



THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 2
THE PERMANENT POGROM, 1935-37

TRANSLATED
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8. Jewish self-defence

What is the Jewish population's position on the attacks against Jews, on the hooligans that terrorize Jewish women and children? What is the position of the Jews on the government, which tolerates the hooliganism and allows wild young men to attack peaceful, innocent people with knives and clubs?

I must acknowledge that these issues were of greater interest to me than the attacks themselves, and even than the Jewish victims. There is ultimately much truth in the words, "in every generation, they rise up to destroy us."¹ Our response determines whether our enemies will succeed. A great deal depends on our response, our readiness to defend ourselves, to return blow for blow, knife for knife.

It is evident that different classes of the Jewish people respond differently. Everyone's response is, however, a national one, even if emphasis is placed on the class factor. They are beating Jews. Of course they go for poor Jews more frequently, since the latter veil their Jewish faces less and are more easily recognizable as Jews. However, the hooligans are certainly not operating from the standpoint of class. To them, every Jewish chest is good for a knife. For this reason, every call to respond to the hooligans with pride, dignity, courage, and strength is a national call that carries, and must carry, national feelings of unity and Jewish commonality.

We make this point in light of the fact that, naturally, the first to respond with brave words and calls for self-defence were the workers, who bear in their hearts the memories of the two Russian revolutions and are heirs to the revolutionary movement of 1905 and 1917.

One such group of Jewish socialists in Lodz spread a call to acquire weapons and organize self-defence. This appeal was of course

1 {From *V'hi sh'amda*, a passage in the Passover Haggadah.}

disseminated secretly and illegally. We learn from this call that two people have died in Lodz, several are on their death beds, and there are many tens of wounded. One could not find out this much from the "legal" newspapers, which have now fallen into complete silence, having had their mouths sealed. According to reports, the hooligans there had a rough time. They were shown that beating Jews is, in any event, a risky enough business.

The response by Jewish workers in Bialystok was even more effective. There, the Nara members had to remove their uniforms. They were simply afraid to show themselves on Jewish streets in uniform, since Jews repaid them immediately for their attacks, or gave them advance payments. In the first days, the hooligans went on a completely unpunished rampage through the central streets of Jewish neighbourhoods. The Jewish population was not prepared. They did not believe that the police would tolerate this. At first, the Jews were somewhat disoriented. However, they quickly came to their senses and realized that the best defence is self-defence, that the best strategy is to rely on themselves, on their own power. They began retaliating as groups and individuals.

The regime soon realized that this situation carried a whiff of civil war and began arresting Jews, both the guilty and, far more often, the innocent. The guilty, too, are only guilty of protecting Jewish women, children, seniors, and weak people. They are guilty of having human blood and human dignity that drove them to respond to hooligans with the hooligans' own measures. Tens of Jews are indeed currently under arrest. However, in recent days, Jews have felt calmer, more secure and relaxed, since they finally feel that they are not only being beaten, but are beating too.

The pogroms in Warsaw were deeply tragic, with a large number of victims. Here, too, Jews became somewhat disoriented at first, fell into a panic, and relied on the authorities. After all, until recently, there was a very strong belief that, come what may, the Pilsudski government would not allow pogroms and acts of physical violence. As it happened, the ruffians beat Jews for a couple of weeks, their nerve growing ever stronger, and the holes in Jewish skulls growing ever more numerous.

The hooligans' nerve grew to the point that they seized a meeting hall in the centre of the Jewish neighbourhood, near Dzika and Muranow Streets. They even began storming into the neighbourhoods around

the Iron Gate,² where the Jewish porters follow the sacred custom of defending the honour of the Jewish nation with gentile means, that is, with knives and clubs.

Then, all of a sudden, the patience of the Jewish porters, workers, and youth ran out. In general, from that day forward, one can no longer speak of a pogrom against Jews, but rather of a war between Polish nationalist hooligans and Jews. There were fights every evening for more than two weeks, particularly in the areas of the city where Jews live in compact masses. There were tens of people wounded on each side. The police claim that Jews beat the Nara members worse than the latter beat Jews. If only that were true. The assailed must, after all, occasionally lose their temper and exact revenge on the assailants. However, people closely associated with the circles in question assure us that it is not true. The police simply arrested Jews faster and in greater numbers, while treating gently the true hooligans, the instigators of the attacks, the agitators and progromists.

Here are several characteristic facts: on Stawki Street, the Nara members began to pick fights with Jews. Jewish workers did not wait for them to demonstrate their full strength, and instead gave them a good thrashing. Two hooligans were wounded. As a result, the police immediately arrested *several tens* of Jewish workers—every Jewish worker on the street.

There was also a fight in front of the Iron Gate, and people on both sides were wounded. Jews were the ones arrested, and four young Jewish men were sentenced to arrests of fourteen and thirty days. The hooligans started a trend of attacking women and children in the gardens in the centres of Jewish neighbourhoods. True, they often did not beat them; they had no need to. It was sufficient to start a panic that would cause Jewish women to run away, Jewish children to get injured as their strollers were overturned, and Jews in general to sprint after and fall over one another. The hooligans would beam with delight and mock Jewish women and old people.

