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‘JEWS TO MADAGASCAR’: POLAND IN THE FACE OF ETHNICAL PROBLEMS IN THE 1930S

Abstract. The idea of deporting the Jewish population of Europe was part of a modern anti-Semitism. Poland was no exception in this regard. Under the influence of other countries implementing anti-Jewish laws, also Polish anti-Semitism became more radical. After 1935, such postulates were openly expressed as the policy of the Polish government has changed its character – from state to national. Additionally, due to the global economic crisis the idea began to be taken far more seriously not just in national Catholic circles. The resettlement of Jews was seen as the way to reduce unemployment and to ‘Polonise’ Polish cities, as masses of poor peasants could be replaced by Jewish workers as far as trade and craftsmanship were concerned.

The authors of immigration plans for European Jews suggested evacuating them most willingly to uncivilised countries – including Madagascar (a French colony) – due to the fact that their lands were either not used at all or only used to an insufficient and inadequate extent. In Poland, the idea was first adopted in 1926 as a solution to the problem of overpopulation in rural areas. However, the conditions on the island did not allow settlement and soon the idea fell through. Yet it came back a decade later as a proposal of deporting exclusively Polish Jews. At the time, the project was taken much more seriously and in 1937 the Polish government commissioned a task force to examine the possibility of settling in Madagascar and to evaluate the island’s potential, in particular its climate and labour conditions. But the reports of the commission members were full of contradictions and the French were showing growing caution on the matter.

Key words: anti-Semitism, emigration, France, Jews, Madagascar.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of deporting the Jewish population of Europe was part of a modern anti-Semitism. Poland was no exception in this regard. Under the influence of other countries implementing anti-Jewish laws, also Polish anti-Semitism became more radical. After 1935 the Polish government replaced Józef Piłsudski's 'state assimilation' (citizens were judged not by their ethnicity but by their loyalty to the state) with a policy of 'ethnic assimilation', which caused the rise of hostility towards Jews and people voicing anti-Jewish opinions¹.

It created a sense of threat and an intimidating atmosphere among Jews, which was additionally intensified by anti-Semitic incidents, pogroms², acts of violence against Jewish students every few months, and terror acts at universities³. At the same time, one should notice that in the mid-1930s voices supporting Jewish emigration as a solution of economic and social problems of The Second Polish Republic gained support not only among the circles of democratic parties, but also socialist groups (Rudnicki, 2008, p. 208).

Categorical demands that Jews should leave Poland appeared in the second half of the 1930s. It is true that since the beginning the National Democrats had ideologically promoted the idea of a Polish-speaking Catholic Poland with no Jews or any other minority, but the Nazi rise to power only strengthened their attitude on the matter. Articles in the national press, since 1930 the number of periodicals gradually increased, positively evaluated Hitler's anti-Jewish policies and praised them as a role model for Poland. The growing number of refugees from Germany, who sought shelter in Poland after 1933, also had a great impact on anti-Semitic attitudes and demands to deport Jews.

¹ The article uses materials dispersed from the publications *Czas*, *La Tribune de Madagascar et Dépendences*, *Le Petit Parisien*, *Polska Informacja Polityczna*, *Przewodnik Katolicki*, *Warszawski Dziennik Narodowy* obtained from the Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, the Consulate of the Republic of Poland in Marseille, the Archives of the Hoover Institute and the Polish Embassy in United Kingdom.

² In the second half of the 1930s, a number of anti-Jewish incidents occurred throughout the country; particularly large pogroms occurred in Grodno (7 June 1935), Sokoły (25 August 1935), Odrzywół (20 and 27 November 1935), Rawa Mazowiecka (28 November 1935), Mińsk Mazowiecki (1–4 June 1936), and Zambrów (27 October 1936). The incidents in Przytyk, near Radom, (9 March 1936) became trademark. See Żyndul, 1994, pp. 18–26; Laskowska-Gielo, 2000, pp. 485–495; Michlic-Coren, 2000, pp. 34–61; Kijek, 2018, pp. 45–79; Kijek, Markowski, Zieliński (eds.), 2019, *passim*.

³ Szymon Rudnicki has distinguished three stages of the struggle against "excessive – according to National Democrats – influx of Jewish youth at universities". The first stage, when the young nationalists attempted to establish dominance as influence at universities during the 1920s. The second stage, when the *numerus clausus* slogan became a call for *numerus nullus* in the mid-1930s, accompanied by a demand for the introduction of 'ghetto benches' and a transition from propaganda to active battle. The third and final stage meant amplifying tactics and the national youths' serious successes in this field, specific for the second half of the 1930s. More on the subject: Rudnicki, 1987, pp. 246–247.

