



THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 2
THE PERMANENT POGROM, 1935-37

TRANSLATED
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<https://www.openbookpublishers.com/>

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Yankev Leshchinsky, *The Last Years of Polish Jewry. Volume 2: The Permanent Pogrom, 1935–37*. Edited by Robert Brym; translated by Robert Brym and Eli Jany. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0342>

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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-997-2

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-998-9

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-999-6

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-000-2

ISBN Digital ebook (HTML): 978-1-80511-003-3

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0342

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Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

11. Suicides

It would be wrong to claim that poverty severe enough to drive people to suicide and abandonment of children in the streets exists only among Jews in Poland. One can read about suicides of unemployed Poles every day in the Warsaw and Lodz newspapers. Not long ago, an unemployed Pole in Lodz killed his two children with an axe and then committed suicide. Everyone cried that this man was driven to desperation by hunger, and after he had freed himself of his worries for his two children, he himself left today's ugly, repulsive world with a sense of relief.

Here is a description from a Polish newspaper of the situation in the Vilna region: "The number of children attending school is constantly declining. The teachers report that most children come to school hungry. If the children are not given food, the schools will have to be shut. Many of the children are dressed in rags. Typhus is already present in many areas."

Here is a description of how the schoolchildren in Polesia (Pinsk region) received food donations sent from Kelts region: "A portion of bread, five pieces of pork, a glass of cocoa. The little diners tore into it like hungry puppies. The teacher excused them, saying that hungry children cannot be expected to be polite." According to the report, a typhus epidemic has broken out in the Polesian marshes. People here are swelling due to hunger.

One could fill hundreds of pages with such facts, not only about the rural population, but also about the urban unemployed. There is a Hebrew saying that collective misfortune is a partial consolation. From a political standpoint, this can be interpreted as meaning that the hungry non-Jewish stomach will eventually extend its hand to the hungry Jewish stomach, and they will link arms in a united front, redeeming the world from hunger and servitude.

And yet, there is something about the Jewish suicides that makes

them different. It can be very easily established that, among Jews, it is not those who are already hungry who commit suicide, but those who are frightened of the hunger to come. These people are weary not from prolonged hunger, but from struggling with the devil that is pushing them into the abyss, tearing the morsel from their mouths, psychologically tormenting them for so long that he exhausts all their emotional strength and turns them into playthings in the hands of dark thoughts and deceptive spectres. The Pole who commits suicide due to unemployment is *physically* depleted, while the Jewish boss who hangs himself in his *tallis* {prayer shawl} and *tefillin* {phylacteries} in a suite of several rooms is mentally exhausted. The former often commits suicide in a moment of despair, a moment of physical hunger. If he had found work that day, he would not have even thought about suicide and would have remained a healthy member of society. His soul is hardly disturbed or poisoned. The latter, the Jew, on the other hand, carries the thought of suicide around with him for months, often years. He lives in society for years as a sick, poisoned man, weary and despondent, and he poisons his entire environment, dispersing toxic bacilli and spreading existential dread and hopelessness.

This is the difference. The Christian suicide is a sign of poverty. The Jewish suicide is a sign of the sickness, fatigue, hopelessness, and mental depletion of an entire class of people, of a group. The suicide of an unemployed Pole is an individual phenomenon; the suicide of a Jewish boss who still has a maid in his home and whose daughters still wear furs, is a collective phenomenon, a sign of a disease that infects those around him. Of course, deep down in the soil, both phenomena emerge from a single root. However, remedies that are sufficient to prevent the despondent unemployed man from taking that step of desperation are nowhere near enough to save the Jewish boss from his step of resignation.

It is sufficient to give the unemployed Christian food for himself and his children, since he believes in the future and has not even begun to lose his faith in his class or his nation. The bourgeois Jew who hangs himself in his store because he has been twisting around for so long that the rope has ended up twisted around his neck has lost his faith in the future of his class. He does not need bread, and often still has plenty of it, but rather fresh courage, fresh conviction, and new living conditions

that could give him faith in a future.

