

NOTES, COMMENTARIES AND REPORTS

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BOUND BY HISTORY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO POLISH-JEWISH RELATIONS

Inter-ethnic relations, in majority vs. minority terms, are an extremely complex subject, almost always topical, with social and often also political resonance. It requires from researchers, not only those professionally involved in science, pardon this platitude, appropriate substantive background, often very specialised (which can be reduced to having insightful knowledge in a particular era or type of mutual relations), and at the same time characterised by far-reaching sensitivity and empathy. The efforts to undertake in-depth scientific reflection, expressed as, among others, the principle of maintaining objectivity, are generally accompanied by a certain amount of emotions. They come to light when one enters the realm of the experiences of the members of groups subjected to some sort of discrimination or pushed – by means of more sophisticated and veiled methods – to the margins of social life; I am referring to communities generally considered minorities which were (and sometimes still are) an integral part of many countries, regions, cities and villages, who creatively found

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themselves within them, only to become absent or almost relict in such places, usually through no fault of their own.

In Poland, Jews were one of the minorities that for centuries have had complex, albeit unequal, relations with the populous, politically and culturally dominant nation, whose broadly defined interests were guarded by the rulers of that country. Pushed aside to the margins of social life – with different dynamics, and often selectively, depending on the historical period – with the order to occupy and organise specific parts of space, not always according to their own needs, they were met by those in power with relative respect for their cultural differences. The result of such an attitude was a fairly unhindered material existence of the followers of Judaism and a certain freedom for them to practise religious worship. As a result of such an arrangement of relations, after several centuries, the largest concentration of the Jewish nation in the world formed in Poland, being at the same time the most intellectually and culturally creative of all (Rykała, 2018, p. 94; 2020, p. 9). This legacy was turned into rubble in the mid-20th century by the Third Reich's extermination efforts. It consumed the lives of 3 million Polish Jews (about 90% of the total population) (Adelson, 1993, p. 387; Cała and Dąbner-Śpiewak, 1997, p. 9; Rykała, 2007, p. 17; Eberhardt, 2010, p. 93, 107, 110). As a result of these barbaric acts, the unique material and spiritual legacy of the Jewish people on Polish soil was also irretrievably destroyed.

Although the main culprits of this unprecedented extermination – which exceeded the horizon of human experience to date – were the “unruly Nazi bandits”¹, one cannot ignore the “Polish «neighbours», who hunted Jews, sometimes with no less ferocity” (Rykała, 2020, p. 18). The anti-Semitic violence committed by a section of Polish society during the Second World War and immediately afterwards was a function of the continuity of anti-Jewish attitudes and sentiments which existed at least since the 1930s, strengthened by the occupant's legal system and by the massive anti-Semitic Nazi propaganda. As Alina Cała (2014, p. 27) stated ethnic cleansing, which began with the deportations conducted by the Nazis and culminating in the 1968 expulsion of Jews from Poland, occurred on Polish soil.

Various dimensions and shades of Polish-Jewish relations, which started generally in the 16th and ending in the 20th century, were discussed in a multi-year interdisciplinary research project launched in 2018, financed by the Minister of Culture and National Heritage (MKiDN) within the framework of the NIE-PODLEGŁA (INDEPENDENT) Multiannual Programme for 2017–2022. A grant with the full title: *Bound by history. Polish-Jewish relations on Polish soil*, is led by prof. Anna Landau-Czajka, a historian and sociologist at the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History, Polish Academy of Sciences. “We mean to present,” the project's head explains, “both cooperation and rivalry or conflicts, and the differ-

¹ A term taken from the proclamation “Almost all of Poland is free”. Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute (JHI), Central Committee of Jews in Poland, bureau and agency, ref. 303/1/7.

ent dimensions of coexistence between representatives of two nationalities on Polish soil throughout history².” Despite the broad time span of the issues discussed, it is anticipated that the bulk of the deliberations will be devoted to the inter-war period and the Second World War. The project will be followed by the publication of several monographs and a series of volumes edited by researchers specialising in the issues of mutual relations between the two nations.

The project had a symbolic inauguration – a kind of an opening ceremony. It took the form of a conference having the same title as the whole research project. It was held on 16 November 2018 at the E. Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. The choice of the venue was no accident. This institution, with great accomplishments for Polish science and culture, and an unquestionable status as the most important institution in the field of research into the history of Polish Jews and promotion of the material and spiritual achievements of this minority, is one of the project partners, along with the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Jagiellonian University, the Institute of Sociological Sciences and Pedagogy of the Warsaw University of Life Sciences, and the Department of Social History of the 19th and 20th Centuries of the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

The conference was the first stage in the implementation of a project intended to progress, as mentioned, over several years. The main idea of this meeting was to present the basic assumptions of the grant and to create a forum for the presentation of short speeches presenting the research problems planned by the speakers in the coming year. The conference was divided into 6 thematic panels, which were intended to correspond to later monograph volumes. The research problems discussed during speeches were to be reflected in the form of chapters comprising individual published items.