As Anna Landau-Czajka wrote: "On the one hand, it was caused by fear that the number of Jews would grow instead of decreasing. On the other, it seemed that only then the supporters of mass emigration gained certainty that there was a real possibility to force Jews to leave Poland" (Landau-Czajka, 1993, p. 10). It was likely that the assumption was that by using similar methods this aim could have been also fulfilled in Poland.

However, due to the global economic crisis, the idea was being taken ever so seriously, and not just in national Catholic circles: "Difficult situations sometimes pushed the representatives of the Polish government to search for desperate solutions. The suggestion that Poland should receive colonial territories for its Jews belonged to this category" (Modras, 2004, p. 280). The resettlement of Jews was viewed as a way to reduce unemployment and to 'Polonise' Polish cities, as masses of poor peasants could replace Jewish workers as far as trade and craftsmanship were concerned. Emphasis was placed on migration from rural areas and small towns (Miedziński, 2010, pp. 416–417; Modras, 2004, pp. 278–279; Tomaszewski, 1994–1995, p. 100). Many opinion journalists and politicians spoke about this subject. "No objective person (...) can demand from us that we abandon the reformation of abnormal relations and deny the Polish countryside and growing agricultural population its place in cities and towns, in craftsmanship and trade," Bogusław Miedziński, one of the leaders of Camp of the National Unity (*Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego*), wrote in 1936 (Miedziński, 2010, p. 416). What is interesting, few people were aware of, at least one can thus infer, the very limited possibility of Jewish emigration.

2. THE MADAGASCAR PLAN

Wiktor Ormicki, Polish geographer and lecturer of the Jagiellonian University, distinguished three types of countries which Jewish emigrants could choose from that time: highly developed countries (e.g. the United States), emerging countries (e.g. Argentina, Brazil, and Palestine) and uncivilised countries (e.g. Australia, Guyana, Cuba, Madagascar, New Caledonia, and New Zealand). In his opinion, countries from the first group did not create chances for temporary or organised emigration, however, they played an important role when it came to individual emigrations (trips to relatives). The second group countries allowed mass emigration, but defended themselves against organised emigration because of increasing sentiments of national identity and a sense of state, and the desire for a proper formation of the occupational structure. The biggest chance for Jewish emigration was the last group, i.e. uncivilised countries, and among them Madagascar. Their terrain was either unexploited at all or only exploited to an insufficient extent (Ormicki, 1937, p. 290).

So what were the directions of Jewish emigration in reality? At first, Palestine seemed the most obvious destination for emigrating Jews. First of all, it was the only direction which could gain the acceptance of Jews. Secondly, it did not involve obtaining colonial terrains. Thirdly, it did not raise objection either on the international stage or in the country – even Polish national and nationalist parties in most cases did not express any opposition in this matter. The revival of historical Jewish national home in Palestine also allowed avoiding the accusations of anti-Semitic policies and discrimination of a specific group of citizens. State plans were no longer targeted at Jews; on the contrary, they became a helping hand given to those who needed help. Of course, provided that nobody actually studied the reasons behind such concepts. The only group which protested, in a more or less distinct manner, against this direction of emigration, was Polish clergy and catholic opinion journalists speaking personally. Over time, more voices expressed dissatisfaction and dislike or even objection to Jewish emigration to Palestine. The fear of a possible desecration of Christian places of worship, due to Jewish presence, was the standard argument (Trębacz, 2017, pp. 281–302). “I know very well that there is not enough space for all the Jews in Palestine, except for a small group. I also know well that a Catholic believer looks at the flood of Jews covering the Holy Land and sacred places unwillingly. But there is much more space elsewhere in the world: in Abyssinia, America and Siberia, and elsewhere” (Wuj z Baranowa, ..., p. 775), a journalist of the *Przewodnik Katolicki* (or The Catholic Guide in English) stated in 1935.

Palestine’s small territory was not able to accept all the Jews who wanted to settle there. Over time, due to the limits imposed by the British government, among other things, all those involved started to realise the necessity of finding new territories which could accommodate such a large number of Jews. The Polish government circulated internally new ideas for possible alternate locations for colonisation. The most popular direction was Africa – Kenya, Rhodesia, Angola, Belgian Congo, and Madagascar.

