jewish stores, literally right in front of their doors and in full view of the Jewish shopkeepers, people handed out leaflets reading "Poland is for Poles! Remember, don't buy from Jews!"

The proprietor of a haberdashery, a Mr. Fuks, summoned a police officer. They led this Jewish man off to the precinct and composed a report accusing him of "disturbing the peace." It goes without saying that the next day they carried on handing out the same boycott leaflets without a care in the world. Not all patriotic Lubliners, however, are satisfied with merely calling on people not to buy from Jews. Lublin is also home to more active and energetic patriots who beat Jews; the sixty-year-old teacher, Moyshe Sobyarski, recently died due to hooligans' blows.

How is the mood in Lublin? Is it a pogrom mood, like in Ukraine in 1919, like in Kishinev in 1903, like in Gomel that same year? Certainly not! Still, the Jews of Lublin are not exactly cheerful. No matter how much you reassure them that in tsarist Russia and in Ukraine under Petliura things were much, much worse, they refuse to be comforted. Jews have this nasty tendency. They hate even little "pogromlets;" they won't even put up with one Jew murdered and a couple dozen wounded.

A day after *Simchat Torah*, a severely wounded Jewish man, Yehoyshue Povonzek, was brought to the Warsaw Jewish Hospital from the town of Dobre. It turned out that this man had been returning with many other

Jews from performing *hakafot*.³ They were attacked by hooligans and brutally beaten. More than twenty Jews were wounded, several severely and Yehoyshue Povonzek life-threateningly. You can imagine how much joy they derived in Dobre from the festival of *Simchat Torah*, and how the town's Jewish community spent the last days of *Sukkot*.

Not far from Nove-Myasto, on the road to Warsaw, hooligans attacked a group of Revisionists⁴ who were returning from a gathering in Pultusk {Pułtusk}. One hooligan stabbed Zemel Yokovitsh in the heart with a knife, killing him instantly. Hersh Tshesla was severely wounded.

For over a month, the Endek hooligans have been terrorizing the Jewish population of Lodz. During the Sejm {parliament} elections, it was simply impossible to walk through the streets near the Endeks' meeting hall. They beat, chased, insulted, and roughed up Jews. In many Jewish shops, they poured oil and carbolic acid over the merchandise. The Jewish retailers complained and sent delegations to the authorities, but the hooligans were not afraid. They carried out their work worry-free and with great zeal. It is evident that these are organized, centrally administered gangs at work.

Here is a list of wounded Jewish merchants from just one region of the city, Baluty, the Jewish working-class quarter: Moyshe Dzhalovski, Mendl Yassenberg, Blavat, Grinboym, Rotshteyn, Izbitski, Gliksman, Tukhmakher, and Migut. The attacks in other regions of the city, even in downtown Lodz, on Pilsudskiego {Piłsudskiego} and Południowe {Południowa} and the surrounding streets, were even more murderous. They broke into Jewish bakeries and pastry shops and poured oil on the baked goods. They ran into Jewish butcher shops and doused the meat with carbolic acid.

If you walk through the streets of Lodz, you can see thousands of Jews running—not running away from pogroms, just running—some to take out a loan and some to pay off a promissory note; some to grab a customer and some to sell a package of merchandise; some with a rope around their neck, looking to transport a package and earn twenty *groszy* {pennies}, and some with a mountainous bale of merchandise on their

3 {Circular processions performed in the synagogue on *Hoshana Rabbah* (the final day of *Sukkot*) and *Simchat Torah*.}

4 {Revisionist Zionism was a militaristic Zionist movement founded by Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky in 1925. It emphasized Jewish sovereignty over a state on both sides of the Jordan River.}

shoulders and a happy face because the twenty *groszy* is already in their pocket. A rustling, seething, humming, racing mass, as if rhythmically beating. A living! Bread! Food for wife and children!

It is difficult for foreign eyes to recognize that many of these crooked and twisted backs have been struck more than once by Endek clubs. They have had no time to pause and consider the true purpose and deeper significance of these clubs that beat Jewish backs. It would not occur to anyone to claim that pogroms are happening in Lodz or that a pogrom mood dominates there.

So what exactly *is* happening in Lodz, when every day they beat a score of Jews and destroy merchandise in Jewish stores? What should we call this? Let us consider more facts.

In Slonim, hooligans attacked a Jewish shopkeeper named Polonsk, poked out one of her eyes, and left a hole in her skull. They regularly beat Jews in the public garden, and they recently pelted a group of Jewish doctors with stones as they were walking through it.

Five Jews were traveling from Nashelsk {Nasielsk} to Warsaw with a wagon of potatoes. Young peasants assailed them, beat up the Jews, and destroyed the potatoes. Young peasants—that means that they are “educated” and probably read pogrom leaflets.

In the town of Vyelun {Wieluń}, twenty-three Jewish children went on strike and refused to go to school. Why? First, because their Polish classmates would treat them to slaps and punches as they arrived and departed. The children would come home tear-soaked and distressed. Second, because the teacher himself gave them a lovely welcome on the first day of class. He cried out, “We don’t want any Jewish children!” and the Polish children joined in: “We don’t want to learn with kikes!”