Eventually, young Jewish men began putting an end to this hooliganism. And once again, the police arrested more Jews than non-Jews, although they knew perfectly well that Jews were not the ones

2 {The large iron gate demarcating the western border of the Saxon Garden; a prominent landmark in Warsaw at the time.}

who started it, and that Jewish men would never have done anything if it were not for the urgent need to defend themselves, women, and children.

Fortunately, there were enough conscious Polish socialist workers in Warsaw who understood that when the hooligans were beating Jews, they meant them too, and they joined the fight against the National Radicals. At this point, the fighting took on even bloodier and more brutal forms. The Nara members attacked the meeting hall of the PPS {Polish Socialist Party} and injured six workers. The PPS-affiliated workers paid them back, plus interest. The police arrested around fifty of the National Radicals. The fighting lasted for about eight days.

We cannot list here all cases in which Jewish workers and Jewish youth in general clearly demonstrated that if the hooligans are going to beat Jews, they had better be ready for a gift that will leave them in bed for a few days. So, what did the police do? They suddenly decided to conduct searches of many Jewish professional unions and arrested tens of workers. The following day, they announced in the newspapers that a large quantity of weapons had been found in the possession of the Jews, and that things would calm down now. They gave the impression that Jews were largely to blame. They summoned representatives of the Jewish newspapers and, as well as forbidding them to write about the attacks, they advised them to convince the Jewish population to remain calm, not to take revenge, and to rely exclusively on the police, who promised to put an end to the fighting. However, the attacks continue. The only difference is that people now know less, since the newspapers write nothing about them.

Here we are witnessing the responses to the attacks among the section of the Jewish nation that does not engage in official politics, but rather replies with its healthy feelings, directly and immediately. After all, it is only partially accurate to speak here about organized self-defence or about the direction of organized socialist forces. One must recall that, in Poland, there are up to 200,000 young Jewish men and women who belong to the Jewish youth movement. More than 100,000 of them attend a good sports school. This is an entirely new type of Jew who knows how to deliver a blow where necessary, and who refuses to let anyone spit in their porridge, much less their face.

So, how did the remainder of Polish Jews respond? The rabbis

proceeded in the best and cleverest manner. They declared fasts. If the Jews do not eat, they will become so weak that there will be nobody to beat up. As Mendeley Moykher Sforim³ says, these days, the Jewish stomach is as big as an olive, and if Jews remain good and pious, they will reach the point where they have no stomachs at all.

This is certainly not only a wise answer to the question, but also a thorough one. As we can see, the rabbis kept their composure and immediately found a solution.

Far worse was the response among official Jewish politicians, who believed—or rather, forced themselves to believe—that the current government did not want nor need pogroms and would not allow them. These official politicians, who always covered up the government's economic antisemitism with its political friendliness toward Jews and its protection of Jews from the antisemitic groups that want to physically destroy them—these people truly lost their heads, feeling duped and swindled. It must be said that they had had a great deal of success among the Jewish bourgeoisie. Their theory had been well received; life is the main thing, and the government protects Jews and does not allow pogroms, so one must forgive its other sins. Alright, Jews will grow a little thinner. Things are miserable without a livelihood, but without a head things are even worse. Pogroms are the worst thing, and a government that protects Jews from pogroms is a good government. One ought to appreciate the government, defend it against its electoral enemies, avoid provoking it, and refrain from speaking out against it abroad. In short, one should be quieter than water and lower than grass out of thankfulness.

Then all of a sudden! The government is in full power, and yet people are beating Jews in the streets of Poland's largest cities; they are beating them openly for weeks at a time. They are publishing pogrom articles and distributing hundreds of thousands of copies. They are preparing brutal pogroms. And the government is silent! It refuses to even promise to put an end to it. It offers the reassurance that the waves of antisemitism in other countries are even worse. It was as if those Jewish politicians had been dealt a blow to the head.

The politicians who had themselves dismantled all Jewish

3 {Literary persona of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, the "grandfather" of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature.}

organizations and representative bodies, who had cynically mocked the value of Jewish politics and Jewish struggle, who had ridiculed every Jewish demand—since Jews can only obtain by pleading, never by fighting—they are all now running around like poisoned mice. They shout that we must at least be organized and unified, but fail to say why we ought to organize or what a Jewish national council would accomplish if it were to emerge. They feel, however, that the masses must not be allowed to despair, that the chaos dominating Jewish life is a thousand times more dangerous than the hooligans' attacks.

There is absolutely no hope that anything will be created that would have authority in the eyes of Jews or non-Jews. Demoralization and neglect have profoundly corroded Jewish bourgeois society. Careerism dances the dance of the demons, not hesitating to perform hideous acts. Denunciation and licking of noblemen's boots have become daily occurrences in all organized Jewish communities. And there is not a single person in all of Poland whom people would respect and whose voice would be heard, not to mention obeyed.

{Undated}