The Madagascar Project or the Madagascar Plan was not a new concept – the idea was born in the mid-19th century⁴ and it was an attempt to find a solution

⁴ In 1885, Paul de Lagarde (born as Paul Anton Bötticher), a German philosopher of culture, formulated an idea of settling Jews in Madagascar. Later, in the 1920s, the location was indicated as a direction for the Jewish emigration. Such ideas appeared in France, the Netherlands, and Germany. In 1931, Egon van Winghene defined this concept extensively in his publication *Arische Rasse, Christliche Kultur und Judenproblem*. He proposed the resettlement of European Jews to some island, e.g. Madagascar, because of “the greatest possibility of control and the slightest risk of infection”. The French colony was supposed to fulfill this condition, and even more – it would allow the gathering of all Jewish people from Europe in its territories. Winghene also postulated the creation of a reservation on the island, which would be controlled by Aryans, and a separation of Jews from the rest of the society. Moreover, at the time, the authorities of different countries were interested in this territory, bearing in mind their necessity to find new settling terrains and solve growing social

to demographic, national, and social problems related to the so-called 'Jewish question'. The Polish authorities first became interested in Madagascar – an island located in the Indian Ocean off the eastern coast of Africa, and a French colony at the time (from 1896)⁵ in 1926. It was supposed to bring a solution to the problem of overpopulation in rural areas. However, the conditions on the island did not allow settlement and soon the idea fell through. France and Japan which also considered the colonisation of Madagascar at this time, expressed similar opinion (Hevesi, 1941, p. 22; Korzec, 1980, p. 315; Yahil, 1974, p. 316). However, Polish politicians returned to this project a decade later, but this time as a proposal of deporting exclusively Polish Jews. At the time, the project was taken much more seriously.

It was related to the previously mentioned plans to introduce changes in the social policy of the country (a 'Polonisation' of Polish cities, where landless peasants would replace Jewish workers). The turn of 1936 is considered as a crucial point in government policy. The new prime minister Felicjan Sławoj Składkowski's first parliamentary address, or *Exposé*, was considered a mark of the coming change. While he did condemn pogroms in June 1936, his words contained an approval for other anti-Semitic actions: "My government is convinced that nobody «should be wronged» in Poland. (...) Economic struggle, yes! But no harm" (Mendelsohn, 1987, p. 71; Tomaszewski, 1985, p. 164). His 'yes' sounded ambiguous to say the least and was later interpreted as a call to boycott Jews, and later even as an acceptance of economic nationalism and a silent consent to many other anti-Semitic acts. This was reinforced by the government's introduction of a range of (formal and informal) restrictions targeting ethnic minorities, such as the limitation of the practices of the Jewish shechita from 27 March 1936⁶. Many years later, Prime Minister Składkowski wrote that his real aim had been to object to the incidents and pogroms. However, his wording proved clumsy and tactless, and the policy towards Jews was called the 'yes policy' ('polityka owszemowa') (Tomaszewski, 1998, pp. 47–48).

and demographic problems of Europe. More on the subject: Mathieu, 2011, pp. 164–166. It is also worth adding that in Germany, the idea of having Jews emigrate to Madagascar was still alive during the Second World War. In July 1940, Hans Frank proposed the project, and Franz Rademacher was responsible for its development. At the same time, Adolf Eichmann's associates from the RSHA were working on a similar plan. See more in: Browning, 2012, pp. 80–88.

⁵ On 20 June 1960, Madagascar declared independence.

⁶ This act limited the ritual slaughter to a rigorously calculated amount of meat consumed by Jews, Muslims, and Karaites – proportionally to the percentage of a minority living in a particular province. It was a clear, legal interference with the sphere of religion. It was being justified by humanitarian concerns but the real purpose of this resolution was to undermine the economic position of Jews in the meat processing trade and especially to eliminate Jewish merchants and craftsmen from the cattle market. The introduction of the act reduced meat consumption by Jews. In the following year, a proposal to ban shechita was reintroduced in the parliament. However, the act did not come into force due to the outbreak of the Second World War.

Furthermore, the unsolved issue of settling in Palestine together with the indecision of the British government had an unquestioned influence on the reappearance of the idea of the colonisation of Madagascar. It might have become evident that even concrete promises would not completely solve the problem with which the Polish government was struggling⁷. Poles also tried to obtain consent from Great Britain to settle Jews in its colonies, especially in South Africa – they were unsuccessful. In that situation, France seemed a natural ally.

