



THE LAST YEARS OF POLISH JEWRY  
BY YANKEV LESHCHINSKY

VOLUME 2  
THE PERMANENT POGROM, 1935-37

TRANSLATED  
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## 13. Jews flee Poland

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I do not want to be misunderstood or misinterpreted. I never wrote or said that Polish Jews *must* emigrate. That would be ludicrous and criminal. There is not a single party or responsible person in Poland who would say something so foolish and harmful. I am not counting the Revisionists and their leaders, who spout off phrases and shoot out empty slogans but are incapable of responsibility.

I did, however, say the following, and I will shout it a thousand times at the top of my lungs without growing tired: for Polish Jews, the emigration of 50,000 or 60,000 Jews a year is as necessary as air to breathe, as water in a desert, as bread to live on. This is a minimum, a number that holds out at least the possibility of staving off hunger.

It follows that 100,000 emigrants a year would be a great joy, a salvation. In ten years, even if no political changes transpired in Poland, this would radically improve the situation of the Jewish masses.

In the first case, emigration would remove the entire natural population increase plus an additional 10–20,000 people. We consider this a minimum because the entire generation currently coming of age has absolutely nothing to turn to. It is easy to say that we must stay strong, fight for equal rights in all domains, struggle for a new order in which everyone's needs will be met. But what are we to do with the 40–50,000 young Jewish men and women each year who turn twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two years old with absolutely no employment options? They want to live now, eat now, get married now, have clothes now. What are we to do with these tens of thousands who begin their life each year without a foundation, without support, without hope, without prospects? They are indeed taking part in the political struggle for rights. They are indeed contributing enough fighters for a new social order. However, one cannot live on political hopes alone. For that reason, thousands of Jews are rushing to all corners of the world, setting off

on the most dangerous paths, literally risking their lives and searching. They find less than they hope to and even less than they need, but they find something.

Over the last fifteen years, up to 50,000 Polish, Romanian, and Lithuanian Jews have immigrated to entirely new, unknown countries like Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Venezuela, Colombia, and others. These were true pioneers who had no concept of these countries, their inhabitants, or their living conditions. They nevertheless set off for these distant and unfamiliar lands. And they do not regret it! Returnees are unheard of. To the contrary, one hears about emigrants bringing over their families and relatives, sending support back home, building a better and richer and more secure life in these far-flung new homes.

These pioneers who did not want to and could not wait for the messiah, for revolutions and upheavals, have achieved something for themselves and for all Polish Jews. After all, the political struggle of the Jewish masses here, which must be carried out, was not weakened one iota through the departure of these several tens of thousands of Jews. It was not even weakened by the departure in the last fifteen years of more than 200,000 Jews to Palestine and America. These 300–350,000 Jews who emigrated from Poland in the last fifteen years did not weaken political activity among the Jewish masses one bit. It is impossible to overestimate, however, how much they eased economic hardship in Poland. Their assistance for those who remain has saved tens of thousands of people from hunger.

Everyone is jealous of the emigrants. Everyone looks at them as though they are lucky, as though they are saved. Why is everyone jealous? Because the Zionists preach that they ought to immigrate to Palestine? Because the Zionists promise to build the Jews their own state? Because people like the writer of these lines believe that immigration is an undeniably important factor in Jewish life? No! There are far more important reasons, reasons that flog like iron whips, drive people to the end of the world, chase after them and force them to run, and drown out all clever propaganda and sage advice. Here they are:

In the village of Sandinyev (not far from Kelts), tens of thousands of peasants recently convened for a religious holiday. Jewish as well as non-Jewish merchants came and set up stalls, but before the Jews had even unpacked their merchandise, they heard shouts: "Poland for Poles!

Down with Jews!” The Jews immediately left the village.

The antisemitic newspaper that published this news was very pleased. Above all, it was pleased that the Jews did not resist and instead immediately ran away. They spared the Endeks the work of a pogrom. True, the Endeks are not lazy, and taking a knife to a Jew is a real delight for them, but for the leaders of this party, every pogrom is associated with unpleasanties. Thus, they are happy that they managed to achieve victory without a pogrom.

Politically speaking, this was certainly harmful. We must fight for every job, for the smallest rights, and, more than anything, for the right to live. After all, the right to do business is equivalent to the right to live. However, I would like to see the courageous Jewish revolutionary show up at this market, rather than sitting in the editorial office, writing that we must not surrender, we must not allow ourselves to be driven off, we must fight for the right to live. I would like to see this revolutionary, in the presence of thousands of agitated and provoked peasants, give a speech and demand that the escaping Jewish merchants unpack their merchandise and do business. For the time being, there are no such revolutionaries. We must remember: Why did these Jews clear out so quickly? Because they knew very well that Jews from Phsitik, Adzhival, Pshiskh {Przysucha}, and Adzhivilav and tens of other towns resisted, did not give in, did not allow themselves to be driven off, and they received blows and strikes from knives and clubs, to the point of pogroms—yet in the end they had to surrender.

