



THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 2
THE PERMANENT POGROM, 1935-37

TRANSLATED
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9. Protests against pogroms

Anyone who has been reading the Polish antisemitic press over the last two weeks could easily observe a particularly joyful tone in the articles, a tone of victory, of success. Every day, they have announced that in this or that town, such and such a number of Christian shops and market stalls have opened, and such and such a number of Jewish shops and stalls have shut. Non-antisemitic, half-antisemitic, and even ostensibly anti-pogrom newspapers have also started publishing similar reports. The antisemitic papers have seized onto this, licking their lips and emphasizing that the entire Polish nation has begun to understand that the only way to help the poor peasantry is to seize commerce and the trades from the Jews. They make grand calculations that, if 250 Polish stalls and shops have opened in three towns, then 250 Polish families have a source of income, and thus at least one thousand Polish souls have a livelihood. They soon calculate that if they were to achieve the same results in three hundred towns, then 100,000 Polish souls would have the means to make a living, and so on.

Aside from this delight, one could also detect notes of an entirely different joy in their poisonous articles: the Jewish resistance has been broken. Jews are disheartened, lost, exhausted, and ready to surrender. This has added to the pleasure of the propagators of poison and preachers of hate.

Then all of a sudden—Jews are protesting! Jews are closing their businesses in protest! Jews young and old, radical and devout, left and right, all as one person, are declaring that they will not allow themselves to be slaughtered like sheep. They will take a stand, they will protect their women and children with their own bodies, they will use every means to defend all their jobs, sinking their teeth into every Jewish job and not capitulating to fear or despair. They will fight against every form of antisemitism, no matter if it comes from the highest levels, no matter

if it is veiled, no matter if it is wrapped in the softest cotton padding!

It had seemed that the thicker the black cloud of antisemitism grew, the more dejected the Jews would become, and the more passive and discouraged Polish Jewry would grow. It was not only all the antisemitic parties, large and small, that counted on this, but also those movements and political orientations that claim not to be antisemitic and to be opposed to pogroms, but insist that we must reckon with the sad situation of the Polish peasantry, which is pushing and shoving its way into the city.

It has turned out that the persecutions and pogroms are not causing Jews to despair, but rather cementing and uniting all classes and groups; they are not humiliating the Jews, but rather strengthening their courage and stoking their desire to fight.

This would certainly be impossible if the Jewish masses did not feel that a great social and political game is being played out on their backs, that at stake is not only the fate of the Jewish masses, but also of the Polish working class and peasantry. Nowhere else has this game appeared as nakedly as in contemporary Poland. From one day to the next, the struggle grows clearer and more explicit. Either the landowners and Polish industrialists will succeed in deceiving the Polish workers and peasantry, convincing them that the main thing is the fight against Jews, in which case Polish Jewry is condemned to far greater suffering and tragedy than the German Jews; or, on the contrary, the revolutionary parties will conquer the minds and souls of the workers and peasants and bring about a leftist upheaval, in which case we will be physically, economically, and judicially saved.

This, however, is a topic that will need to be dealt with separately. Now we must describe how the last protest strike came about. This strike encompassed fully 99% of Polish Jewry and proved once more that all the miserable blows and insults that Polish Jews have endured in recent years have not broken their spirit nor crushed their ability to fight.

For three weeks, the attention of the entirety of Polish Jewry, all its classes and political movements, was concentrated on the Pshitik trial. It was, after all, not a simple trial about fights and attacks. On one side of the trial were the pogrom leaders and perpetrators, the educated pogrom agitators and the half-educated hooligans, brawlers, and assailants with knives—in other words, the whole antisemitic camp

with its entire ideology and all its knife- and iron-wielding heroes. On the other side, for the first time in the Polish pogroms, the Polish population was brought to trial by a population consisting not only of people hiding in their attics and cellars, but also of true heroes with revolvers in their hands and iron bars wielded against the pogromists. For the first time, the elementary right of Jews to defend themselves, to respond to an attack by wielding a club, to meet a knife with a revolver, was on trial. After the pogrom cloud had been hanging over their heads for weeks and months, the fourteen Jewish accused sat on the bench for all three million Polish Jews and their elementary right to respond to an attack and to prepare themselves for self-defence.