This country became the centre of attention for the Polish authorities when emigration/colonial politics of the Second Polish Republic took a specific shape. The idea of settling Polish citizens, mostly Jews, in Madagascar was a part of the plan aimed at finding the solution to the so-called ‘Jewish question in Poland and developed by Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the time, the relations between Warsaw and Paris were largely determined by the activities of Léon Noël, the French ambassador in Poland⁸.

The project was taken much more seriously than the first time, although since the beginning the French had been indicating that the possibility of settling in Madagascar was very limited. They underlined that there was little terrain where the climate would let Europeans work, and the attempt of mass colonisation would cause political problems – just as it happened in Palestine. Moreover, they had never agreed that future immigrants should be exclusively Jews. France made its position dependent mostly on the support of important organisations for this concept and financial help for the future colonists.

Yet in autumn 1936, the issue of making Madagascar available for emigration from Poland became a topic of discussions between Józef Beck, Polish minister of foreign affairs, and Léon Blum, Prime Minister of France (‘Madagaskar’, pp. 38, 79); Marius Moutet, minister of colonies, proved favourably disposed to the idea. Also, at that time, in October 1936, at the session of the Political Commission of the League of Nations, which dealt with mandates problem, the emigration issue was raised by Tytus Komarnicki, permanent delegate of Poland to the League of the Nations, and Adam Rose, undersecretary of state and vice minister of industry and trade. They both justified it by overpopulation in the country, and the economic structure and high number of Jews in Poland.

Further, the information about the necessity of increasing Jewish emigration (to at least 100,000 per year), released in the early August 1936 in the *Polska*

⁷ The emigration topic and the so-called Jewish issue connected with it were touched on quite unexpectedly on the session of budget commission in January 1937. Minister Józef Beck said then: We know very well, in fact, we had the possibility to investigate this issue diplomatically with the British government, that both the capacity of Palestine and the conditions existing there, do not solve the enormous problem of Jews in Eastern Europe. See *Problem Żydów w Europie ...*, p. 7.

⁸ Already in January 1936, in the report to Yvon Delbos, the minister of foreign affairs, Noël wrote about Polish colonial demands. A few months later, on 30 September 1936, details were provided – Poles wanted two colonies: one for Jews and one for “their own sons” (Watt, 2008, p. 72).

Informacja Polityczna, an official journal of the Polish ministry of foreign affairs, could somehow have influenced the decision of the French side to enter to dialogue. In the article, the priority was admittedly given to Palestine, but it was firmly underlined that its capacity was very limited, also due to numerous Jewish refugees from Germany it was necessary to seek other places. "The road to new areas should be opened for Jewish emigration primarily by those countries that are interested in finding at least a partial solution to the Jewish problem, and which due to their role in world politics and on the basis of their territorial possessions could effectively contribute to working out a practical solution to the issue," the *Polska Informacja Polityczna* read, leaving no doubt as to which countries it referred ('Emigracja żydowska', pp. 1–3). The publication was noticed in French circles immediately. The main focus fell on its official character and the fact that it was organised in a way that it was impossible for France not to notice it.

The negotiations lasted until the beginning of 1937. Feliks Frankowski, special envoy of Józef Beck and *chargé d'affaires* of Poland, represented the Polish side. Both Delbos and Moutet basically accepted the plan and suggested conducting a study which could deliver more details. Moutet even offered help of French specialists. It is worth mentioning that Léon Noël expressed a different attitude. He was doubtful and warned the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs against this idea⁹.

On 16 January 1937, Marius Moutet, French minister of colonies, was interviewed by the Parisian journal *Le Petit Parisien*. Many newspapers reprinted its fragments, and articles published in a daily pro-government *Gazeta Polska* were particularly enthusiastic. The declaration expressed a carefully formulated consent for settling some Jews in French colonies – Madagascar, New Caledonia, New Hebrides, and French Guyana. Of course, the French proposal did not mean that Madagascar would become a Polish colony, it was only about making settling easier. Moutet saw it as a chance for the victims of political, religious and racial persecution, but he warned against mass and sudden colonisation. Moreover, he made his attitude dependent on receiving financial help and support from important organisations, precise examination of the proposed territories, and a careful selection of potential settlers ('À propos d'un projet...', p. 2).