Here we provide several facts from recent weeks:

Thirty-nine-year-old Aba Shtern hanged himself in his brother-in-law's store. Who is this Jewish man? Was he left with nothing to eat? Two years ago, he was a landlord. His property did not give him enough to live on, since taxes were high and not everybody paid their rent. He sold the house and opened a store dealing in electric light bulbs. His capital wavered, and so did his hope to begin earning rather than consuming his small savings. The former landlord was no longer paying rent and he was in danger of being evicted from his home. Shtern put an end to the struggles that had exhausted his nerves. He leaves behind a wife and two children.

Shloyme Kalmen Hornshteyn was sixty-eight years old. He was a member of all of Warsaw's Jewish charitable associations, a long-time supporter of Zionism, a highly respected and active communal leader, the father of a large family, a major entrepreneur, a longstanding purveyor of produce for the Polish army, and a generous supporter of the poor and of cultural institutions. This sixty-eight-year-old Jewish man, with a long beard, was found hanging in his house, wrapped in his *tallis*. On the table, on an open *siddur* {prayer book}, they found a letter in which he asked them to forgive him for taking this step; he "could not bear it any longer." On Friday morning, Hornshteyn began his prayers and sent his wife to the store to buy something. She returned to find her husband hanging in his *tallis*. Was there not enough to eat in the home? They were not that poor yet. But it had already been several years since they stopped giving Jews army contracts. People go running to them, begging, offering lower prices, often even receiving a promise, but in the end a Jew never gets an order. That is precisely what happened here. After months of chasing and even promises, they finally told him on 28 March 1936 that he would not be receiving a contract. His nerves could not endure this. He lost all hope of earning from his old line of work. At sixty-eight years old, it was a bit too late to start a new one, and he had no capital. So he said his final confession, wrapped himself in his *tallis*, and left the world voluntarily. This distinguished and universally respected man lies by the cemetery fence; that is what Jewish law decrees for suicides. His family's tears and pleas were of no use.

Thirty-one-year-old Hela Dizenhoiz came to the house that had once belonged to her parents and in which she had grown up, and threw herself from the fourth floor.

At 7 o'clock in the morning, people in the courtyard at number 44 Muranov Street heard a cry of "*Shma yisroel!*"¹ followed immediately by the heavy thud of a fall. In a pool of blood on the ground, with a cracked skull, lay fifty-five-year-old Yoysef Goldshteyn. They found a note tucked into a buttonhole of his kaftan saying that he was being evicted from his apartment.

We could go on and on listing such facts, but it is absolutely superfluous. The ones provided make the picture sufficiently clear. The Jewish middle class has its back against the wall due to the crisis of the government's antisemitic policy and the surrounding population's boycott. It is severely agitated by the antisemitic provocation and the ever-increasing uncertainty. It has lost its faith in a better future and in its own strength. The Jewish middle class has lost its equilibrium and contributes a large percentage of Jewish suicides.

That is not to say, however, that we do not have normal suicides, people who are fleeing physical hunger and saving themselves from death by starvation. Here are several more facts.

The entire courtyard at 3 Dzielna Street was so horrified by the heartrending cries that everyone came running. They saw Avrom Khentshiner, a Jewish man, hanging in the air, holding onto the sill of a fourth-floor window. From all the windows, people began tossing pillows and featherbeds to the ground, so that if the dangling man were to fall, he would not be killed. The neighbours who had come running dragged the man through the window and into the apartment. Avrom Khentshiner has a wife and two children. He is all of thirty-six years old. He is a broker by trade. He hangs around in front of Jewish clothing stores and "grabs" customers. If a miracle happens and a customer allows him to lead them into a store and goes on to buy something, the broker receives several *groszy*. He knows, however, that such miracles are happening ever less frequently. He has no hope of a better livelihood, so he tried to throw himself from the fourth floor.

