



THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 2
THE PERMANENT POGROM, 1935-37

TRANSLATED
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5. Government antisemitism

It is truly difficult to decide what to write about first: perhaps more on the Pshitik trial, where the Jewish name is defiled and mocked by hundreds of witnesses and about twenty lawyers burning with hatred; or about Minsk-Mazovyetsk, where the pogrom continues, in different forms, to different degrees, but energetically, with enthusiasm, joy, and laughter; or about the filthy, terrifying wave of agitation that flooded Poland more powerfully this past week, threatening far more brutal pogroms in the near future. Or maybe I should write about how the Prime Minister's legitimization on the dais in parliament of his nation's economic fight against Jews provoked a resounding echo among the ranks of the antisemites and reinforced their courage and energy.¹ Perhaps I should write about our horrible poverty and dejection, which are constantly growing, dragging ever greater portions of the Polish Jewish population into the abyss, progressively paralyzing Jewish life, and provoking increasing desperation.

I did not just make up this list of topics. These are all burning questions that torment one's mind and demand that one shout to the whole world, that one move heaven and earth, because together they signify that *the situation of the more than three million Polish Jews is becoming unbearable. It is becoming more than dangerous. The fate of the poorest but most vibrant portion of the Jewish nation is hanging by a thread and demands the attention of all the world's Jews!*

In our discussion of these topics, we will therefore keep at the front of our minds the weight and importance of these events and their significance for the condition of Polish Jews in the future. We will preferentially select small facts that convey major outcomes. Small events often shine a brighter light on the true situation than major ones.

1 {In the Polish parliament in June 1935, Prime Minister Skladkowski [Skladkowski] said: "My government considers that nobody in Poland should be injured.... But an economic struggle? That's different." Quoted in Polonsky, *The Jews...*, p. 228.}

Here is a minor but characteristic matter. A couple of days ago, the official Polish telegraph agency distributed a memo to all newspapers stating that, following a Revisionist rally, street brawls broke out between Jewish Revisionists and Jewish Communists.² When a Christian procession passed by, the Jewish Communists tore the icon of the Holy Mother from a Christian woman and trampled it with their feet.

This was recounted by a correspondent from the official agency, an institution of the central authorities. The critical reader will recognize immediately that something is amiss: Jews are fighting among themselves, and then all of a sudden, the Communists toss the Revisionists aside and run over to the Christians to tear up their icons. Meanwhile, the latter say and do absolutely nothing. The next day, the official agency denied and retracted the memo. Nevertheless, all the Polish newspapers printed it; the antisemitic newspapers placed it under large headlines, with juicy interpretations and suitable appeals to the readers. Jews read it and waited for a pogrom to begin. In the current mood, given the Polish population's state of agitation, a single spark is enough to set off a fire. Given the Jews' state of agitation, the smallest incident is enough for them to expect a pogrom and see it before their eyes.

It goes without saying that no Polish newspaper printed the retraction of this fairy tale. Here is the part of the whole story that interests us: the official agency distributed an unverified memo that could lead to the greatest tragedies, that could ignite a fire throughout the entire country, that could trigger a pogrom wave that would make Pshitik, Grodno, and Minsk-Mazovyetsk look like trifles. We must acknowledge that, until now, it was not like this. The official agency used to be more careful.

Jews interpret this as a new direction for the government, a further downward slide on the part of official circles toward the antisemitic program of the Endeks. Jews have a dark interpretation, not because they are blind and see no light around them, but because it is indeed dark all around. It is pitch black and growing darker from one day to the next. The prime minister just recently tossed out the phrase, "economic struggle, by all means, but no physical mistreatment." It is worthwhile elaborating on the reverberations of this phrase across Poland.

2 {Revisionism was a militaristic Zionist movement founded by Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky in 1925. It promoted Jewish sovereignty on both sides of the Jordan River.}

At the Pshitik trial, this phrase was cited not only by the antisemitic lawyers, but also by tens of Christian witnesses. A united front was created among the accused pogromists, the Christian witnesses, the antisemitic lawyers, and the judges on these grounds: *boycotting Jews is permissible*. It is not a crime at all. On the contrary, it is a patriotic act. The entire antisemitic press is dancing with joy: the government has permitted a struggle against Jews. The government even said “by all means,” that is, it invited society to carry out an economic struggle against Jews. Well, it goes without saying that “economic struggle” is a very broad concept, and that the antisemites are highly skilled at reading into such a phrase many things, like beatings, stones to the head, and knives to the side. One antisemitic newspaper takes pride and boasts that it has achieved victory, since the prime minister is now saying what it has been preaching for more than forty years. It is certainly right that it has achieved victory. True, from a practical standpoint, nothing has changed. This whole time, the government has placed absolutely no restraints on the open preaching not only of economic struggle, not only of boycotts, but of eradicating and expelling Jews. The government itself ejected Jews from all official positions, from all the factories it monopolized, and from all the commercial enterprises it took over. Nonetheless, the newspaper is right to boast. Up until now, the government was still ashamed to admit that it was carrying out an antisemitic economic policy. If it is now no longer ashamed to call openly for economic struggle, then surely tomorrow it will not be ashamed to take on another few points from the Endek’s program. Since we are living in fast-paced times, the development is happening very quickly. Nowadays, it is not necessary to wait forty years to descend into an openly antisemitic party. It can be done in forty days, sometimes faster.