In their hearts, they did not surrender. They remained deeply offended by the injustice, and as soon as they have an opportunity, they will take revenge against the true perpetrators of these pogroms and expulsions. But what did they do? What did they have to do from a practical standpoint? Should they have sat and waited until the Polish peasants and workers understood the true causes of all suffering? Should they have raised their hungry children with courage and the desire to fight hidden deep in their hearts? Should they themselves have been satisfied with the feeling of offense and the holy rage of revenge against the instigators and pogromists? Who will have the courage to propose *that* kind of pogrom?

Jews indeed carry in their hearts not only sorrow, but also rage. Not only resentment, but also the desire to fight. However, in the meantime,

they wander in all directions in search of a livelihood, sustenance, employment for their children, and a secure place for themselves and their families. They do not run just to Lodz and Warsaw and the nearest large cities. They search for cracks through which they can push their way into Palestine, America, Brazil, Mexico, Paraguay, France, Belgium, Chile, Uruguay, Spain, Portugal, Egypt, and tens of other old and new, well-known and unknown, near and distant countries and lands.

There are millions of poor and desperately poor Polish peasants, workers, and people who have fallen in class status. If there were open gates to the United States, Canada, Argentina, France, or Belgium, they would have emigrated with joy and jubilation. There are millions of Ukrainians and Belarusians who are even poorer, unhappier, and hungrier. If the countries just listed, which are well-known and have already long been settled by large masses of people from these nations, were open, people would run there as though to paradise. However, the doors to these paradise countries are bolted and locked. So, they stay home; they do not try their luck in Venezuela and Colombia, Paraguay and Uruguay, Chile and Peru. Recently, 30–40,000 Poles have even returned each year from France and Belgium, pushing their way back into the hungry villages and languishing cities. These returnees with a bit of capital, with open eyes, with lively souls, with sharper elbows, are becoming the most dangerous competitors for Jewish retailers and artisans.

There are no Jewish returnees. Thousands of young Jewish men wander around Paris without a card giving them the right to work. They work under the table for half wages, scared of being caught and deported. They serve time in prison, as long as they do not have to return to Poland. When they no longer have any other choice and they must leave, they travel through tens of countries, begging and wracked with shame. They drag themselves from city to city, from country to country, and often from continent to continent, as long as they do not have to return to Poland. I know a case of a twenty-year-old Jewish man who travelled through eighteen countries and in the end still wound up getting hurled back into cursed Poland. Here, he was forced to try to sell neckties at the market, pulling at the coattails of every passer-by and selling a tie to one in a hundred, in fear of a different police officer every five minutes, having to hide himself in a nearby courtyard. I can assure

you that this twenty-year-old migrant was far from the worst off. He was a qualified weaver, a conscious, developed boy, an entirely normal and healthy person, who could not extend his hand for a donation, but in order not to starve to death or throw himself into the river he learned—*had* to learn—to acquire support from the Jewish communities in more than a score of cities.

Why do poor Poles return to their poor, miserable home, while Jews run from this old home to all corners of the world, to unfamiliar climates, to the wildest places, as long as they can get away, as long as they can escape from hell?

Because in Minsk-Mazovietsk where, during a pogrom, they burned a Jewish stall and the Jewish community had to pay six *zloty* to clean up the embers, there is now a new stall, and the proprietor is the daughter of the local postal clerk—a Christian, of course.

What is the Jew who left Minsk-Mazovietsk, whose hopes for a livelihood in the city where he was born and raised were burned down along with that stall, supposed to do? Should he think about changing the political regime, or should he look for a livelihood in another city, or even in another country? Should he be ashamed that he is ceding a position and surrendering to pogromists, or should he exercise all of his Jewish strength, summon all of his inheritance of wandering, awaken all of his enormous capabilities and set out for unfamiliar worlds to seek a nest for his children? And should his teenage children sit there and wait until the Polish working class gains consciousness and the Polish peasants' minds open and they put an end to the pogroms and the Jews help them revolutionize the ugly, rotten world? Or should they follow the cry of their healthy human instincts and head to Palestine, to Birobidzhan, and even to the end of the earth, as long as they can build a new life, an independent life?