Perl Zilber, a mother of four children, committed suicide because it had been weeks since her husband, an apartment broker, had brought home a *grosz*. Her home was cold and there was nothing left to eat. On

1 { "Hear, O Israel" are the first words of Judaism's central prayer, proclaiming the existence of one God, the God of the Jews. The Bible commands that the *Shma* be recited during morning and evening services and, traditionally, a Jew recites the *Shma* immediately before dying. }

top of this, there was the threat of being thrown out into the street. So she decided to put an end to it.

Thirty-five-year-old Moyshe Shnitser, a bag maker, hanged himself, leaving behind a wife and two children. His household had long been without bread since the sole earner was unemployed.

Freyde Shustokove was a widow, a mother of two children, ages four and six. She did the children's laundry, got them changed, kissed all their limbs, then left home and committed suicide.

A police officer arrived on Smocza Street to evict the Kats family from their apartment. Upon seeing the officer, the woman, Ite, cried out, "What do you want? You're ruining us!" She then lost consciousness and died on the spot.

Losing consciousness and dying on the spot has become a daily occurrence among Jews in Poland. Not a day goes by without a dead Jew being lifted off of the street. Jewish hearts are not able to bear the hunger, the misery, the worry, the terror, and the desperation.

At 22 Nowolipki Street, fifty-six-year-old Yankev Oybensvayg was found lying unconscious. He was taken to the Jewish hospital.

At the corner of Leszno and Rymarska, a thirty-year-old Jewish woman lost consciousness. It was confirmed that this was due to hunger.

In front of 31 Leszno Street, a sixteen-year-old Jewish girl was found unconscious. A doctor confirmed that she was exhausted due to hunger and cold.

Thirty-five-year-old Yisroel Zhema, from Ruzhany, was found lying unconscious on Nalevki Street. He was taken to the hospital.

In front of the main train station, a young Jewish man lost consciousness and died immediately. Based on a receipt from the tax office found in his pocket, it was established that his name was Henekh Mesing and that he came from Bzhezin {Brzheziny}.

An unknown Jewish man was picked up from the street, where he had lost consciousness. He died in the hospital. The doctors established hunger as the cause of death.

Sixty-three-year-old umbrella-maker Khaim Kenigshteyn lost consciousness by the door to his apartment and died immediately. He left behind a wife and three children.

Sixty-four-year-old Miryem Kaplan of 14 Twarda Street was standing and washing laundry. She suddenly collapsed and died. She left behind a husband and four children.

Twenty-six-year-old Sore Grinberg, an unemployed and homeless woman, lost consciousness in the middle of the street. A doctor established that she had collapsed due to hunger.

At the corner of Muranowska and Nalevki, ten-year-old Moyshe Goldman from Lekov {Łuków} was found lying unconscious.

We have provided here only the facts from Warsaw, and only for the past several days.

We have listed cases of fainting due to hunger. However, in recent times, a new type of heartbreak has also emerged. I have previously described the anguish and suffering of Jewish street merchants who are chased by police officers and persecuted by undercover agents. Just recently, such an incident occurred. A woman named Dine Kalber was standing with a basket of oranges. All of a sudden, someone shouted that a police officer was coming. The woman lost consciousness and had to be taken to the hospital.

Another few words about the epidemic of abandoning children—not infants, but two-year-olds, four-year-olds, six-year-olds, and eight-year-olds.

A boy of two years was found in front of the building at 4 Bonifraterska. In a note pinned to the child, his mother wrote in Yiddish and Polish that the child's father is dead and that his mother is starving and unable to look after him. She asked for merciful people to take pity on the child and raise him.

That same day, a Jewish child was found on Parisowski Square with a letter from the mother explaining that she had no choice but to abandon her child on the street since her apartment was cold and there was no food for the child.

At 29 Senatorska Street, a Jewish woman abandoned a child with a note in which she wrote, "I had to do this... Kind people, take pity and give the child food!"

Two boys were found in the gateway of 6 Niska Street, dressed in tatters and severely malnourished. They absolutely refused to say their names and where their parents lived. They were taken to the Jewish orphanage.

This is the appearance of the "Jewish street" in Poland, besieged by Polish antisemites and handed over as a bonus to the Polish masses so long as they drive out the Jews.

18 February 1936