



THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 2
THE PERMANENT POGROM, 1935-37

TRANSLATED
BY ROBERT BRYM AND ELI JANY



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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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3. The Minsk-Mazovyetsk pogrom

The antisemitic atmosphere is so tense and heated that the smallest of sparks is enough to set the fire ablaze. Everyone's nerves, both Poles' and Jews', are so taut and aggravated that at the first sign of fire, they go running to the ends of the earth, losing all self-control and reason—all the more so when there are thousands of arsonists standing at the ready, just waiting for the opportunity to initiate the spark and fan it into a conflagration. This is especially so when Polish life is so aggravated and disorganized, and poverty spreading so quickly, that even nerves of steel are unable to withstand it.

Is it necessary to add that there are thousands of distinct causes that are rattling Jewish nerves even more, literally ruining the Jewish soul, turning us into physical and mental invalids, robbing us of the bare minimum amount of rest and security necessary for a person to live? Is it necessary to describe how miserable it is to be afraid of every rustle, every movement among the surrounding masses, every tremble the nation makes for entirely different reasons? After all, there stand at the ready large, organized parties with an interest in directing every movement among the masses, each awakened thought, all of the awakened fury, toward the heads of the Jews. Unfortunately, they are largely successful.

It is thus no surprise at all that these master pogromists find it so easy to incite the rabble against Jews when a misfortune really does take place.

Precisely such a misfortune, which led to tens of people wounded and hundreds of families ruined, took place in Minsk-Mazovyetsk. A sick Jew, a madman, a maniac, a wretched cripple, shot a Christian man to death. Of all people, this was a Christian who had good relationships with Jews, who was respected by the city's entire population, and who

was a genuinely decent person. His wife, despite the great misfortune she suffered, deeply regretted the tragic events. She understood very well that it was wild, barbaric, bestial to punish an entire city's population for an act by a madman.

Nevertheless, the master pogromists simply needed a little something to latch onto; they were eagerly awaiting the spark they could fan into a conflagration capable of annihilating a city's worth of people. Their work was a dazzling success.

Here is the first list of the severely wounded: Khane Zhelyazke, Leyb Nayman, Khaim Kornfeld, Arn Feldman, Tsivye Shpigel, Shmuel Zaydentreger, Yankev Granatovitsh, Leyb Rozenberg, Sore Mikanovska, Zishe Altmed, Rakhmiel Ayzenshteyn, Yisroel Popovski, Yankev Grinberg, Khaye Perkal, Velvl Biblyazh, Shmuel Kagan, Yoysef Mlinski, Mrs. Mlinski, Leyb Berman, Mordkhe Mints, Yankev Dagus, Ber Nagelevski, Ber Rozenblat (seventy years old), Efroim Furmanski (sixty-two years old), and Ester Goldshteyn. In total, twenty-five people severely wounded.

Of course, this is not even half of all of the people wounded. There is still no confirmed list of victims, not even of people harmed *physically*. It is still unknown whether anyone was killed. Likewise, it is unknown how many stores were looted or how many houses and stores were burned.

The Polish Jews have many caregivers who are competing intensely amongst themselves, racing to outdo each other and demonstrate how deeply they care for the Jewish community. Members of four or five committees run to the authorities, each declaring that they are in charge. The result is one I would wish not only on Hitler, but also on his Polish students.

The final calculation is clear enough: the entire city is in ruins—the Jewish part, of course. Hundreds of houses have had all of their windows shattered, their furniture smashed, their cushions torn apart, and all of the feathers released from their bedding. Hundreds of stores have been looted and tens of houses burned. Our large masses of beggars have been joined by several hundred, and perhaps even a couple thousand, fresh ones. The crop of Jewish beggars is growing: beggars from the boycott, beggars from the economic crisis, beggars fleeing the villages, beggars from towns with pogroms, beggars from towns awaiting pogroms.

In recent days, hundreds of Jews can be seen drifting around the courtyard of the Jewish communal leadership, trudging from one Jewish committee or editorial office to the next, seeking help, begging for bread, longing for a place to sleep, a place to rest and forget the nightmare somewhat. These are all yesterday's *bourgeoisie*, who themselves distributed bread to the poor and contributed to charitable societies.