Krasinski Garden is in the centre of Warsaw’s Jewish ghetto, right by Nalevki Street. Jewish children play there, pale, hungry, and skinny, but still children with children’s appetites for running, jumping, and playing. Last week, eight Jewish children went into a Jewish editorial office to complain that they were being beaten and chased away and prevented from enjoying running around freely.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, a gang of hooligans attacked kibbutz Haganim in Radom.⁵ They used clubs and stones to assault

5 {Zionist youth movements in Poland established collective agricultural settlements to prepare members for emigration to Palestine.}

three pioneers whom they found on the kibbutz, causing them severe injuries. The hooligans were not caught.

In central Warsaw, a Jewish man, Arn Himelshteyn, was walking along Chlodne {Chłodna} Street. A hooligan assaulted him, beating him with brass knuckles and poking out his eye. There are frequent attacks against Jews in this neighbourhood, but nobody ever gets caught. On the Jewish streets in Warsaw—Novolipie {Nowolipie}, Mila {Miła}, Zamenhof—the watchmen's children, all of whom are Christians, have started a trend of beating Jews in the evenings before the streetlamps are turned on: old people, married women, children, young women. The Jewish workers demonstrated to the hooligans in no uncertain terms that Novolipie and Mila Streets are not Chlodne, which is located beyond the Jewish ghetto and cannot be as effectively defended.

Upon becoming acquainted with the facts, which we have not even come close to exhausting, one feels compelled to draw several conclusions and pose several questions.

First, the pogrom wave has seized all regions of Poland, from Slonim to Lodz, from Poznan region to Vilna region, from the smallest towns and villages to the largest cities, including the capital. One gets the impression that a huge quantity of pogrom gunpowder has accumulated, and at the first opportunity this gunpowder could explode, leading to the greatest destruction and the most tragic results.

Second, large groups of people prowl around this gunpowder, led by a main party of arsonists and purveyors of explosives, who work energetically to amass the gunpowder and expedite its explosion.

Third, aside from organized workers, there is virtually no organized Polish social force that stands in any degree of opposition to the pogrom agitation and the pogrom wave, which is swelling and flooding the country.

Fourth, the local authorities respond variously to attacks against Jews. In tens of cases, the assailants are not caught. In tens of cases, they are so lightly and trivially punished that the criminals feel almost encouraged to carry on beating Jews and cracking their skulls. However, there are many cases in which the police are sufficiently active in identifying the criminals and the judges are sufficiently severe in punishing the hooligans. The police everywhere are sufficiently active to prevent attacks from expanding into large-scale pogroms.

Whether they do so out of love toward Jews or out of hatred toward the pogromists, who oppose the current regime, is an important question, but the answer is clear enough. They allow the hooligans to live it up a little, not wanting to make a big deal out of a couple of holes in Jewish skulls or the destruction of ten or so Jews' merchandise. However, they keep a watchful eye on these organized gangs of hooligans to keep them from fanning the flames of the pogrom fire too much and transforming the Jewish conflagration into a political conflagration.

Fifth, based on the previous point, the attitude and tactics of the central government with respect to the pogroms also become clear. They become even clearer when it is established that murdering a Jew or wounding several Jews carries a much lighter punishment than, for example, distributing Communist leaflets. They do not allow explicit calls for pogroms or for the murder and destruction of Jews, but they allow Jews to be blamed for all sorts of misery and misfortune in Poland, for all the poverty and hunger in the countryside and city, for all the destitution and deprivation of the population. They permit the accusation that Jews are actively seeking to destroy Poland and corrupt the Polish nation. I feel it unnecessary to add that, practically speaking, this is pogrom agitation.

And now a few questions. First, what is Jewish society doing to explain to the better parts of Polish society (which, although minimal, do exist) the great danger posed by these pogrom waves, which are poisoning the entire atmosphere, and which are bound to eventually become a danger to Poland itself?

Second, what is Jewish society doing to compel the Polish government to stop the pogrom agitation and prevent the poison from spreading further, which would inevitably and tragically end in large-scale pogroms?

Third, what is Jewish society doing to compel the government to adopt severe measures against individual attacks, against small pogroms, and against individual cases of murder and maiming, since these will without a doubt ultimately result in mass murders and large pogroms?

Fourth, what is Jewish society doing to organize itself and speak out in a coordinated manner against the pogrom rehearsals of a political party that openly preaches pogroms as a means of political struggle and

declares its goal to be Hitler's program, but in a more extreme form since, after all, Poland has seven or eight times as many Jews as Germany?

And fifth, what is Jewish society doing to create a common front on at least one matter, the matter of self-defence against pogroms and against preparations for the major slaughter to which the Endeks look forward with such great hopes?

It must be acknowledged that to all of these questions, there is a single tragic and horrifying answer. At this very moment of danger, Polish Jews are torn and splintered, divided and dispersed like never before.

13 November 1935

