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‘The most momentous epochs in Jewish life’ American Jewish Congress in Philadelphia (December 15–18, 1918)

Summary. The American Jewish Congress began its activities as an organisation established to represent all Jews living in the United States during the Congress in Philadelphia. On December 15–18, 1918, a meeting of 400 delegates representing all Jewish political parties and social groups in the USA took place. It aroused great hopes because new opportunities were opening up for the Jews to resolve the Palestinian question, the main Zionist project, and to guarantee equal rights for Jewish minorities in East Central Europe. The article answers questions about how the American Jewish Congress was convened. How did the main political groups of Jews in the USA respond to it? What was the subject of the debate? What decisions were made? And then how were they implemented and what was the future of the initiative launched in Philadelphia? Answers to these questions will allow us to draw a conclusion as to the importance of the December congress in the history of Jews in the USA and whether it fulfilled its tasks.

Keywords: Jews in the USA, American Jewish Congress, Palestinian question, Zionism, minority rights.

IN December 1918, the first ever congress of representatives of Jews living in the United States was organised. The meeting of four hundred delegates elected by more than 320,000 electors is sometimes called the ‘long-forgotten event’¹. However, at the time of its opening, one of the speakers referred to the event in Philadelphia as one of ‘the most momentous epochs in Jewish

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¹ J. Loeffler, *Nationalism without a Nation? On the Invisibility of American Jewish Politics*, ‘The Jewish Quarterly Review’ 2015, vol. CV, No. 3, p. 368.

life' because 'it was the first time in American history that Jews of all classes, all groups and all factions into which American Jewry has been divided, have come together to solemnly and hopefully deliberate for the rights and the welfare of their race'². Indeed, for the first time in the history of the Jewish diaspora in the USA, which at that time numbered about 3.3 million people and resided mainly in large American cities³, there was a meeting that could claim to represent the entire community. It is therefore hardly surprising that all the most important American newspapers on national level wrote about it⁴.

It should be noted that other similar summits of representatives of Jewish minorities took place in that period: in Budapest for inhabitants of Hungary, in Vienna for Austria, in Cracow for Western Galicia, in Lviv for Eastern Galicia captured by Poles, in Stanislavov for Eastern Galicia seized by the army of the West Ukrainian People's Republic, in Warsaw for the Kingdom of Poland, in Zagreb for Croatia, in Chernivtsi for Bukovina and in Prague for Bohemia⁵. None of the above-mentioned summits, however, earned comparable publicity. Undoubtedly, Jews of all political options of a given region were in attendance. Nevertheless, the impact that these people had on the fate of the Jewish diaspora on a global scale was incomparably lesser than that of the Jews living in the United States. That is why it is worth answering the

² *Jews Ask Voice at Peace Table. Congress in Philadelphia to Take Up Palestine and Other Questions*, 'Washington Post' [hereinafter: WP], December 16, 1918, p. 5; *American Jews Ask Full Rights in All States. Judge Mack, Chicago, Named President of Congress*, 'Chicago Daily Tribune' [hereinafter: ChDT], December 16, 1918, p. 15; *Jewish Congress Voices Its Hopes*, 'Boston Globe' [hereinafter: BG], December 16, 1918, p. 6.

³ The American metropolises with the highest percentage of Jewish population at the end of 1918 were New York (over 1.5 million people), Chicago (225,000), Philadelphia (200,000), Cleveland (100,000), Boston (77,500), Baltimore, St. Louis, Pittsburgh (60,000 each), Newark (55,000), Detroit (50,000). For more on this subject see G. Cohen, *Jews in the Making of America*, Boston 1924, pp. 362, 364.

⁴ The article will present the results of archival research of five most influential press titles in the United States at the time: 'New York Times' [hereinafter: NYT], 'Washington Post', 'Boston Globe', 'Chicago Daily Tribune' and 'Los Angeles Times' [hereinafter: LAT]. The search also included the 'Wall Street Journal', in which, however, politics was practically a marginal subject and there was not a single mention of the American Jewish Congress.