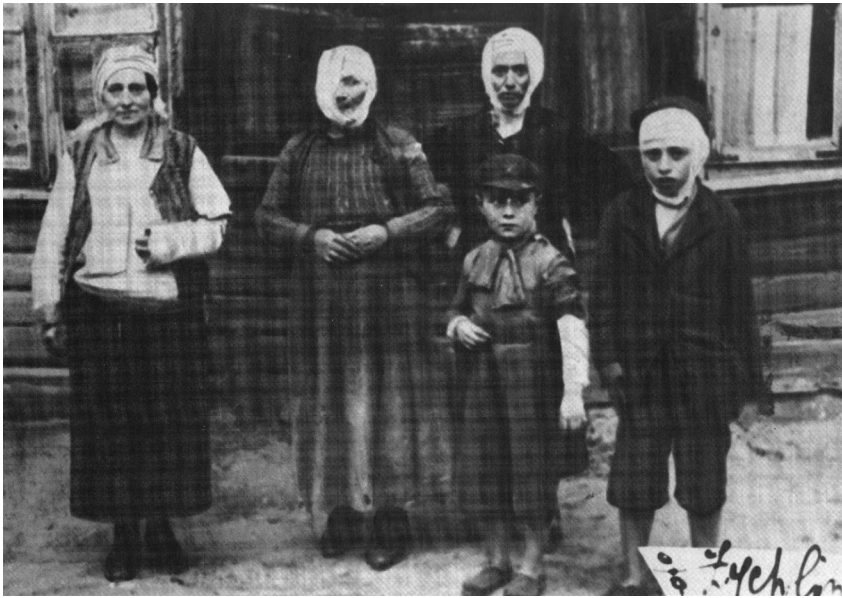


Fig.6 Victims of the Minsk-Mazovyetsk pogrom, June 1936. Wikimedia, public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ofiary_pogromu_w_Mi%C5%84sku_Mazowieckim_czerwiec_1936.jpg

The panic that had seized the Jewish population of Minsk-Mazovyetsk is indescribable. The atmosphere had been tense since the first of May, when the *Po'ale Tsiyon* member Tsilikh was killed and several Jews were severely wounded, and one hooligan was also stabbed. The Jewish population had no rest this entire time, since the Endeks, in full view of the local police, conducted wild agitation for a pogrom and revenge. It seemed to them that they had paid too steep a price: one whole hooligan wounded for one Jew killed and five or six wounded. Throughout this time, they had been threatening to settle the account. Now, God had practically tossed down from heaven a golden opportunity to wreak

destruction, inflict wounds on Jewish bodies and souls, foment panic in tens of towns around Minsk-Mazovyetsk, and rob the entire Polish Jewish population of their sense of calm and security.

As the atmosphere in Minsk-Mazovyetsk grew hotter; as people sensed ever more keenly that just an hour from Warsaw, practically under the central government's nose, people were beating Jews day and night without intervention; as the fleeing of hundreds of families dragged on, the hooligans in every city and town grew bolder, and the Jewish population grew ever more panicked and uncertain.

Minsk-Mazovyetsk is, after all, only one hour from Warsaw. Over the course of a single hour, more than enough police could have been brought in to establish order. In this instance, nowhere near the entire Christian population participated in the pogrom. On the contrary, a very significant portion was against the pogrom. True, not actively against it, but against it nonetheless. And that is not even counting the workers. There are tens of known cases in which Christians hid Jews and even risked their lives and houses. In fact, the hooligans set fire to several Christian houses and threatened revenge against Christians who hid Jews. A few tens of police officers could have chased off the whole gang of hooligans and, if necessary, arrested them. Despite this, the situation continued for an entire week. Only now are people gradually beginning to return, although they are afraid to open their stores and they remain locked indoors, sleeping in their clothes if they sleep at all.