The government is keeping quiet about the pogroms against Jews. Jews have no doubt that new winds are blowing in the “upper spheres,” new winds that will further rattle the weak Jewish structure. They reach this conclusion first because under the new government attacks against Jews have grown more numerous and severe. Now, not a day passes without attacks against Jews in several locations, and the government keeps quiet, even though the current government is very talkative in general. Secondly, Jews see how the Endeks are feeling and acting after the latest

pogrom in Minsk-Mazovyetsk. After the previous pogroms, they would at least take a break of several days from their provocations in the location where they had spilled Jewish blood, where they had punctured holes in Jewish skulls and Jewish houses. This time, they are acting entirely differently. They are developing massive efforts in pogrom-stricken Minsk-Mazovyetsk to reap with delight what they had sown with joy.

In addition to the legal appeal {for economic pogroms} that the Endeks freely distributed on the day of the first fair after the pogrom, there was also a secret illegal one that used entirely different wording. It called for an entirely different struggle, a physical one, and encouraged Poles to take advantage of Jews' flight by seizing the properties they left behind and preventing them from returning to their stores and workshops. On the same day, the Endek central organ, *Dziennik Narodowy*, printed the following:

Minsk-Mazovyetsk must become the first major Polish city in which commerce and artisanry are transferred to Polish hands. The current situation in Minsk-Mazovyetsk is excellent and we must take full advantage of it.

In a matter of months, we can achieve in Minsk-Mazovyetsk what will take years in other cities. The struggle must be carried out to completion. We are of the opinion that the administrative authorities will not stand in our way. After all, this is a matter of *economic struggle, which Prime Minister Skladkowski proclaimed legal in his government declaration.*

The newspaper concludes with enthusiasm: "We must immediately begin a major economic offensive in Minsk-Mazovyetsk. In the next weeks, if not days, new Christian stores and workshops must be established."

The newspaper further hints that houses, stores, and workshops can now be purchased from Jews at low prices. It calls on Poles to take advantage of the moment and seize positions. At the fair, the heroic victors walked around free as birds and agitated for people to buy from Poles, not Jews. They had no fear whatsoever of being disturbed by the police since, after all, the prime minister had given permission for economic struggle.

The boycott is even worse than a pogrom. It is no wonder that the Jews of Minsk-Mazovyetsk have only now become deeply worried and sad. Only now have they fallen into melancholy and despair. An

ordinary Jewish man explained it to me: people were at the pogrom-fair; they saved their lives; they ran this way and that—a tumult, a din, with shattered windows, knocked-out teeth, dislocated arms and smashed doors. They forgot about their daily hardships—that life without a livelihood is worse than life without teeth, that without bread for one's children it is worse than without a head on one's shoulders. Gradually, the pogrom fumes dissipate, the holes in the houses are somehow stopped up, the pogrom "holiday" passes and the pogromless weekdays arrive, the ordinary days when one no longer receives a premade soup from the committee and no more bread is sent by wagon from the surrounding towns. Those difficult days, when one must *buy* bread, when one must *pay* for milk—days when one must earn and there is nowhere to do so; days when one realizes that tomorrow will be worse and the next day even more miserable—those ordinary, pogromless days are horrifying!

This man tells me he reckons that far more Jews are being suffocated by the boycott than were wounded in the pogrom. He elaborates a theory that dying of hunger is far worse than dying by hooligans' stones or knives. He lists for me Jews who stood in the market with merchandise, went hungry but lived, toiled away and coped with poverty. Now their stalls are shattered and they are afraid to return to the market. In a closed store, a Christian here or there will risk buying from a Jew. There are also, for the time being, few large textile or haberdashery stores owned by non-Jews, so people still have to resort to Jewish ones. In the market, however, in front of the entire antisemitic nation, when there are tens of Christian stalls with the same merchandise, what peasant would risk being a traitor to the nation? What Christian would have the audacity to buy a pack of matches or a length of thread from a Jew? Jewish market vendors and small-scale merchants of farm produce thus have no hope of once again eking out an impoverished living. They think with terror of the day when the aid committee will stop distributing bread and herring. What will happen to these hundreds of families who will never be revived in the Minsk-Mazovyetsk marketplace?

The official organs ensure that Jews do not feel protected or supported. For instance, a Jewish payment collector named Yekhiel Troyanovski worked for the municipal power station for many years. They fired him right after the pogrom. The reasons were unspoken but clear. They soon hired a Polish collector. A Jewish contractor worked for

a military regiment stationed in Minsk-Mazovyetsk, completing various repairs in the barracks. Shortly after the pogrom, they drove him out. On 11 June—that is, ten days from the start of the pogrom and seven days from its end—they wounded several more Jews: Khaye Zusman, Yoysef Reyzman, Dovid Goldshteyn, and Meylekh Rotshteyn, a tailor. They split Rotshteyn's head open with a sword. The previous day, they beat the baker Radzinski, Avrom Herman, and Shmuel Zilbershteyn.

Hardly a day goes by without stones flying into one or two Jewish houses. In Minsk-Mazovyetsk, this is considered calm, and Jews can return to their hardships and livelihoods, to their plagues and dealings.

{Undated (1936?)}