⁵ D. Jeziorny, *Londyn wobec ochrony mniejszości żydowskich w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej (1918–1919)*, Łódź 2016, pp. 55–56; W. Jaworski, *Syjonіści wobec rządu polskiego w okresie międzywojennym*, Sosnowiec 2002, pp. 9–12

questions of how such a significant congress came to be convened in Philadelphia. Secondly, we need to consider whether the December assembly fulfilled the hopes that had been placed in it, namely what resolutions were passed and how the decisions taken were implemented. Finally, the article will try to investigate the aftermath of the initiative, which, as has been mentioned, has been dubbed the 'long-forgotten event'.

The path leading to the first American summit of Jews was not easy. Debates on this matter lasted for practically the entire duration of the World War I. The congress was advocated primarily by Zionists, that is the faction whose aim was to implement the idea of a Jewish state, preferably in Palestine. The Federation of American Zionists (hereinafter: FAZ) achieved great organisational success in the USA. In 1914, it had less than 12,000 members and four years later there were already 176,000. This was due to several reasons, of which, in addition to Lord Balfour's declaration of November 2, 1917, and the entry of British troops into Jerusalem the following month, the most important was the commitment to Zionism by Louis D. Brandeis. He was a judge of the Supreme Court of the United States, a close associate of President Thomas W. Wilson, very popular among workers, to whom he provided legal assistance during their struggle to improve working conditions and wages. These included many Jewish immigrants from Russia and other countries of East Central Europe, where the longing for Palestine was particularly strong because of the treatment they received from the authorities in their countries of origin. This way, at the peak of his professional career, Brandeis earned popularity among Jews from all social groups present in the USA. He had close contacts with rich, well-established Jews of German descent, their middle class coreligionists, as well as the largest group of unskilled workers who came to America between 1881 and 1914 (about two million people), which Zionists and socialists of various factions wanted to represent. This, in turn, elevated him, as an excellent speaker and 'people's lawyer', to increasingly higher levels of political career⁶.

⁶ N. Glazer, *The Jews*, [in:] *Ethnic Leadership in America*, ed. J. Higham, Baltimore-London 1979, pp. 25-26; L. Pastusiak, *Prezydenci*, 2nd ed., vol. II, Warszawa 1989, p. 328; J. Daniels, *The Wilson Era. Years of War and After*, New York 1946, pp. 216-217; G. Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-213; A.T. Mason, *Brandeis. A Free Man's Life*, New York 1946, pp. 442-444, 451; *Racial and Cultural Minorities*.

As the situation of Jews in East Central Europe deteriorated, in 1915 the FAZ began to offer leaders of other organisations of American Jews a common platform for action. The main reason for the cooperation was to improve the standing of fellow worshippers in Eastern Europe, where the situation of Jews was, in short, very difficult already before the war⁷. The main partners of the Zionists for the talks were the American Jewish Committee (hereinafter: AJC) and various workers' organisations. The divisions among them were brought to the USA from Russia and Austria-Hungary, from where immigrants mainly came to America. The socialist circles were well aware that the Zionists were their main opponents in the competition for the hearts and minds of the workers. For their part, in August 1915 they established the Workers' Committee for Jewish Rights, which demanded complete political, civic and national-cultural equality. Initially, they failed to notice the threat posed by the FAZ striving to absorb smaller political groups. Over time, however, they withdrew from collaboration because the Zionists wanted only delegates who were able to identify themselves as American citizens to be allowed to participate in the possible congress. Given that many socialist activists were workers newly arrived from Russia to the USA, the anti-Zionist camp gained an argument to reject the Zionist offer of cooperation⁸.

Quite surprisingly, the American Jewish Committee was the main ally of workers' activists in opposing the FAZ's proposal to convene the American Jewish Congress. Founded in 1906, this organisation can be called an 'elite club', meaning that it was on the antipodes of the political scene in relation to the socialists. Led by a well-known New York lawyer, Louis Marshall, it brought together very influential people of American economic, financial, social and political life⁹. They were mainly German immigrants

Analysis of Prejudice and Discrimination, rev. eds G.E. Simpson, J.M. Yinger, New York 1958, pp. 314–316; L. Baker, *Brandeis and Frankfurter. A Dual Biography*, New York 1984, pp. 73–75, 161–162.