Thus, Jews listened with pounding hearts to everything that was taking place. With gritted teeth, they read the open calls to pogroms by the antisemitic lawyers. With terror and fury, they read about the insolent behaviour of the pogromists and the open, shameless lies of the hundreds of witnesses. With joy and happiness, they read the proud speeches of the Jewish lawyers and, with even greater joy and indescribable delight, the morally elevated and politically clever speeches of the two Christian lawyers. They hoped and believed and awaited the moment when the sun would burst into light, when a Polish court would be illuminated with a humane verdict, with an honest, objective judgement. They wanted proof that in today's Polish Sodom, there are still virtuous men, true and honest judges for whom right and conscience stand above all else. Their nerves were wracked to the highest degree. The wounded Jewish heart was full of anticipation.

On Friday evening, before reciting the blessing over the candles, when most Polish Jews still experience an elevated, celebratory mood, and hope and faith find their way more easily into Jewish minds and hearts—in these pre-Sabbath hours, the thunder resounded. It is impossible to describe its impact. One phrase was heard from every Jew's mouth: *now for sure they're allowed to kill Jews!* In these words were fury, sorrow, endless anger, deep despair, and a huge question: how much further can they fall, this nation dazzled by the wild preachers of hate, misled by false providers and vile demagogues? Another question cried out from the eyes of every Jew: what threat does this pose to us, a verdict that frees explicit pogromists, that endorse knife-wielders and window-smashers, that leaves the Minkovski murder—a murder that

screams to the heavens for a guilty verdict—unpunished, that punishes the one acting in self-defence ten and twenty times more harshly than the attacker?

On the outside, all Jews appeared dejected, downtrodden, beaten to the ground. But deep in their hearts simmered a feeling of protest, of struggle, of responding with honour, of demonstrating our power, our readiness to protect and defend ourselves.

This time, the right wing of *Po'ale Tsiyon*¹ correctly fulfilled the demands of the moment, and on their initiative, a general Jewish strike was called for Tuesday 30 June across the whole of Poland. The strike was declared for the hours from 12 to 2 p.m. and was {nearly} one hundred percent successful. A quarter of a million Jewish shops and market stalls and 200,000 Jewish workshops closed in unison across all of Poland. There were cases when customers had to be asked to leave the store. In many cities, this was a fair day, but the number of strike breakers and dissidents was negligible.

As always, the Jewish worker was the most active participant, the initiator, the awakener, the leader, but the entire Jewish bourgeoisie was willing to follow, as though unintentionally admitting that the future belongs to the worker, the sole class of Jews that has friends and partners in struggle among the surrounding population. In Lemberg, where there is such a relentless struggle among the bourgeoisies of three peoples—Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians—workers from all three nationalities demonstrated their solidarity for the hundredth time. In Bendin and Sosnovits, a large number of Polish workers went on strike. In Warsaw, the Polish workers from more than twenty factories went on strike. When Polish workers in a couple of factories refused to strike, a speech by a Polish or even a Jewish socialist explaining the political significance of this Jewish protest strike was enough to make everyone stop working. One Jewish factory owner told his workers that he would pay their wages for a whole day's work, but they refused and declared that they would make up the two hours of the strike.

One of the most important results of the two Jewish protest strikes on 17 March and 30 June was the fact that they managed to weave the struggle against antisemitism into the general struggle for freedom and a new order. It was demonstrated most unmistakably that the situation

1 {*Po'ale Tsiyon* split into left and right factions in 1920.}

of all of Polish Jewry depends on the victory of the Polish working class. At the same time, however, the exceptional situation of Jews was also made evident: the Jewish bourgeoisie, persecuted based on ethnicity and physically threatened, must appeal to and seek help among its social enemies—the Jewish and Polish workers.

Particularly noteworthy is the small town of Pshitik, which has suffered a great deal, but bears its burden with honour and dignity and increasingly displays its heroism. The entire Jewish population, including all women and children, gathered in the synagogue courtyard. It was as though the town had died. Everything was shut and bolted. Here they mentioned the fallen martyrs, and many people wept and fainted. But the proclamations of the speakers—*We are not broken! We will continue our struggle!*—provoked great enthusiasm. Among the speakers was Borenshteyn, who was freed not long ago. He was received with particular love and enthusiasm.