The first session, entitled “Cities and Towns”, discussed, among others, the antagonisms and connections between Jews, townsmen and nobility in Warsaw in the 17th–18th centuries (discussed by Paweł Fijałkowski), the perception of Jews from the perspective of the Polish landowner’s manor in the 19th and 20th centuries (Tadeusz Epsztein), the planes of cooperation and conflicts in the rural environment of interwar Poland (Sławomir Mańko), the attitude of Vilnius Jews in the years 1918–1922 towards their affinity to Poland or Lithuania (Paweł Rokicki), or the Christian-Jewish criminal world – under a very telling title: “Between a safecracker and a pimp” – in interwar Warsaw, using the example of Ostrowska Street (Mateusz Rodak).

During the panel “Power and Politics”, chaired by the director of the Jewish Historical Institute, Paweł Śpiwak, the lecturers outlined similarly diverse research plans as those presented in the session devoted to cities. This multithreaded landscape consisted of proposals for research relating to, e.g.: the situation of the Jew-

² Excerpt from Anna Landau-Czajka’s speech at the inauguration of the conference “Bound by history. Polish-Jewish relations on Polish soil” 16 November 2018 (author’s note).

ish soldiers interned in Jabłonna in the Battle of Warsaw of 1920 (discussion by Christhardt Henschel), the participation of Jews in the Krakow City Council in the 19th century (Hanna Koziańska-Witt), the issue of the block of three nationalities (Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian) in the city council in the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic (Wacław Wierzbieniec), the Jewish Religious Self-Government in the same period (Rafał Żebrowski), the area of cooperation between Polish and Jewish youth within communist organisations (Sandra Tomczak), and the activities of the Special Commission (Jewish Self-Defense) after the Second World War, with particular emphasis on Łódź and the Łódź region (Andrzej Rykała).

The Polish-Jewish relations, which were the main cause for establishing one's own (para)military formations just after the war, as discussed in the last lecture, were presented, this time in an extremely tragic dimension, also in the next panel, entitled The Holocaust. It could only be devoted to this unprecedented genocide in the world history. During this session, the participants discussed, e.g. the activities of Polish tax collectors towards the inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto (a sketch presented by Marta Janczewska), the denunciation of Jews and how they were blackmailed in occupied Krakow (Martyna Grądzka-Rejak), the reactions of the Polish Socialist Party activists in the Krakow district to the extermination of the Jewish population (Katarzyna Kocik), and the attitudes of the Polish population in the Lublin district towards the consequences of the extermination of Jews in the years 1943–1944 (Janusz Kłapeć).

The forum in the form of a separate panel was also made available to speakers specialising in economic issues. During the speeches (and discussions) under the "Economy and professional environments" title, *scenarios* of potential studies (subject, scope, often also methodological assumptions) were outlined. The future authors made the following issues the objects of their research: Jewish printers active in Lublin in the 16th and 17th centuries (presented by Magdalena Bendowska), Polish-Jewish advocacy circles (Izabela Mrzygłód), mathematical circles (Wiesław Wójcik), trade unions (Magdalena Kozłowska), including filmmakers (Katarzyna Czajka-Kominiarczuk), and cooperative circles (Piotr Kendziorek) in Poland during the interwar period.

The publishing plans also recognise, in the form of a separate volume, the sphere of culture in the broadest sense of the word, which is extremely important for maintaining the national and religious identity of Jews. Its manifestations examined by speakers and potential authors. The topics included, among others, the anti-Semitic depictions in selected old-Polish leaflets (Marta Wojas), the presentation of peasants as a collective character in humorous and satirical creations in the Jewish press in the interwar period (Agnieszka Żółkiewska), the mythologisation of B'nai Brith's activity in the Polish anti-Semitic and nationalist press (Larysa Michalska), Polish-Jewish relations in the light of the memories of Yiddish writers who survived in the USSR using the example of the work of Awrom Zak (Magdalena Ruta), and the relations between these communities in contemporary Polish literature for children about the Holocaust (Krzysztof Rybak).