Moutet's declaration caused an tidal wave of comments – from critical to fully enthusiastic. Those voices previously raised against raising too high hopes became silent. Journalists mainly concentrated on the French acceptance of Polish plans. Nobody had actually analysed the real sense of the words being spoken. National Democratic press accepted the minister of colonies' statement particularly eagerly. By selectively using it, the ND announced the French consent to Jews settling in Madagascar. It did mention, however, that for the time being

⁹ See Brechtken, 1997, p. 81; Caron, 1999, p. 149; Korzec, 1980, pp. 250–251; Paruch, 1997, pp. 304–315; Pawłowski, 1937, p. 36; Yahil, 1974, p. 330; 'À propos d'un projet...', p. 2; 'Kolonie, emigracja i...', p. 1; 'Obyź jak najprędzej!...', p. 2; 'Projekt osadzenia Żydów...', p. 2.

it was impossible to speak about large numbers, but it emphatically stated that it was only a matter of time: “The point is not an immediate departure of a few million Jews to Madagascar; the point is to start releasing that Madagascar stream of Jewish emigrants” (*‘Żydzi na Madagaskar’*, p. 3). The opinion journalists of the *Warszawski Dziennik Narodowy* felt particularly triumphant, recalling how the idea of colonisation was mocked and ridiculed until very recently while they supported it from the very beginning. The project which no one once considered with any seriousness became a real solution to the so-called ‘Jewish question’, the newspaper wrote. It emphasised its role in the dissemination of this idea with real satisfaction. Even the headlines showed an euphoric mood and slogans such as ‘Jews to Madagascar’ or ‘Let it happen as soon as possible!’ became very popular.

3. SPECIAL MISSION OF THE POLISH GOVERNMENT

A few months later, in May 1937, the French government finally allowed the Polish side to conduct the study and a special Commission was sent to Madagascar. It was composed of the following persons: major Mieczysław Bohdan Lepecki (famous traveller and chief of the commission who represented the Polish government) and two representatives of the Jewish side: Leon Alter (director of the Warsaw office of HICEM¹⁰) and Salomon Dyk (former worker of German colonisation associations and agricultural engineer from Tel Aviv). Despite appearances, both Alter and Dyk came as private persons and in fact they did not represent any Jewish organisation, as one could mistakenly assume¹¹. It was a clear message for the international public opinion that the Polish government’s plan lacked any official Jewish support¹².

¹⁰ HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society): international social non-profit organisation established in 1909 in New York, aimed at providing material and legal aid to Jewish emigrants coming to America from East-Central Europe. In the years 1917–1926, HIAS established offices in Eastern Europe which organised emigration efforts to the countries of North and South America, and to Australia. In an agreement with the Jewish Agency, they also helped with the emigration of European Jews to Palestine. In 1927, after the merger of HIAS and the Jewish Colonization Association, the two formed a European organisation called HICEM. In the 1930s, HICEM focused on transporting Jews – refugees from Nazi Germany to South American countries. In 1945, HIAS became an independent organisation again. In March 1946, it was allowed to open its offices in Poland. It was intended to mediate legal matters related to the emigration of Jews from Poland, conduct information activities and facilitate contacts with relatives abroad; it also provided financial support, covering some of the travel costs. Since 1924, Leon Alter managed the Polish branch of HIAS, until its dissolution in 1950. The organisation has remained active in the United States under the name of United HIAS Service.

¹¹ Among others, Marius Moutet, the French minister of colonies, was convinced about it.

¹² Although Leon Alter was the director of the Jewish Emigration Society JEAS, he participated as a private person in the study expedition to Madagascar, not being connected with any Jewish organisation or association.

Formally, the task of the experts was to examine the 'objective' possibility of settling on an island for 'white man', in particular climate and working conditions. Just before their departure to Madagascar, the members of the commission visited Paris. The French minister of colonies stressed again that settling Jews on the island could not have a mass character. Moreover, he stated that financial help from Jewish circles interested in this idea was necessary because France would not be able to finance these plans. He also excluded merchants and traders from possible emigration – it was intended only for 'colonists'.

The government's mission on Madagascar caused anxiety among Polish Jews. That was why on 21 May 1937 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs published an announcement titled 'Palestyna–Madagaskar', where the Polish government's position was presented. Above all, it aimed to calm the Jewish population. The authors of the announcement assured everyone about the positive attitude of the authorities of the Second Polish Republic towards creating a Jewish national home in Palestine, which had already been 'one of the traditional factors of Polish foreign policy' since 1926. They also tried to prove that the Polish administration continued to support this settlement direction and simply wanted to divert emigration flows to other places. At that moment, Palestine could satisfy the needs of the Jewish population only to a small extent.