Joyful, encouraging news arrives from Vilna, Bialystok, Krakow, Novidvor, Mezritsh {Międzyrzec Podlaski}, Prushkov {Pruszków}, Grodno—in short, from all of Poland—that the strike was a magnificent success, and that Polish workers everywhere demonstrated sympathy and joined the strike.

The protest strike was invaluable for Jews themselves. Their hearts grew lighter and their eyes brighter. It was a true pleasure to stroll through the Jewish streets and see the radiant Jewish youth, the invigorated Jewish working masses, and the joyful faces of ordinary Jews. I witnessed several scenes in which ordinary Jews, even well-dressed ones who likely belonged to the bourgeoisie, demanded that people who were running late hurry up and close their businesses. A special joy could be heard in that demand, the joy of a person who feels that he is not alone, that he can defend himself, and that he has allies in his self-defence.

Of course, the rubber batons of the police were not on strike. Wherever a police officer noticed that they were demanding the closure of shops or the cessation of work, he got cracking. Here in Warsaw, around twenty Jews were wounded and around twenty were arrested, and in Lodz around fifty were arrested. In general, however, the strike remained peaceful.

We commented that the entire Jewish bourgeoisie joined the protest

strike. However, it must be added that *Agudes Yisroel*² called on Jews to fast instead and set a fast for the seventeenth of Tammuz, that is, a day when devout Jews fast anyway. The leaders of *Agudes Yisroel* thus made themselves look ridiculous, since their devout followers, who are sent to communities to supervise kosher food preparation, ritual slaughter, rabbis, weddings, and divorces, understand well that in the struggle for Jewish rights, it is better to follow the Jewish workers.

The Polish press, aside from the wildly antisemitic organs, has not yet responded. The antisemitic press is foaming with rage and threatening pogroms. A Warsaw newspaper (*Dziennik Narodowy*) writes: "This protest of the entirety of Polish Jewry against a verdict from the state court will certainly not discourage any Poles. On the contrary, we would like Jews to carry out protests like this 365 days a year, and not just two, but 24 hours a day." And after a poisonous description of Jews transforming convicted criminals into martyrs, the newspaper concludes: "The Jewish assault continues. But this will not discourage anyone." Another paper published a cry that Jews are organizing the revolutionary elements in the country and that Jews support the Communists and are fighting against Poland on the foreign and domestic fronts.

We must add that the verdict in Pshitik shocked not only Jews, but also Christians. Even the greatest Jewish pessimists had not expected such an absurd verdict, and even the most optimistic antisemites had not hoped that their allies would be given so much encouragement to perpetrate further pogroms. The newspapers tell us one fact that casts a glaring light on this verdict and shows us to what extent we can rely on protection by the central government. The chairman of the court, who throughout the trial conducted himself in a sufficiently objective manner and thereby gave hope of an objective judgement, travelled to Warsaw prior to rendering the verdict. It is believed that he delivered the "gift" of the verdict under the direction of Warsaw.

22 July 1936

2 {The largest political movement of Orthodox Jews in interwar Eastern Europe.}

Poland is a strange country, so strange that I sometimes simply cease to understand what is happening around me. Consider the past week. Over the course of the week, Jews in Poland held as many as 400 meetings, conferences, and rallies, attended by no fewer than 200,000 Jews. They were evidently not afraid to attend meetings *en masse*, remain there for many hours, spend time together, debate, and often have a rather fun time, singing songs and dancing. At tens of these rallies, they sang the Internationale and the Bundist Oath,³ that is to say, revolutionary songs. Nobody bothered them, nobody interfered, nobody arrested these singers who were, after all, calling for a social revolution.

In today's Poland, therefore, one is allowed to call for a social revolution, a free country! I can divulge another secret. At tens of the aforementioned rallies, people harshly criticized the government. They attacked the camp whose representatives sit in the government. They accused them not only of tolerating and permitting pogroms, not only of allowing the bourgeoisie to rob and exploit the workers, not only of letting the peasants die of hunger, so long as the privileges and estates of the landowners are protected, but of bringing Poland to ruin and delivering it into the hands of its greatest enemies, the Germans. They spoke, and nobody interrupted them. Freedom! Just like in a European country.