During the conference, there were two curatorial tours by Dr Agnieszka Żółkiewska (JHI) of the temporary exhibition *Free Bird/Der Frajer Fojgl*³. *Caricature in the Jewish press in independent Poland* (Fig. 1). It has been the first and largest exhibition of satirical drawings published in the Jewish press to date (between 1919 and 1939), both in Yiddish and in Polish. It presents an extensive collection of drawings showing the political, social and moral problems which Polish Jews faced during the interwar period. The drawings, despite their humorous overtones, formed a poignant tale of the highlights and shadows of the life of the Jewish community in the twenty years' period prior to the turning of the “most tragic page in the history of the Jewish people,”⁴ i.e. the Holocaust.

The authors of the drawings presented at the exhibition were artists gifted with an extraordinary talent and a sense of humour that matched it: Jakub Bickels, Szaja Fajgenbojm, Samuel Finkelstein, Chaim Goldberg, Fryderyk Kleinman, Artur Szyk, Ignacy Witz and other, sometimes anonymous, cartoonists. Many died during the Shoah, leaving behind, often as their only memento, the works displayed in the exhibition.



Fig. 1. Poster for the exhibition of caricatures from the Jewish press in independent Poland

Source: E. Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

³ The title was taken from the masthead of one of the first satirical weeklies “Der Frajer Fojgel”. The graphic sign of the magazine referred to the symbol of the independent Polish state – the White Eagle.

⁴ The phrase comes from a report by F. Friedman, the director of the Central Jewish Historical Commission, which operated after the Second World War. Archive of the JHI, Central Jewish Historical Commission, ref. 303/XX/37.

The exhibition was followed by a bilingual (Polish-English) album with satirical drawings published in the Jewish press in 1919–1939, compiled by Agnieszka Żółkiewska (Fig. 2–3).



Fig. 2–3. The *Wolny Ptak/Der Frajer Fojgl. Humor z prasy żydowskiej w Polsce niepodległej* album, edited by Agnieszka Żółkiewska (Warsaw, 2019).

Source: phot. by A. Rykała.

Most of the plans and research drafts presented at the November conference were developed in the form of extensive papers in the following year. On 20–22 November 2019, once again in Warsaw, the JHI held another scientific conference entitled “Bound by history. Polish-Jewish relations on Polish soil.” Its title was therefore identical to the previous one and coincided with the topic of the research project, under way at that time. However, the list of participants did not exactly

match that of the previous year. Minor differences also could be found in the topics of individual panels and a thematically diverse opening session during the second grant meeting. This part, chaired by Paweł Śpiewak, the director of the Jewish Historical Institute, was devoted to some of the issues already discussed the previous year, namely the interwar Christian-Jewish criminal world of Warsaw (Mateusz Rodak), and Jewish self-defence after the Shoah (Andrzej Rykała), as well as, for the first time, the activities of Jewish envoys during the Sejm meetings of the Republic of Poland in the 16th–18th century (Anna Michałowska-Mycielska), and the attitudes of rabbis towards the Second Polish Republic (Jolanta Żyndul).

The other panellists presented in the following thematic sessions: (i) Holocaust – e.g. Alicja Jarkowska-Natkaniec discussed the subject of blackmailers and informers in Krakow during the Second World War; Justyna Majewska examined the exchange of flats between Poles and Jews during the creation of ghettos on selected examples from cities in occupied Poland; Michał Grochowski researched Polish-Jewish smuggling companies and their participation in supplying the Warsaw Ghetto; Maria Sławek traced the Holocaust theme in the compositional work of Mieczysław Weinberg; (ii) Culture – e.g. Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska presented the “dybukkification” of Polish theatre; Agnieszka Kajczyk discussed the Jewish film community in post-war Poland until 1950; Jacek Drozda traced Warsaw street politics in the autobiography of the revolutionary Hersz Mendel and in the novel by Szczepan Twardoch entitled *The King*, and Anna Landau-Czajka examined the ambiguity of the term “goy”; (iii) Locality and towns – e.g., Marian Skwara presented the situation of Jews in Pruszków from the establishment of the Jewish community to their deportation to the Warsaw ghetto; Katarzyna Thomas analysed Polish-Jewish relations in Drohobycz between 1918 and 1939, and Maria Misztal examined the influence of repatriation experiences on the attitudes of the representatives of both nationalities in Lower Silesia after the Second World War; (iv) Economy – e.g. Alicja Maślak-Maciejewska talked about the charity initiatives of progressive Jews in Krakow in the 19th century; Przemysław Zarubin examined the role of Jews in the economic life of Krakow and its surroundings during the period of Galician autonomy (1860–1914), and Michał Grochowski discussed the topic of the employment of Poles in the shed in the Warsaw Ghetto; (v) Power and politics – e.g. Katarzyna Kocik analysed the attitude of the Polish Socialist Party towards the Jewish question in interwar Poland; Maciej Moszyński discussed the activity of the Jewish People’s Council in Max Kollenschers’ memoirs, and Katarzyna Person traced the fortunes of Poles and Jews from Poland in Bergen-Belsen DP camp; (vi) Remembrance – e.g. Andrzej Czyżewski discussed the official commemoration of the history of the Lodz Ghetto in the People’s Republic of Poland; Piotr Kendziorek examined psychoanalytical categories as an instrument for describing the consequences of the Shoah in the Polish collective consciousness, and Krzysztof Czajka-Kalinowski analysed the digitisation and presentation of collections as a tool of historical awareness.

