



THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY  
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 2  
THE PERMANENT POGROM, 1935-37

TRANSLATED  
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## 12. Is emigration a solution?

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I will never forget this picture: a tall man, around thirty years old or a little older, with a lean, weary face, walks along slowly, carrying a sign: "I am looking for work! It has been three years since I graduated from the legal faculty!"

I witnessed this scene today, 26 May 1936, on one of Warsaw's main streets. The man was, of course, a Pole. The passers-by shook their heads sympathetically, but nevertheless allowed the man with the sign to carry on walking. Everyone hurried their own way to fight for their piece of bread, to struggle for physical existence.

Here we have some news from Lodz: "The hunger strike of the sixteen men who barricaded themselves in the military volunteers' hall has been interrupted." What kind of a strike is this? And who are the strikers? Sixteen former military volunteers from the Polish army who had been unemployed for years entered the military volunteers' hall, declared a hunger strike, and indeed sat there for sixty hours without a drink of water or a bite of bread. The police eventually ejected them from the hall by force. Several of them fainted due to weakness. Will they get work now? We will have to wait and see.

These two examples are, unfortunately, not exceptions. They are eminently typical of the situation in Poland. They reflect most sharply the true situation in this country, the truly desperate situation of millions of people.

It is true, of course, that for every hungry Polish intellectual we can present ten Jewish ones, since the Poles still become judges, prosecutors, and clerks, and are also preferentially hired in state syndicates as well as private firms, while the young Jewish man who graduates law school must wait for private clients, and the competition is so great that he takes a mere half dollar for providing counsel. It is also true that the hungry Jewish lawyer would absolutely not have the audacity to go into the

street with such an eye-catching sign, since it is certain that hooligans would beat him and the police would arrest him at once. It is true, too, that the percentage of hungry people among the Jewish masses is much greater in Palestine and in the Vilna region than among peasants in the countryside, where the situation is desperate. And it is true that the government thinks, *must* think, about those unfortunate peasants and will eventually have to quell their hunger. Meanwhile, it thinks about the hungry Jewish masses as well, but from an entirely different angle: how can we be rid of them as soon as possible? How can we force them to pack up their measly bags and clear out?

I agree, of course, that our hungry intellectuals and masses have absolutely the same moral and legal rights as Poles to be helped by Poland. I also believe with certainty that there will come a day when these hungry people will shake hands as brothers and put an end to this hell.

All of this, however, is only a political program, a propaganda program, a program of promises and hope. It is fine for those who believe that tomorrow or the day after, the socialist messiah will arrive and redeem everyone. But what if the messiah is a few decades late? Bitter reality has taught us well that he is capable of playing dirty tricks. Austria, Germany, and Italy are countries with large and powerful workers' movements. And yet the messiah refused to come, sending the devil in his place. And a devil does not readily cede the position he has captured. So if the messiah arrives late, if he does not hop on his donkey right away, what will happen then?

Then we must think seriously about an economic program for the hungry masses, about providing immediate help, help for tomorrow and the day after, and perhaps even for the day after that. If one takes this down-to-earth, concrete, realistic approach to the issues of Jewish life in Poland, rather than floating in the clouds or drowning out one's own logic and conscience with slogans and catchy calls to action, one reaches entirely different conclusions. If things are bitter for the surrounding population, they will be bitter and dark for us; if things are bitter and dark for the surrounding population, we will be buried six feet under, and perhaps even deeper.

From this standpoint, we must attend far more seriously and honestly to Polish voices that speak of emigration. It is not enough to shout the

refrain that we are and feel ourselves to be equal citizens of Poland with equal rights, that all we demand of Polish non-antisemitic society is help in our fight for our rights, that we are not asking for advice about emigration and colonization, about Zionism and Territorialism. Of course, until they acknowledge the first part, our right to equal rights, they do not have a sufficiently clean moral conscience to speak about emigration. However, our task should entail not discrediting or mocking them, but rather uncovering the truth. Our truth consists of the fact that both fronts are equally important, that in the same years when Jews were fighting among the revolutionary ranks in Russia, they sent 150,000 Jews to America annually. There will be enough Jews for both a new, free Poland, and a new centre of immigration.

There is a conservative newspaper in Poland called *Czas*. It is far from an antisemitic paper. It combats hooliganism and regularly strives to say an impartial word regarding the Jewish question. Although we may have more than enough grievances against this almost non-antisemitic newspaper, we must nevertheless admit that it is a rare phenomenon on the Polish front. In the chorus of gnashing teeth, waving fists, and aggressive shouts that Jews are ruining Poland and the Polish nation, the tone of this conservative newspaper is more or less tolerable. From time to time, it is worthwhile to listen to this opponent.