Here are a few scenes from recent days that ought to be surprising:

Large masses of Polish workers with flags and placards stretch across the streets of Warsaw. On the placards are proclamations against reactionary politics, fascism, antisemitism, exploitation, enslavement of the working class, and ethnic oppression. Alongside the Polish workers walk Jewish workers, a delegation from the Jewish trade unions. They too carry large placards in Polish and Yiddish. With these placards they protest against antisemitism and persecution. They demand equal rights for all ethnic groups. They walk through tens of streets, almost without a single incident. At one point, a couple of hooligans try to cause a disturbance, but they receive a generous portion of blows and slaps and quickly clear off.

Here is another interesting scene: a Bundist rally is taking place in a courtyard on Zamenhof Street. Three or four thousand Jewish workers protest against the attacks on Jews, calling for self-defence. They blame

3 {*Di shvure* (The Oath), the anthem of the Jewish Labour Bund.}

not just the capitalist order in general, but the current Polish leaders in particular for the pogroms. They call for a struggle in favour of a workers' and peasants' government, they sing the Internationale, and the atmosphere is one of revolutionary fervour. The representative of the Polish socialist trade unions, Comrade Zdanowski, greets the Jewish workers, calling for a common struggle against hooligans of all sorts, both hidden and overt, and promises the help of Polish workers in the Jewish workers' fight for full equality and the human right to security.

In the last week, joint assemblies of Jewish and Polish workers concerning the struggle against fascism, hooliganism, and pogroms took place in ten or twelve cities. A genuinely fraternal atmosphere dominated them, an atmosphere of struggle and revolution. I say this in all seriousness—an atmosphere of revolution. The members of the crowd were so ready to fight and sacrifice themselves, they were in such a state of elevated idealism, that one could almost believe that if they were called into the streets to fight they would go at once and struggle valiantly for their ideals.

The reader who has for more than two years been accustomed to reading about pogroms in Poland every day, and who is certainly aware that for weeks now a constant pogrom has been taking place in Warsaw, should not misinterpret my words as a joke. Likewise, he should not believe that the correspondents who have telegraphed or written about the pogroms are simply trying to cause him worry. But how is it possible that in a country where there is still so much freedom, people are permitted to beat hundreds of Jews and cripple innocent people without restraint?

I assure the reader that everything I have written above is absolutely true. There is still so much freedom in Poland. The trouble is that, in addition to the aforementioned freedom, there is another freedom. That is the freedom not only to speak, but also to *do*. Here is what that *doing* looks like:

From 10 to 20 September 1937, more than ninety Jews were wounded in Warsaw. We have names and news about their wounds. There are also tens or perhaps hundreds who suffered brutal blows but quietly washed off the blood at home and held their tongues. A wound remains in their hearts. A needle of shame remains stuck in their souls, pricking and tormenting them forever. This is because today's Jew is not the medieval

Jew who believed that the “goy” is a donkey that cannot be reckoned with like a human being.

Wounded? What does that mean? We will provide just a few facts, and the reader will understand immediately. At 20 Krochmalna Street, they beat Mendl Kaplan so badly that he remained lying on the street unconscious. They left Avrom Yakubovitsh (4 Pańska Street) with four severe, life-threatening knife wounds to his back and chest. Hersh Valkenbreyt had such a serious wound to his cheek that they needed to operate on him immediately in the hospital. In the best-case scenario, he will be left crippled. They threw the shopkeeper Kasher (20 Grzybowska Street), who was in the late months of pregnancy, to the ground and trampled her. In the Saxon Garden, they threw a young Jewish man into the water and he was barely rescued. Meanwhile, they beat a young Jewish woman, who lost consciousness. On Krolevska {Królewska} Street, Jewish higher education students Mark Kaplan and Pola Freyd were attacked. The assailants struck Kaplan over the head with an iron bar and trampled him as he lay bleeding. They used only their hands to beat Freyd, knocking her to the ground and kicking her until she bled.