For four days, news floods in from Minsk-Mazovyetsk, as if from a battlefield, although a very peculiar and perhaps modern battlefield. The enemy has fled or lies hidden in the attics and cellars; the aggressor, however, does not lose his desire for war, so he exacts vengeance against cushions, featherbeds, windows, cupboards, merchandise, chairs, and tables. He smashes and destroys everything he can get his hands on. The third party, the one that in the first place should never have allowed war to break out among citizens who, despite their differing statuses, belong to one state—this actual master of the country and custodian of order makes a face as though he is very displeased by the civil war. He gives orders and pretends to be on the verge of eradicating all the malicious spirits and agents of destruction, while the pogrom carries on for four days—and the panic, an entire week.

These are the kind of peculiarly modern things that can happen in

today's Poland. This goes to show how secure one's life is in Poland. This is the extent to which one can think of a livelihood or a tomorrow, or any future at all.

Both the audacity of the pogromists and the trepidation of the Jews are spreading like a plague. In the town of Kolbyel {Kołbiel}, they smashed the windows of Jewish houses and stores. They wounded several Jews and stabbed a man named Rozenshteyn with a knife, causing severe injuries.

In Skale {Skala}, Eastern Galicia, Ukrainian fascists smashed several hundred windows of Jewish houses, and several Jews were injured there too; one sustained a severe wound after being shot with a revolver.

In Vaver {Wawer}, near Warsaw, they stabbed the son of Rabbi Kestenberg with a knife. He had to be taken to the hospital. At the same time, they smashed all the windows of his apartment and the study and prayer house.

In Radzimin {Radzymin}, hooligan military recruits started beating Jewish recruits who were standing naked, ready to appear before the medical commission. This was the first lesson given to future Jewish fighters for the Polish fatherland.

In Dobra, Volomin {Wołomin}, Kartshev {Karczew}, Vlokhi {Włochy}—all around Warsaw—terror is running rampant. People are beating, robbing, smashing windows, wounding Jews' heads and making their lives so miserable they are utterly disgusted and fed up.

In Warsaw itself, the capital city, the centre of Europe, in full view of the Polish authorities, there is a constant pogrom. In Mokotov {Mokotów}, a Warsaw suburb, they broke into a shop owned by a Jewish man named Rozenberg, shouting, "Today you're going to be turned into a mountain of ash!" When the woman in charge started screaming, they kicked her so hard with a boot in the stomach that she lost consciousness. In the Saxon Garden, the assaults on Jews have continued. They beat them with clubs and iron bars. It would be no exaggeration to say that a minimum of seven or eight hundred Jews have been wounded in the last year in Warsaw, one at a time, and there are hundreds with holes in their skulls. We have the names of more than a hundred severely wounded people in Warsaw. The mildly wounded make no reports.

The prime minister's speech before the Sejm was like salt in our wounds. The new prime minister tried cosying up to the Jews. He said

that he would not allow anyone to beat Jews, but this was the kind of cosiness that could make your vision grow dark. Things have indeed grown so dark and miserable that everyone you meet groans and sighs and comes to the general conclusion that now the pogroms are really about to get started.

The prime minister said, "Economic struggle by all means, but no mistreatment." This is also the wording of the antisemitic newspaper *Dziennik Narodowy* as it calls every day for a pogrom against Jewish pockets. The simple masses, however, do not get bogged down in the details. If someone says to them, "pogrom against Jewish pockets," they understand that chasing Jews out of the market square, preventing peasants from buying from Jews, preventing Jews from selling in the market, and compelling them to leave town altogether is obviously the best pogrom against Jewish pockets; the impact is swift and powerful. Indeed, if the Jews will not leave by choice, they must be shown the way with stones, clubs, iron bars, fires, and revolvers. Otherwise, the economic struggle and the pogrom against Jewish pockets will yield no results.

If a prime minister declares from the dais before parliament that it is acceptable to engage in economic struggle against Jews, rather than equitable competition, the simple antisemite can reach the logical conclusion that the best struggle is a club and a knife. This is how it works in practice, as can be seen every day. The government has now been in office for three weeks. It is a strong government—and the pogrom wave is spreading and intensifying; the attacks are transforming into outright slaughters; the pogromists feel free and exuberant as they carry out their work with diligence and zeal. The new government does not utter a word, not to mention actually doing anything!

Jews thus go around with their heads down, with wounds in their hearts, with extinguished eyes, with endless sorrow in their souls!

From where and when will help come?¹

20 June 1936

1 {A reference to Psalm 121:1}.