⁷ There is a great deal of literature on this subject, e.g. A. Polonsky, *Dzieje Żydów w Polsce i Rosji*, Warszawa 2014, pp. 73–218; L. Poliakov, *Historia antysemityzmu*, vol. II, Kraków 2008, pp. 279–297; *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, eds J.D. Klier, S. Lambroza, Cambridge 1992; J. Parkes, *The Emergence of the Jewish Problem. 1879–1939*, London–New York–Toronto 1946, pp. 91–103.

⁸ M. Epstein, *Jewish Labor in USA. An Industrial, Political and Cultural History of Jewish Labor Movement. 1914–1952*, vol. II, New York 1969, p. 62.

⁹ It is worth quoting at least a few of the most important names in this context: Oscar Straus (the most significant figure of Jewish life in the USA in the first

or their descendants of the first generation, who achieved great success in their business, often in cooperation with family members still on the Old Continent¹⁰. The restriction of the number of AJC members (membership based on co-optation – ‘prestige and wisdom’ of candidates as vital factors) did not prevent the organisation from being very influential, not only in the country, but also in a broader sense. The Committee saw its power of action in political instruments (talks ‘between people of influence with other people of influence’) or economic incentives (granting or withholding financial and economic aid). Since the congress proposed by the Zionists was to be based on the principles of democracy, which was the only appropriate option in America at the time, according to which the Zionists would be in majority, the American Jewish Committee abstained from cooperation, not wanting to lose its influence¹¹. Admittedly, a more numerous (several thousand members in 1918) Masonic lodge of the Independent Order of B’nai B’rith (Sons of the Covenant)¹², the oldest Jewish organisation in the USA (active since 1843), collaborated with the Committee. However, the method of operation did not differ much from the AJC model. The aim was to lobby the most important

years of the 20th century, member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, former president of the AJC, known as ‘the dean’ of Jewish bankers in New York, Secretary for Trade and Labour in the administration of Theodor Roosevelt), Julius Rosenwald (Chicago’s ‘Prince of American merchants’, head of the house of Sears-Roebuch, member of the National Defence Advisory Committee of the Wilson administration despite his membership in the Republican Party), Jacob H. Schiff (head of the largest American investment bank Kuhn, Loeb & Co., known for his philanthropic activity).

¹⁰ For example, the brothers Paul and Felix Warburg (the former was one of the co-founders of the Federal Reserve System, associated with the house of Kuhn, Loeb & Co., and the second was the chairman of the Joint Distribution Committee, which distributed aid to Jews from East Central Europe). Their brother Max Warburg was one of the main German bankers, and after World War I he was in a delegation that went to Paris to receive the first version of the peace conditions set by the *Entente* powers.

¹¹ G.D. Best, *To Free a People. American Jewish Leaders and the Jewish Problem in Eastern Europe 1890–1914*, Westport 1982, pp. 196, 206, 209–211; A.A. Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community. The Kehillah Experiment 1908–1922*, New York–London 1970, pp. 16, 22, 26, 30; N. Glazer, *op. cit.*, pp. 22–23; G. Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 106, pp. 108–109, 217–218, 222–224, 226–228; J. Daniels, *op. cit.*, pp. 216, 218; M. Epstein, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹² Initially Simon Wolf and Adolf Krause, who headed B’nai B’rith in 1905–1928, belonged to the AJC, but they left its ranks in 1907. See G.D. Best, *op. cit.*, pp. 131–133.

USA politicians for the improvement of the fate of Jews in various parts of the world. In 1913, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith was also formed as an association to combat all forms of anti-Semitism. It has made it possible to carry out more vigorous awareness-raising activities among the general public¹³.

