



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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7. Ghetto benches

Warsaw's Jews have been on a break for two weeks. They are ready to celebrate the anniversary soon. For two weeks, people smashed heads and shattered windows, and now there is a pause. This is not to say that the beating has stopped entirely. They are still beating Jews, not in the main streets and by the light of day, but in the darkness of night. They are still beating Jews, but a few at a time, rather than masses at once, and three or four people are still being wounded every day. Nonetheless, three or four is not twenty or thirty. So, people are ready to praise God and those who helped the Almighty put a stop to a relentless mass pogrom. People go around asking how long this will last. To answer this question, one must know why the pogroms were halted all of a sudden.

Some say that those in high places gathered the leaders of the pogrom parties and advised them to stop, promising them a lovely gift in return: "ghetto benches" in the universities. The gift was accepted, and things soon calmed down.

There is another opinion as well: the Polish government was acting in the spirit of the program it has been following for the last two years. It permits people to beat Jews, break their bones, and destroy their property, but all in moderation. It does not allow the anti-Jewish pogrom to become a threat to state life as a whole. Two weeks in Warsaw, the nation's capital, a couple hundred wounded, another couple hundred mildly beaten, a panic seizing the entire Jewish population, disorienting and demoralizing Warsaw's Jews and dramatically strengthening the pro-emigration mood: the goal was reached, so they called it off.

There are people who believe that the protests abroad also helped a

little. One thing is clear. Things calmed down as soon as the government wanted them to. Jews deduce from this that, if things were previously not calm, if people spent two full weeks wreaking havoc and beating Jews, then those who can so quickly and easily stop a pogrom had not wanted to do so.

For now, things are quiet in Warsaw. Jews ought to be satisfied. But no. An ungrateful people. They are not just dissatisfied. They curse the day when the pogrom stopped. The pogrom in the streets stopped, but on that same day, a different pogrom started, one that is far worse, far more dangerous, and far more painful. It led to horrifying results. The gift used to bribe the hooligans, the "ghetto benches," struck the Jewish population like a bolt of lightning.

It is difficult to comprehend, but it is a fact that despite the pogroms, which have been going on for more than two years already; despite all the restrictions in economic and political life and in the universities; despite all the declarations by powerful people that Jews are not and cannot be citizens with equal rights—Jews did not expect this officially-launched stone to their heads. They are dejected and humiliated, and they are just now beginning to understand the true meaning of the torments they have suffered thus far, as well as what this portends for the near future. One can read from Jews' backs their sense of condemnation and dejection. The Jewish back has grown even more hunched and crooked, and the head has crawled even deeper into the shoulders.

I reckon that all of those who criticized me for seeing things too bleakly, for painting pictures with too much black paint, will now criticize me for having shouted too softly, for not having foreseen just how far we could fall in Poland. I feel that it is my duty now to shout as loudly as possible that we are at the very beginning of the Polish Inquisition. After all, this used to be the demand of the opposition, and the government merely tolerated it. Now it has become the official program of the government.

Appetites are growing. Here is what an Endek newspaper prints:

The directors' demand for ghetto benches was undoubtedly made with government assent. The Polish youth's resolute struggle was crowned with a resounding victory. The academic ghetto is a reality. The *numerus clausus* principle had already been realized. Sights are now set on a *numerus nullus*. Our entire front is moving forward! The

Jews are retreating all along this front! The first step in the fight for the de-Jewification of higher education is complete; the Jews will now sit separately. Full victory is not far off. We will be rid of the Jews.

The hooligans' newspaper is absolutely justified in its celebration. Their victory is indeed not far off. Last year, 10% of those admitted to institutions of higher education were Jews. This year, it is already down to 5 or 6%. The Warsaw University of Technology {*Politechnika Warszawska*} admitted 4 Jews out of 141 students in engineering, 4 Jews out of 97 students in electrical studies, 4 Jews out of 174 students in mechanics, and 1 Jew out of 68 students in architecture. The university admitted the following: 7 Jews out of 100 students in medicine; 11 Jews out of 350 in law; 13 Jews out of 105 students in dentistry. The situation is even worse outside the capital.

What are Jews doing aside from groaning and grinding their teeth out of their sense of powerlessness? The students decided to hold a seven-day strike. The Sejm and senate deputies went running to various ministers and returned with their heads hung even lower than before. One must recall that the current Minister of Education belongs to the left faction of Pilsudski's camp. The Jewish parties are also holding deliberations, but in complete secrecy, since every party is afraid that someone else will snap up this fight before them. Nobody has any thought of agreeing to a general struggle in this tragic and dangerous time. After all, how could proletarians and common paupers defend themselves together? How could socialists and Zionists sit at the same table?

This is still just the beginning. In about ten cities, the coachmen have also instituted a ghetto. The Jewish coachmen must stand separately, and in addition, the non-Jews wear tin badges on their hats proclaiming that they are Christian coachmen, that is to say, the bosses in this country, the ones with an illustrious lineage.

In still more cities, ghettos have already been established in the markets. The Jews stand separately, and there is often also a sign proclaiming that this is where the Christians are standing, and honest, devout Poles buy only from Christians.

This year, they have also introduced separate benches for Jewish children in the public elementary schools. The patriotic tykes, eight-year-old and nine-year-old children, started dragging Jewish children to separate benches. In many schools, the teachers were absolutely

delighted by the little antisemites and forced the Jewish children to sit separately. There were also teachers that calmed the little patriots down and told them to leave this matter to the grown-up hooligans. Such teachers were few in number, however.

The coachmen, merchants, and junior hooligans have decided for themselves that they cannot defile their "Aryan" (or foolish)¹ bodies by getting too close to Jews. It was the government, however, that decided that higher education students, the nation's future intelligentsia, cannot sit on the same benches as Jews. It is easy to imagine the upcoming proliferation of separate benches, markets, restaurants, theatres, museums, and God knows what else the hooligans of various types will come up with. Perhaps individuals will not even need to rack their brains to come up with ways of ejecting and expelling Jews. It is entirely plausible that the government will spare them the effort.

We find ourselves on the eve of immense and fundamental changes to the government and to domestic politics as a whole. Adam Koc, the "Führer," the creator of the Camp of National Unity, is preparing to become the true, and likely only, boss in Poland.² Consultations are taking place with Mr. Koc in the Presidential Palace all week long. From conversations with his lieutenants it has become clear that they are preparing to transfer power to Koc's group. The latter, which contains more than a few renegades from the antisemitic camp in its ranks, is preparing not only to adopt the hard-line antisemites' entire program but to install them in the seats of power. We can expect a real "salvation" for the Jews.

I must acknowledge that the leftist camp has not been sleeping either. It has been adopting pointed resolutions. It has been sending delegations to the Prime Minister, calling the workers to be on guard, and attempting to create a united front of all oppositional parties and groups. I would be happy to believe that this left wing is capable of holding back the black tide. To my great regret, I do not believe it. I cannot help myself. It is not that I am a hopeless pessimist. The reason is more profound: nobody believes it.

26 October 1937

1 {Leshchinsky puns here. The Yiddish word for "Aryan" (*arish*) rhymes with "foolish" (*narish*).}

2 {*Sanacja* politician Adam Koc announced the formation of the *Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego* (OZN; Camp of National Unity) in February 1937 and went on to become its leader. This nationalistic, antisemitic party subsequently won Poland's 1938 legislative election.}