



THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY  
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 2  
THE PERMANENT POGROM, 1935-37

TRANSLATED  
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## 10. Old-fashioned methods in new times

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Times change among Jews as among Christians. Until recently, people believed that changing times were a good thing—we're moving forward! Every generation is smarter, more capable, richer in scholarship, and therefore better, finer, more decent and humane than the last! Well, there are few fools left who believe in these juvenile fairy tales of progress. It is possible to progress not for the better, but for the worse; to become not finer and more decent, but crueller and more barbaric. One can learn to fly not to be closer to God, but to drop heavy bombs.

We are aware of this because recent times have brought to light a long list of facts that, to those of us from the old generation, with old traditions and habits, appear so remarkably crazy, so strikingly bizarre, that we simply cannot make sense of them.

Take, for example, the old Jewish custom of decreeing fasts under extraordinary circumstances. If Jews were slaughtered or expelled from a country, if they were pelted with edicts and had nooses around their necks, they would fast and pray to God to still the hand of the slaughterers, to turn the heart of the wicked lord or king toward goodness.

There followed a generation of Jewish revolutionaries who ridiculed and scoffed at the fasters, penitents, and self-flagellators. One ought to torment not oneself, but one's tormentor! It is not one's own stomach that ought to shrivel up, but the stomachs of the assailants and instigators!

Well, what do we see now? Jewish higher education students who are beaten, bloodied, spat upon, cast out, and marked with yellow patches are fasting. Yes, they gather in their club, like our grandfathers in the prayer house, and they refuse to eat! They do not pray, but they do hold sermons! They do not weep or moan, but they swear that after the fast,

they will turn to the fight. *After the fast*, after exhausting and weakening the enemy by leaving their own stomachs empty; after strengthening the fighters' hearts through their communal fast, they will go off to fight. They are satisfied with this, patting themselves on the back and calling it a "heroic fight."

I absolutely do not want to minimize the heroism of the Jewish students in Poland. However, I must admit that I cannot begin to understand what is going on around me. In our times, entirely different methods of struggle were applied to such circumstances.

Certainly, times change. In my day, non-Jewish students were leaders of the revolutionary movement. Now, they are leaders of the pogroms. Back then, non-Jewish students rushed to the barricades for liberty, equality, and fraternity. Now they rush with knives and clubs at Jewish students who have the audacity to mention these old-fashioned words. As an echo of the revolutionary struggle, the song of self-defence and death for the honour of the nation rang out in Jewish streets. Pogroms were, after all, the final gasp of a dying regime, tottering on its last legs. Today, however, pogroms are the cry of the young generation, of the future generation, of the majority of the intelligentsia, and therefore the majority of the nation's leadership. Perhaps the echo must ring out as hunger strikes and self-flagellation.

I am not trying to scold, and I truly do not wish to criticize. I am simply stating facts that ought to jolt us since they demonstrate that the world around us has changed so drastically that we have been thrown back a hundred years in the methods of our fight for the basic right to live, breathe, and sit and stand where we want.

It is tremendously difficult for me to write about this subject. I know that I am picking at an open wound. I know it is better not to think, to choke back all human feelings, to swallow all complaints about human honour and self-defence. I know one ought not to blame the weak for not being stronger. I know that mocking the weak is even worse than mocking the unfortunate. And heaven help me if a single cell in my body is bent on ridiculing or scoffing at someone. Yet I cannot choke back my lament that we have already returned to the ghetto, that we are once again people with yellow patches, princes of the soul who hunch down and convince themselves that they are still princes.

Who thinks about self-defence these days? Who thinks about human

dignity? About national pride? Jewish students fast and Jewish workers' organizations—left-leaning ones whose members believe that they remain faithful to the most revolutionary traditions of 1905—merely clap their hands and celebrate the heroism and courageous struggle!

Am I really that old already? Am I really incapable of understanding these new times, this new generation? What is going on around us? Yes, yes, times are changing. New people, new songs.