Also, Józef Beck, minister of foreign affairs, in an interview of 30 January 1937 by the *New York Times* mentioned this difficulty and the need to search for others emigration directions. He insisted on the emigration of about 50,000 Jews per year. At the same time, Beck tried to refute the charges of any anti-Semitic character of these plans, presenting them as an element of demographic and economic policies. He argued: "Polish government did not raise an emigration issue on the international forum in anti-Semitic spirit. The problem of the emigration expressed by Poland at the General Assembly of the League of Nations in September concerns both Jews and Poles". At the same time he admitted that due to Palestine's limited absorption capabilities, attempts had been made at finding new emigration directions. However, he did not question its basic meaning for Jewish population. However, since European countries immigration opportunities, it became necessary to search for new settling areas overseas.

The Commission spent about thirteen weeks on Madagascar, during which its members visited different parts of the island (Hevesi, 1941, p. 16; Yahil, 1974, p. 317; Drymmer, 1968, pp. 66–67; 'Mission étrangère...', p. 1). The results seemed interesting. Wiktor Tomir Drymmer, head of the Consular Department in the ministry of foreign affairs, who was responsible for colonial policy, recalled that the commission "judged Madagascar as a future settlement area very positively". However, having remembered his earlier, not very successful experiences and not trusting this opinion entirely, he sent Arkady Fiedler, naturalist, reporter and traveller, who as a correspondent of the *Gazeta Polska* was to make notes and send his remarks about the weather changes occurring on the island

throughout a year. According to Drymmer: “Fiedler wrote an enthusiastic article which, once the press announced that there appeared a possibility of emigrating to Madagascar, made national circles invent a new slogan: «Madagascar only for Poles» – «Jews to Palestine»” (Drymmer, 1968, pp. 67–68).

What is interesting, Drymmer completely ignored the issue of the very controversial results of the commission’s activities. No official report from this expedition was published, and the commission members had opposing opinions¹³. Lepecki relied on the testimonies of several French experts in the following disciplines: geology, climatology, agriculture, and demography, supplemented with his own observations. Having agreed with the general opinion that only areas with low population density and climatically suitable zones in the northern part of this high plateau could be considered, the traveller reported that French colonial experts indicated three parts in this region: Betroka, Itasy, and Ankaizina (the last one – in the northern part of the high central plateau) as noteworthy. In his opinion, the first two districts could be considered in a distant future, but the colonisation should start from already developed Ankaizina. Lepecki’s statement that Ankaizina could become a shelter for white workers was based on the French experts’ opinions about its rich soil and the beneficial influence of Madagascar’s climate on human health. However, none of them drew a conclusion on the basis of their own observations. They discussed this issue quite often, but much less frequently recommended that white workers should settle in that area. Moreover, it should be noted that while the conditions in Madagascar would allow the settlement of farmers accustomed to hard labour, they were an insurmountable obstacle for office workers, merchants, artisans, let alone large business owners (Hevesi, 1941, pp. 16–19).

It seems that Lepecki chose to overlook the problem of the typically agriculture character of the island when he suggested that Jews could settle there and forgot about the fact that only a few percent of the Jewish community in Poland made their living as farmers. In his opinion, there was a chance to settle from 5,000 to 7,000 families capable of physical labour in Madagascar, while Alter in his anticipations estimated that possible only for 500 families, and Dyk mentioned even smaller numbers. Lepecki predicted similar numbers for merchants and small traders as he wanted to increase the number of European immigrants to about 40,000–70,000 people. Additionally, Alter indicated that there was a strong opposition among the local population, in his opinion it was probably stronger than in Palestine. One might infer that this factor was underestimated during the colonisation debates. In fact, the Malagasy people were afraid of losing jobs and feared the privileged position of the future immigrants.

What is more, apart from problems with transportation in mountainous terrains nearly impossible to overcome, Alter stated that white people would not be able

¹³ Only Lepecki submitted an official report to the Polish government, while two other members of the commission sent separate memoranda.

to work physically under the climate conditions and he described the danger of tropical diseases as horrible. In contrast, Lepecki spoke about a temperate climate with winter similar to early autumn in Europe and a lack of tropical diseases except the inevitable malaria (Hevesi, 1941, p. 19; Yahil, 1974, pp. 317–318; *Mission étrangère...*, p. 1). Foreign press outlets also noticed those differences in the opinions of the commission members.

4. FAILURE OF THE MADAGASCAR PROJECT

Initially, the Polish government tried to see Lepecki's opinion and interpret the results of the commission's exploration exclusively as positive; but the commission's official report had not been published. In December 1937, only an announcement advising caution in forming opinions and promising the cooperation between Polish and French governments on the project of settling in Madagascar was released.