The reader should note that this did not occur in some remote corner where a couple of hooligans encountered an individual Jew and beat him up. No. This is all happening on the liveliest streets of Warsaw. Groups of twenty and thirty hooligans walk along shouting, “Death to Jews! Go to Palestine! Get out of Poland!” They attack the shops, dragging people out and beating them, stabbing them, striking them with clubs, and destroying the shops’ merchandise. This has already been going on for two weeks in Warsaw, right before the eyes of the authorities, and nothing is being done. This, too, is freedom! If freedom is for everyone, that is. The Polish rulers are consistent. It would not be fair to let the Jews call for a fight against the pogroms without allowing the others to carry out the pogroms.

It must be confirmed that in recent days a very appealing phenomenon has been noted. Jews are beginning to respond with iron bars of their own. They have recently wounded around ten hooligans in Warsaw. A few were severely wounded and will be able to tell their children that beating Jews comes at a heavy cost. This, however, is small comfort. We paid for every wounded hooligan with ten of our own. Even according to the most conservative calculations, Jews suffered material losses of

several hundred thousand *zloty* in Warsaw over the last ten days. This represents direct losses due to destroyed merchandise, but the indirect losses are far greater. The Jewish bookstores have gone bankrupt because customers were prevented from entering. In general, in the pogrom atmosphere that has dominated Warsaw over the last two weeks, not a single Christian has set foot in a Jewish store.

Also in Warsaw, on practically the same days, there were street demonstrations by Polish and Jewish workers against pogroms and fascism, while tens of Jews were wounded and tens of Jewish businesses plundered. The government ministers themselves rode through the streets and saw with their own eyes that young Polish pupils were carrying out pogroms. They presumably also saw that Polish workers were demonstrating against pogroms, but they took neither of these observations to heart. Meanwhile, things have stayed the same. Of course, for every anti-pogrom demonstration, there are twenty or thirty pogroms. The Polish police cannot be blamed for this. They escort workers' demonstrations, ensuring that they are carried out as agreed and that, God forbid, nobody shouts anything impermissible. It is much easier for the police during a pogrom. They simply need to disappear, to become deaf to the cries of the assailants and the pleas and wails of their victims. It is no surprise that the pogroms are far more pleasant for them. It is enough to read the command of the Warsaw government commissioner, issued after two weeks of pillaging and beating, to confirm just how gently they speak to the hooligans.

Warsaw is not an only child. The same Polish government that allows Jews to carry out 400 meetings throughout the country in one week also allows what will soon be a full week of plundering, beating, smashing windows, terrorizing, and transforming Jewish life into hell in the town of Bielsk {Bielsk Podlaski}. After all, a government that does not stop a pogrom for five or six days is giving its silent approval.

A tragedy happened in Bielsk. A Jew, undoubtedly a scoundrel, shot a Polish worker. The whole dispute was over forty-five *groszy* {pennies}, and even if it is true that the Pole was drunk and about to strike him, the appropriate response is not to shoot him. On the other hand, tens of incidents like this happen in Poland every day, and nobody carries out pogroms against Christians when one Christian kills someone. In this case, however, a pogrom soon broke out and has now lasted almost a full

week. The pogromists take a break and then continue their work. The police arrest a few of them and then take a break as well. Meanwhile, fresh pogrom forces arrive and carry on plundering and beating, and the police arrest another couple of them, but the pogromists sense that there is no real danger, so they head back onto the streets. Even though all the Jewish stores have already been plundered, they still manage to find a bit of hidden merchandise. If there is no merchandise, then Jewish pillows are also worth something.

Pogroms are highly contagious. Here is a scene that brilliantly encapsulates the mood among the population after two years of pogroms. In the villages around the town of Złoty Potok {Złoty Potok} in eastern Galicia, the Endeks spread a rumour that, for half of Wednesday, plundering would be permitted in the town. At dawn on Wednesday, hundreds of peasants rushed into town with sacks over their shoulders. The small number of police officers knew that they would be unable to cope with such a large mass of people, so they sent agents to tell the peasants that the plundering had been postponed until Friday. The peasants believed this and headed home peacefully. By Friday, enough police officers had been brought in and they let the peasants know that plundering would not be allowed. It must be acknowledged that the peasants were only prepared to plunder if the government permitted it. They had no desire to risk facing trial. If it's allowed, then by all means! If not, so be it. However, the most important thing here is that people could believe that a half day of plundering Jews would be permitted.