This newspaper published three articles about the Jewish question. The point of departure was as follows: Without antisemitic agitation, without provocation, and without the pogrom atmosphere, the situation of the broad Jewish masses would still grow ever more catastrophic with each passing day. The newspaper paints a picture of the severity of rural poverty, the high rate of natural increase of the rural population, and the consequent intense drive of rural residents to move into small towns. The newspaper describes what we already see with our own eyes. The rural population is rushing with elemental force into retail in the villages and towns, as well as into artisanry and so-called *chatupnictwo* {cottage industry}, that is, work for businesses that is completed at home.

The newspaper believes that Jews are indeed stronger in terms of capital, experience, and knowledge, but the Polish population will nevertheless be victorious. This is especially so when it encounters "such fertile soil as the current antisemitic mood, the numerous examples from abroad, and political propaganda from several political directions."

While Jewish retailers and artisans are inundated by this rural wave

consisting of poor peasants and the children of well-to-do peasants who have nothing to do in the village, Jewish mid-sized merchants and the Jewish liberal professions (doctors, lawyers, engineers, and so on) are in no less danger. Impoverished noblemen, children of fallen landowners, children of wealthy peasants who have received higher or mid-level education—all these people will surge into the Jewish domains of mid-sized commerce, medicine, law, and all the other higher urban professions.

Even if the government renounces the state policy it has followed until now and starts abolishing state factories and state commerce, it will bring little relief to the Jewish masses. That is because those dismissed from state enterprises will rush into private commerce, and into the private economy in general. These are, after all, people who have had excellent preparation, and they will therefore be even more formidable competitors. The aforementioned groups, which are at a higher cultural level and possess more capital, will also become strong competitors in large-scale commerce, industry, banking, and to an extreme degree in the liberal professions.

This picture that the newspaper paints for us is, alas, no vision of the future. It is the current sad reality. It only serves to confirm my opinion, which I have expressed in my articles in the *Forverts* more than once: antisemitism in Poland is not organized from the top down, but rather rises from the bottom up. It bears the character of a mass movement and it travels from the stomach to the head.

*Czas* concludes that the economic situation of the Jewish masses will inevitably become far worse, far more dangerous and catastrophic. "The Jewish population is in danger of starvation in the literal sense of the word," the newspaper concludes. The word "danger" ought to be deleted, since a very large percentage of the Jewish population in Poland is already starving, and the portion that is not starving senses that it is approaching that abyss of poverty with giant steps.

Where is the way out? The newspaper rejects all the hooligans' solutions and methods, all the remedies based on putting holes in skulls and banishing Jews. The newspaper sees emigration as the only remedy. It even understands that three million Jews cannot and will not emigrate, and it agrees that a portion of Jews will remain in Poland. At the same time, it does not say a single word about how the Jews who remain in Poland are to live or whether they will be treated like citizens with equal rights. In my opinion, it is of little interest to us what

kind of future this Polish newspaper imagines for the Jews remaining in Poland. After all, we have no doubt that millions of Jews will remain in Poland and that we will have to fight for the masses to have full rights. The Jewish masses are sufficiently politically mature. Bitter experience is a good political teacher, especially when the Jewish masses have no trouble wrapping their heads around revolutionary ideas. That is not to say, of course, that we ought to shut the revolutionary prayer book and sit waiting until the Polish masses catch up to us. Political struggle cannot withstand any interruptions, waiting, or despair.

The danger is of an entirely different kind: we must not overestimate the value of the political struggle and entirely abandon the struggle for new jobs. And emigration must remain a prominent goal. We can see from experience that the millions of Jews who have emigrated from Eastern Europe in the last fifty years are living better lives than those who stayed put. I believe that American Jews, although they live in a bourgeois order, would nevertheless be unwilling to change places with the Jews of the Soviet Union. Jews have emigrated and continue to emigrate from Eastern Europe to more than sixty countries in all parts of the world. From everywhere—from America and Australia, from Asia and Africa, absolutely everywhere in the word—they send support to Eastern Europe. It is difficult to imagine the situation of the millions of Jews in Eastern Europe without the support of Jewish islands that have been planted in all corners of the world over the last fifty years.

We can learn from this that we Jews have no reason to fear emigration. Thus far, emigration has always played a positive and productive role in our lives. There is as much happiness to be found in the most distant lands as there is in Poland or Romania. The Jewish masses do not quibble; as many of them as possible set off for any possible destination. Over the last ten years, new Jewish colonies have emerged in the countries of South and Central America where there were previously only handfuls of Jews. These colonies are growing. People are already bringing over their relatives. Now German Jews, who have more capital, more technical education, and more courage to set off on lengthy journeys, have established new colonies in additional new countries. And one Jew sticks to others, so more people set off.

There is therefore no reason to be frightened when a Polish newspaper speaks of emigration. We must not respond by considering

the word “emigration” non-kosher and declaring every conversation about it harmful.

After all, Poles frequently think about and discuss emigration possibilities for pure Poles too. They often repeat that it is a misfortune for Poland that the emigration of Polish peasants to America, Argentina, Germany, and France has been halted.

10 June 1936