In reality, the three or four or five children of a ruined Jew like this, or a candidate for ruination, are distributed among several camps. The pathologically zealous, impatient one who has absorbed all of the desperate hatred toward the current rotten capitalistic order, who seethes and boils with hatred and impatience, turns to the Communists. To find footing on more solid terrain than the Jewish environment offers, he throws himself into the Belarusian or Ukrainian Communist Party. With fanatical obstinacy and truly insane fanaticism, he speaks only

Belarusian or Ukrainian in court and receives an extra couple of years in prison beyond the usual eight, and a couple of dozen bonus beatings on top of the usual ones.

He burns more with hatred for the old world than with love for the new one. The overturning of the old world is more important to him than the creation of the new one. Even Birobidzhan is appealing to him more out of spite for Zionism than for the positive aspect of its independent statehood.

His brother is also a fervent character, also with hatred toward the old order, but with immense scorn for Jewish trade, Jewish landlessness, Jewish status as intermediaries in economic and intellectual life, and Jewish in-betweenness and dependence even when it comes to starting a revolution. He has an enormous yearning for wholeness, selfhood, independence, creativity, security, and rootedness and is simultaneously laden with the full baggage of many generations' dreams and longing for redemption and the coming of the Messiah. This Jewish youth goes to the kibbutz, chops wood while singing, and lugs wooden beams with delight. Work and redemption become his gods, social and national salvation become the motors of his life, and he rushes to Palestine to build and create, and if necessary, also to die.

The third child is the calm, brainy, cooler-headed, conservative, sensible, realistic, dependent, earthbound, unimaginative, less self-sacrificing, gradualist, theory-bound one, the revolutionary inheritor of Jewish prudence and nationalism. This youth joins the Bund, which is so rich in foreign inheritance and so poor in our own, which wants to rebuild without revolutionizing, which wants to be brought to paradise rather than entering by force, which wants another world, a better one, but not an entirely new one, which out of all the Jewish cultural treasures from a thousand years recalls only one verse: "I do not wish to go free."<sup>1</sup> I do not want my own land. I do not want to leave exile.

Aside from these three, our ruined Jew from Minsk-Mazovietsk has another few children. A couple of them head to all corners of the world simply to seek a livelihood and sustenance. Who would cast a stone at them? Who would declare them traitors or cowards? And who would say that we have no need to care about them, no need to try to make their individual efforts of use to the community as a whole? Who would

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1 {Exodus 21:5.}



claim that these ordinary Jews are stepchildren?

Living the hellish life of the Jewish masses here in Poland, one cannot say that we ought not to speak about emigration and that we ought only to explain to the Polish government that we live in Poland and will remain in Poland.

After all, what are the Jews of Pshitik supposed to do when, following the pogrom and the fine judgement in Radom, they received the “gift” of having their fair moved from Pshitik to a nearby village? As a result, several hundred Jewish families are left without sustenance, without hope of earnings, with no prospects of living in Pshitik. Should those few hundred Jewish families wait until the Polish messiah arrives and redeems them? Should they occupy themselves with political agitation, or seek the money to flee? And if we tell them a thousand times that fleeing is shameful and politically harmful, and, in any case, three million Jews cannot and will not leave, are they going to listen to us? Will they not look at us like crazy people, like people with their heads in the clouds who are unable to feel this hell on earth?

As I was finishing this article, I received news that a fresh pogrom had taken place yesterday, 2 July, in Dzhezdzgov {Dzierzgowo}, near Prashnits {Przasnysz}, with more than twenty wounded. It was during the fair and the Endek hooligans were exhorting people not to buy from Jews. The atmosphere was tense. Honest Christians advised the Jews to pack up their goods and leave while there was still time. However, the Jews were in no rush to leave, since they still had to live, still had to eat. If they did not earn, they would have no food. They held out until around 3 o'clock. Right when the Jews were starting to pack up, they attacked them with stones, clubs, and knives, beating and stabbing them. They seriously wounded a Jewish girl named Kirshenboym with a knife. Two Christians were also wounded, not by Jews, but because they were mistaken for Jews. The police force, which consisted of a total of three men, did nothing.

What should we say to the Jews of Prashnits who lived through a fair like this? That they should keep on going to the fairs anyway? And how could we stop them from thinking about emigration, from gathering the last of their strength and energy and trying to escape somewhere?

If the Jews of Prashnits, Pshitik, Minsk-Mazovietsk, Pshiskh, and Adzhival, along with many others, are thinking about emigration, then

Jewish society must also concern itself with emigration.

This does not mean, however, that all Polish Jews can and will emigrate. Millions of Jews must and will remain in Poland and they must therefore fight with all their might for full equality. Emigration is only a medicine to ease the patient's condition, to preserve his health for better times, and to refresh his strength, which is on the verge of depletion. One cannot live on medicine alone, but without it one might die.

25 July 1936