This is what the Christian population thinks of the government's attitude toward Jews. The Jewish population has their own unique perspective. A democratic Polish newspaper in Vilna writes that Jews are being beaten, but they have stopped informing the police about this, because it often occurs that the victims are transformed into perpetrators. The Jews are so despondent that they prefer to keep quiet. The newspaper provides the following factual account: on the corner of Pohulanka Street, two hooligans with clubs and brass knuckles attacked five Jews and beat them horribly. The lumber merchant Smolenski went to a doctor and it was confirmed that all his front teeth and his jaw had been injured. When asked why they had not stopped the hooligans, they candidly admitted that they were afraid they would face trial. Such scenarios have already happened. The hooligans claim that the Jews

attacked them, and the police believe them and make the Jews stand trial. Then, on top of the lost teeth, one faces a couple months in prison. It is better to deal with just the lost teeth.

However, we are still at the beginning of the season. True, it has begun with a rather abundant harvest. September will yield an enormous harvest, but even now, a week before month's end, we can say that up to 500 people have been wounded this month. No fewer than fifty of these people will be left crippled. Five are likely not to live, and if they do, that is even worse for them.

In the winter, two groups will compete to beat Jews and force Jewish higher education students onto separate benches: the old hooligans from the Nara party, who spent all last winter tormenting Jewish students, and the youth organization of the Camp of National Unity, since nearly all ministers have by this point joined Adam Koc's party. The Camp of National Unity's youth organization is indeed led by a former Nara party leader, a proficient pogromist. The Koc youth have already made a start on their nationalist work.

They made their first attempt with Jewish windows. It turned out well. Two large display windows of Jewish businesses received a couple of large rocks. To prevent any mistake by the public, which was accustomed to the idea that only Nara members carried out genuine nationalist work like beating Jewish heads, windows, backs, and so on, the Koc group allowed themselves to be arrested and literally begged for their heroism to be announced in the newspapers. It goes without saying that these heroes were released on the same day.

They had even greater success with wresting the higher education student campaign from Nara, that is, dragging Jewish students from the right benches onto the left ones. In Warsaw, the Wawelberg technical school was founded by a Jewish convert to Christianity who also bequeathed funds for the school after his death. In this school built with Jewish money, the Koc group began their campaign against Jewish students. In order for the public to know who deserved credit for this patriotic work, they published a leaflet the following day in which they boasted that they had already succeeded in making Jews in one institute of higher education sit on separate benches.

The Jewish students refused this, but alas, what kind of a refusal is it? They remain standing the whole time. The Jewish students complained

to the rector and he gave them a logical answer: last year, this was a demand by an opposition party, but now it is being carried out by youth from the same organization as the government ministers. How exactly could he speak out in opposition? How could he, a government official, speak out against the ministers' friends?

The chapter of "separate benches for Jewish students" got off to a rollicking start. In Lemberg, they would not let Jewish students into the office to enrol in the university. In Warsaw, armed fighters stood beside the university and greeted Jewish students with clubs. News has arrived from Vilna, too, that they are actively preparing for their winter campaign.

One must pay careful attention to the rector's words: now the club-work is being carried out by youth from the same party as the ministers.

We have presented our readers with two realities. In one reality, we have rallies, demonstrations, resolutions, fiery public statements, and revolutionary songs. In the second, we have pogroms against Jews, holes in Jewish skulls, knocked-out teeth, and fear of complaining to the police because one might end up in prison for a couple of months for "offending the Polish nation." We have ghetto benches enforced by an organization that belongs to the government's own camp. One reality is intellectual, the other, bloody. One is theoretical, the other, practical.

There is absolutely no doubt that the first reality, the humane, distinguished, liberating one, will win. The question is only how to endure until then. The first reality indeed demonstrates how much life-force, readiness to fight, and willingness to sacrifice Polish Jews carry within themselves. This might be their only consolation.

15 October 1937