It also paid tribute to France as the first of colonial powers to show real understanding for Polish demands in this matter and enabled the building of the so-called 'mutual understanding bridge' between the two countries, which effectively resulted in a reduction of the disproportions existing in the international life. It is possible that it was related to the visit of Yvon Delbos, the French minister of foreign affairs, in Warsaw. From that moment on no further steps had been taken.

Such a restraint of the Polish government was probably caused by the attitude of the French side, which started to show increasing caution. Although Marius Moutet confirmed in public his participation in the study of settlement possibilities in four colonial territories – Madagascar, French Guyana, New Caledonia, and New Hebrides – he nonetheless increasingly warned against excessive hopes. Also he consequently talked about a lack of a connection between the commission's activities and the plan of forced Jewish emigration, supported in some circles of the Polish government. Moreover, considering the climate conditions in Madagascar and serious difficulties related to the adaptation of white people on the island, Moutet did not see emigration to African countries as a solution to the so-called Jewish question. He also firmly excluded the idea of mass emigration, due to, among other things, predictable political problems.

Marcel Olivier, former governor of Madagascar, also joined the debate. In his articles and during public lectures he expressed serious doubts and strongly advised against taking such an initiative. He underlined that good weather only occurred on the high plateau and pointed at numerous endemic diseases such as malaria, dysentery or malignant anaemia, as well as insufficiently explored possible results of solar and soil radiation. Consequently, Olivier precluded any possibility

of white people's physical labour in Madagascar, except from the area on the furthest north. The native population inhabited a few fertile valleys and removing them from there for the benefit of new settlers would be impossible – the French government would never sanction such gross injustice. The former governor referred to the history of general Joseph Gallieni, the French conqueror of the island. Having conquered Madagascar, he distributed well located lands amongst young participants of the campaign. Within a few years, most of them died whereas those who came back to France were emaciated and suffered from anaemia. "If Poland does not take steps to stop white people's large-scale emigration to Madagascar," Olivier wrote, "it will be responsible for making sacrifices in the name of acceptance of the practices which are nothing else like mass murder." (Hevesi, 1941, pp. 19–23; Yahil, 1974, p. 318; 'À propos d'un projet...', p. 2).

Ambassador Léon Noël shared similar thoughts. He saw the Polish plans for Jews settling in Madagascar as 'disastrously ill-considered'. He justified his opinion with several arguments such as an unhealthy climate, a lack of sufficient capital, and the aversion of both Jews and the local people to governmental projects. "For these reasons, he regarded these ideas as «chimerical» and unsuitable for serious consideration" (Pasztor, 1998, p. 13)¹⁴.

Additionally, there had started an intense press campaign in France severely criticising the Polish project of the colonisation of Madagascar (e.g. the socialist *Le Populaire*, the radical *La République*, the *L'Œuvre*, and the communist *L'Humanité*, but also right-wing press like the monarchist *L'Action Française*). Most of the periodicals, even those more or less anti-Semitic (e.g. the *Je suis partout*, the *Le Réveil du peuple*, and the *La France Extérieure et Coloniale*), had seen Jewish mass emigration to Madagascar as an invasion on a French territory. The arguments about abandoning the idea of colonial power were most pronounced in right-wing press, but other newspapers also utilised them.

Moreover, the new French government, which came to power in April 1938¹⁵, lost interest in these plans and started to withdraw its support. The problem of the refugees from Austria, annexed to The Third Reich just a month prior, could

¹⁴ However, the author indicated that "Noël's critical attitude on this matter resulted primarily from inappropriate, in his opinion, choice of the place for the possible emigration for Jews, and not from rejection of the very idea (...)". What is interesting, the French ambassador regarded Jewish emigration to some countries in South America differently, considering it as the necessity in the face of the worsening situation in Eastern Europe and increasing anti-Semitism. Yet, he omitted this opinion expressed at the beginning of 1939 in his memoirs published after the war. More on the subject in: Pasztor, 1998, pp. 13–14.

¹⁵ On 10 April 1938, Édouard Daladier replaced Léon Blum as Prime Minister (he then held the office until 21 March 1940), and Georges Mandel replaced Marius Moutet as the Minister of Colonies (he held the office until 18 May 1940). A bit earlier, from 18 January to 13 March 1938, for a short time, Théodore Steeg took over the position in the ministry, and later Moutet returned for a month (holding the office from 13 March to 10 April 1938).

have influenced that decision. The rapidly changing situation in the old continent occupied the seats of power in all countries which were not inclined to draw any other changes on the world's map.