An exceptional, thoroughly ceremonial point of the second symposium was a meeting devoted to a book by dr hab. Jan Doktor, researcher at the Jewish Historical Institute, entitled *Brothers, strangers or fellow citizens. Christian debates on Judaism and its followers in Europe until the early 19th century* (Fig. 4). This item is the first in a series of volumes published by the Jewish Historical Institute devoted to Polish-Jewish relations⁵. The discussion with the author was hosted by prof. Stanisław Obirek, theologian, historian and cultural anthropologist, and Anna Landau-Czajka. The book presents, as was presented during the meeting, Christian debates on Jews and Judaism, from the late Middle Ages to the French Revolution. It presents the changes in the perception of Judaism by Christians, along with an attempt to find an answer to the question: could Christians and Jews, from the perspective of two millennia, have established permanent rules of coexistence?



Fig. 4. The cover of Jan Doktor's book

Source: E. Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

⁵ The publication is co-financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage under the NIEPOD-LEGLA Multiannual Programme for the years 2017–2022, and the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation.

“In his book *Brothers, Strangers or Fellow Citizens*,” said Stanisław Obirek, “Jan Doktor presents in a synthetic and insightful way, on the basis of various sources, the debates conducted by Christians in different parts of Europe on Judaism and its followers. Starting with the arguments of St. Augustine, and concluding with projects of equal rights for Jews from the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, he chooses from this rich material some key cases, sometimes some also less known, such as the Barcelona dispute of 1263 or the writings of Marcin Czechowic, a member of the Polish Brethren. A particular value of the work is, on the one hand, the presentation of the polemics concerning Judaism in the context of the developing culture of print, and, on the other, the discussions and initiatives undertaken on Polish soil against the background of European debates.

The centuries-old disputes between Christians and Jews in Jan Doktor’s book have been divided into nine chapters, each of which is a miniature monograph, which could easily be developed into a thick volume. It should, therefore, be regarded as a great achievement, both scientific and promotional,” Obirek concluded, “that it has sometimes been possible to capture on several pages the essence of very complex phenomena that far exceeded sheer religious differences.”

As in the previous year, the conference also featured a curatorial tour, this time by dr Katarzyna Person (JHI), of the temporary exhibition *Polenaktion! October, 1938. The Story of the Expellees from Germany*, devoted to the anniversary of a forgotten and, above all, little known event from eighty years ago (Fig. 5). The purpose of the action, announced on 26 October 1938 and carried out mainly on 28 and 29 October, was to deport Polish Jews from the Third Reich. In just two days, 17,000 people were expelled. It was one of the largest and unprecedented manifestations of the growing persecution of Jews by the Third Reich. However, the action did not remain unrelated to Poland. Apart from citizenship, this was influenced by the adoption by the Sejm in March of the same year of the provision on revoking Polish citizenship for compatriots who lived abroad for more than five years. The decision was aimed primarily at the Jews, whose return was becoming more and more of an issue, especially in the case of Germany, with its growing anti-Semitic persecution. The adoption of the law was intended to effectively block this return. Among the exiles there were Jews who went there as children and even those born in Germany. Their sense of connection with Poland was generally weak and many of them did not even speak Polish.

These stateless Jews were placed in the transition camp established in Zbąszyń – a town located on the then Polish-German border. Those who had family ties to Poland and adequate financial resources were able to leave this place after some effort. However, several thousand people remained in Zbąszyń in tragic conditions.



Fig. 5. Poster from the exhibition devoted to the expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany in October 1938
Source: E. Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

Emanuel Ringelblum, the patron of the Jewish Historical Institute, joined in helping those in Zbąszyń. He participated in a huge aid and logistics project, organised mainly by charitable institutions, including the Polish Red Cross. “By also gathering the accounts of the exiles, Ringelblum gained experience which proved crucial in his organisation of the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto – the most important collection of our Institute”, said the curator of the exhibition⁶. The camp in Zbąszyń was closed down in August 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Polenaktion was shown through the perspective of the victims’ individual fates. The main thread of the exhibition were the stories of six Jewish families from Berlin. The exhibition was divided into three chronologically arranged chapters: “Life in Berlin before 1938”, “Deportations in October 1938”, and “The history of persecution and rescue”. This three-part approach was underscored by photographs, documents, accounts, memories and letters of deported family members, as well as maps with the routes of their deportation and subsequent movements.