Consider the following example. On the streets of Lodz, people are beating Jews. The hooligans doing the beating are ultimately a negligible minority. Lodz has 100,000 Christian and 30,000 Jewish workers. Jewish and Christian workers meet daily in factories, at strikes, during rallies, in city council, and in the unions. It will soon be fifty years of the blood and sweat of Jewish and non-Jewish workers in Lodz flowing so intermingled in the struggle and at work that it is impossible to separate the Jewish blood from the non-Jewish, the Jewish sweat from the non-Jewish. Tens of thousands of Christian workers are organized in socialist unions and vote for the Polish Socialist Party. Thousands of Jewish workers are organized in Jewish socialist parties. And in a city like this, Jews are being beaten! They have already killed more than ten Jews and wounded more than 200. Well, what is being done? The most revolutionary Jewish socialist party has sent a delegation to the authorities to *request* protection of the Jewish population. Yes, request!

I would go so far as to say *beg*. One can write, and perhaps genuinely convince oneself, that they demanded, that they insisted. However, I have reliable testimony that they requested: upon leaving the government representative's office, the delegation was intact and unharmed. This is the best proof. Nobody is going to convince me that representatives of *Agudes Yisroel* fall to their knees and kiss the rulers' coattails when they take part in a delegation, while the socialist delegation pounds on the table and threatens a revolution if no protection is granted. Of course there were *nuances* in the tone and the words, but since both delegations had the same result and Jews continue to be beaten, I am justified in saying that both delegations went to request or beg and had no success, which was entirely foreseeable. With regard to *Agudes Yisroel*, of course, there is nothing to be said. That is its very nature. But how can one comprehend a delegation from a revolutionary socialist party *requesting*?

I must repeat once again that I do not feel justified in criticizing or

casting stones at people who doubtlessly hoped to accomplish something, to put an end to this nightmare, to make an effort. I understand well that one can lose one's head from powerlessness, from suffocating and choking on one's own strengths, from being compelled to squander golden revolutionary capital on trifles and petty squabbling in the ghetto. I know very well how despondent one can become, suffocating in the ghetto when one is fully ripe for the struggle, for freedom, for a decent new life, but must wait until the boss comes to his senses and gains sufficient courage and desire, for without him, one is nothing, sentenced to suffocate in the juices of one's own energy. I know that in such a fatally tragic situation, one can commit suicide and allow oneself to be led and misled by every mirage.

It is therefore not my intention to criticize the delegation's action, but I have the desire to shout: look what we've come to! Look how far we've fallen! Look how deep we've sunk into the muck!

Times change. And since we have before us an entirely new world, an uglier, wormier, wilder, crueller one, we too are changing, adopting different concepts and methods of struggle.

Here's another little fact that demonstrates how different, how much uglier and wormier the world has become, and how forcefully we have been compelled to adapt to this world.

There was recently a vote in the Lodz city council in which the Bund<sup>1</sup> voted with all of the other Jewish councillors. That is to say, with the whole of Jewry, with the unkosher, thousand-times-cursed and mocked Jewry as a whole. And the Polish Socialist Party voted with the National Democrats, with the hard-line reactionaries, with the bloodthirsty antisemites.

What exactly happened here? Did a bolt of lightning strike the meeting hall and split the councillors into nationally unified groups? There was indeed a lightning bolt. However, it came not from outside, but from the mouth of a representative of Left *Po'ale Tsiyon*. He introduced a motion for city hall to hire Jewish seasonal workers according to a percentage to which the Jewish unemployed are entitled. All of the Jewish councillors, including the bourgeois ones, voted "yea," with the Bundists joining the general Jewish faction. Meanwhile, the Polish Socialist Party unabashedly voted "nay," along with the National Democrats.

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1 {Interwar Poland's largest diaspora-centred Jewish socialist party.}

After all, there is no need to be ashamed of such things in the year 1937! Even socialists are not ashamed to vote against the Jewish unemployed. Perhaps it is inevitable that Jewish students fast and Jewish leftist socialists request that the authorities protect Jewish lives.

Yes, times change! And how! You could just about lose your mind! And how urgently Jews adapt to the Christian trajectory, as though we have no life of our own, but only an echo of the life around us.

{Undated (1937)}