The increasing aversion of the French government influenced by the attitudes of its own society, as well as unfavourable opinions of Jewish communities and the tense situation in Europe caused a gradual fading of such a programme of Jewish emigration. However, it did not mean complete abandonment of the ideas of intensifying the Jewish emigration from Poland. As early as December 1938, in the Sejm, deputy Stanisław Skwarczyński and 116 other deputies, the representatives of the governing party, filed an interpellation on the measures aimed at introducing steps for the preparation and implementation of mass Jewish emigration (Tomaszewski, 1994–1995, pp. 102–104). In February 1939, deputy Juliusz Dudziński put forward a far-reaching project of forced Jewish emigration (Walicki *et al.*, 2012, p. LX).

Finally, over the last few months before the outbreak of the Second World War, the issue of Jews settling in Madagascar would echo in the French-Polish conversations, and from time to time not only Polish, but also Jewish press would highlight the whole matter. Jewish journalists showed a growing disquietude about the situation in East and Central Europe and the plans of Polish authorities, so detached from the increasingly complicated reality.

5. CONCLUSION

This exotic island clearly stirred the collective imagination in the years before the Second World War. A thought cannot be easily removed if it manages to take root. What was the intention behind the efforts of the special commission? Did the representatives of the Polish government indeed see in Madagascar a chance to acquire an overseas colony? Did they believe that it was possible to gain their own settling territory? Or were they drawn by an unbridled desire to expel Jews from the country? Or maybe Madagascar could really become a new Promised Land for escapees persecuted in their current homelands? The history of the project of mass settling of the Jewish population in Madagascar enables one to pose many, not always easy questions, and that is why it is so meaningful and can be a contribution not only to the research on the history of Jews or Polish colonial plans, but also to the evolution of the opinions about the so-called Jewish question in 20th-century Europe and ethnic minorities in general. Questions about the mechanisms of creating and functioning of the similar projects are still valid.

It is difficult to assume that the authors of the emigration concepts placed so high hopes in the French colony that they actually believed that starting a settlement

action on its terrain could considerably contribute to solving Poland's economic and demographic problems, including, above all, the issue of overpopulation in rural areas. The statement of Marius Moutet from January 1937 admittedly gave hope, but, in fact, it was not very precise and later French activities revealed a rather cautious attitude to the whole idea. A moderate interest in the Polish plans and a consent for organising the research expedition could be thought of as a sign of restrained sympathy for the colonial ambitions of the Second Polish Republic. The Jewish thread, which played such an important role for Poles, was rather an obstacle for France and caused a certain cooling of its attitude towards emigration projects. It should be remembered that at the time France itself struggled with different social or national problems. Although no one can say with certainty that "The attempts to gain the interest of France, in the person of minister Delbos, in the issue of settling Polish Jews in its colonial properties (Madagascar), turned out to be entirely utopian", as Andrzej Skrzypek wrote (Skrzypek, 1995, p. 522). For a long time, the conversations were held between the highest actors in the authorities of both countries, a special research commission was sent to the island and its members reported the results of their work also to Paris. It definitely was not evidence that the conceived plan was unrealistic. Even Lepecki's team's return to the country and divergent results offered by the members of the expedition did not eliminate the topic of the colonisation of Madagascar. Of course, the supporters of this solution came from Polish groups, but without any doubts the attitude of the French ally, if not positive then at least not overtly negative, reassured them that the project could be fulfilled.

The issue of overpopulation and the concept of Jewish emigration related to it was not only a Polish problem. Many European countries, struggling with similar difficulties, considered the colonies and overseas territories of their neighbours. French territories seemed especially attractive. In the late 1930s, the international aspect of the matter did not raise any doubts, but the possibility of finding a solution to this issue remained unclear. Politicians from different countries began to understand that the problem could not be solved partially, but they probably did not fully realise what it meant.

Surely, Polish internal policy of that time could be concerning and was, among other things, a source of conflicts between Poles and the Jewish community. It was not free from anti-Semitic accents, resulting from a concept by the Polish government and the politicians connected with it – a concept of the 'ethnic assimilation' policy, in which Jews did not and could not fit. But, it seems, the authorities lacked the ideas to solve the problems of citizens who were not indigenous Poles. Alina Cała indicated acutely that: "In the interwar period, minority policy was incoherent and inconsistent, more often irritating than favourable to consolidation, regardless of the political parties in charge" (Cała, 2012, p. 325). In the second half of the 1930s, nationalist concepts received much more attention and enjoyed popularity in the government camp whereas anti-Semitism had replaced any real political and economic program.

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