The following institutions were responsible for the substantive preparation of the exhibition: The Department of History of the Institute for East European Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, and the Actives Museum in Berlin. It was organised by the Jewish Historical Institute. The exhibition was an extremely valuable addition to the meeting, perfectly fitting the theme of inter-ethnic relations.

⁶ Excerpt from the speech given during the curatorial tour (author’s note).

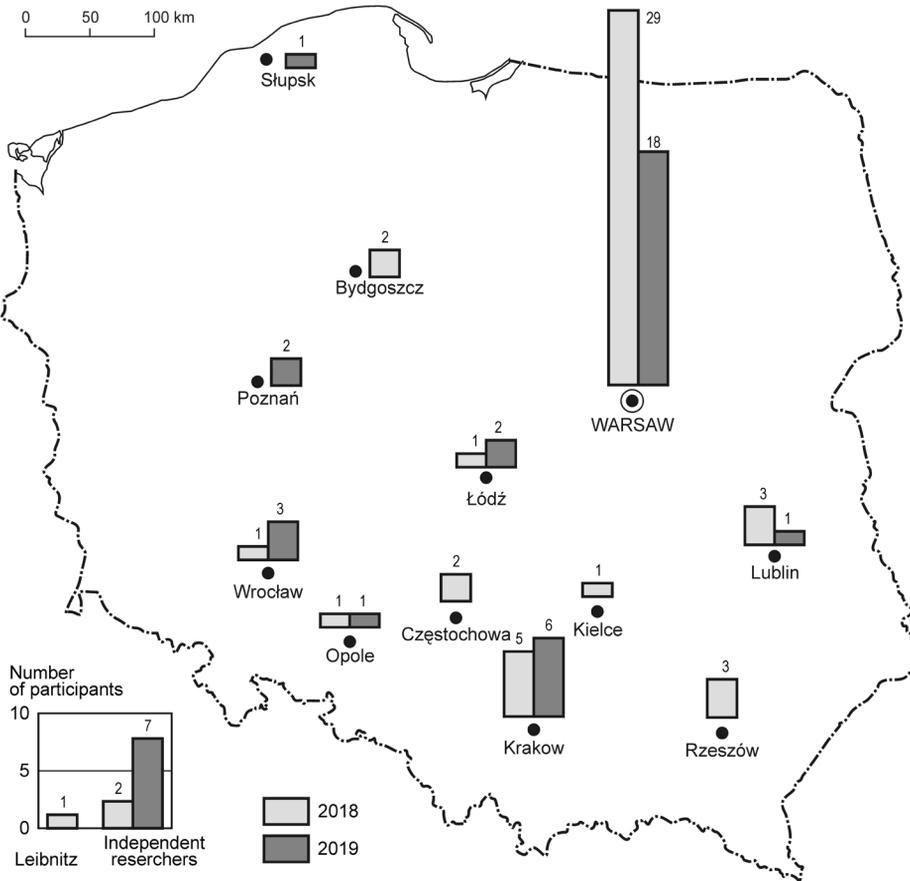


Fig. 6. Number of participants and the cities they represented at the conferences on Polish-Jewish relations in 2018 and 2019

Source: own work.

Both conferences were forums for very varied, original and interesting presentations, encouraging inspiring discussions, providing plenty of material for similarly promising publications. “Bound by history” is an exemplarily interdisciplinary project. Its participants are not only historians, though they dominate by far in terms of numbers and contributions, but also representatives of other fields of science: sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, literary studies, art history, Jewish studies, and geography. The authors’ use of their respective scientific tools did not preclude them from employing an interdisciplinary approach in many cases. Apart from the representatives of scientific institutions (both recognised independent employees and young doctors and doctoral students), journalists and social activists, active in the field of local history research and involved in pre-

erving the relics of the multicultural heritage of small towns, were included in the project. During both conferences a total of 92 papers were delivered (51 in the first and 41 in the second). The speakers, and potential authors of the chapters in the monographs, represented the following cities: Warsaw, Łódź, Krakow, Wrocław, Częstochowa, Opole, Rzeszów, Bydgoszcz, Lublin, Kielce, Poznań, Słupsk, and Leibnitz (Fig. 6). Thanks to this spatial scale, an interesting cross-section has been presented of the latest research on Polish-Jewish relations from the 16th to 20th century.

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