The dispute between the Federation of American Zionists and the other political circles of Jews in the USA was, however, not only a tactic of fighting for political position. The matter had a more principled resonance. Anti-Zionists in the ranks of American Jews were usually well-established in terms of income and positions. They wanted the Americans to think of them as part of their own elite and to be seen as citizens loyal to their homeland, the United States. It was the USA and every other country of Jewish settlement that, according to the anti-Zionists, should be seen as a modern Zion, where all the necessary aspects of life could be developed. Advocacy for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine inevitably led to the question of which country really counted for the Jews more: the USA or Israel; or which anthem someone wanted to sing as their own – the American *Star-Spangled Banner* or the Zionist *Hatikvah*; and finally, which flag such person considered as their own – ‘Star and Stripes’ or the six-pointed blue star on a white background. The symbolic sphere was very much emphasised in this case, hence the dissociation from all manifestations of Jewish nationalism and emphasising the fidelity to the country of residence in those circles. The latter also consisted of the courage of soldiers of Jewish descent, fighting on the fronts of World War I and dying in the name of the American *raison d'être*. Suspicions of dual loyalty led, according to opponents of Zionism, to anti-Semitism, which could completely undermine the position of Jews in the United States. They could be accused of getting rich at the expense of Americans during their ‘temporary stay’ in the USA, so that they could go to Palestine with the money they earned. On the part of American anti-Semites, it was expected that the Jews, as ‘undesirable aliens’, would be pressurised and persuaded to go to ‘their own country’. However, there were but a few who wanted leave the United States. This provided another argument against the Zionists, presented as a small minority of the diaspora in the

¹³ https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/B'nai_B'rith; M. Sklare, *The Jewish Community in America*, New York 1974, pp. 80–81; N. Glazer, *op. cit.*, p. 26; A.A. Goren, *op. cit.*, p. 22; G.D. Best, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–16, 212–213, 220.

USA. Enmity towards the Jews could also materialise by pointing out behind-the-scenes activities meant to influence individual politicians or even entire governments – after all, money offered such an opportunity. In this case, the Jews were aware of what might be a problem for the public opinion. Furthermore, Zionist opponents claimed that the word ‘Jew’ meant a follower of Judaism, not a person of Jewish nationality. The nationality they declared was 100% ‘American’. In addition, ‘Jewish Palestine’, often referred to as ‘the so-called homeland’, was associated by anti-Zionists with the threat of a combination of state and religion, which would be set back the achievements of liberal government ‘thousands of years’. Orthodox rabbis supporting Zionism did not hide their intentions. Citing biblical prophecies that heralded the return of Jews to Zion, they proclaimed that they would establish order in their country introducing a political and economic system based on the teachings of Judaism. Another accusation against Zionism was the utopian nature of the solution, which did not give the Jews living in oppression any chance of cultural or educational development. Palestine was too restricted and poor an area to receive suffering fellow believers from the Eastern part of Europe.

Aside from strictly political and economic arguments, there was yet another one. Opponents of Zionism recruited from the ranks of religious Jews, where there were deep divisions. Advocates of Reform Judaism were against the idea of the Congress, associated with Zionists¹⁴. They referred to the resolutions of the Rabbinical Conferences of 1869 and 1889, when the ‘Palestinian nationalism’ in Judaism in the U.S was renounced. Even the old prayers for the restoration of Palestine were withdrawn. Such decisions gave rise to the development of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which in 1918 brought together more than 200 congregations of Reform Judaism. In fact, the majority of American Jews from before 1881 felt affiliation with this particular brand of Judaism. It was also given a proselytising character, hence the

¹⁴ More about the rules adopted by the reformers in the mid-19th century: A. Unterman, *Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, based on the Polish edition: *Żydzi. Wiara i życie*, Łódź 1989, pp. 97–101. The American precursor of Reform Judaism was Isaac Mayer Wise, who established the first Reform rabbinical seminar in the USA in Cincinnati – see A. Hertzberg, A. Hirt-Manheimer, *Jews: The Essence and Character of a People*, based on the Polish edition: *Żydzi. Istota i charakter narodu*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 178–180.

acceptance of English as the language of the worship, so that prayers, the Bible and its reading could be understood by people from outside the Jewish world. In this sense, the restoration of a separate nationality among Jews was a threat to Judaism, as it would restrict the possibility of following the Jewish religion only to those born of a Jewish mother. In the last years before the war the above principles wavered significantly because many Orthodox Jews who came to the USA from Eastern Europe did not intend to assimilate at all with the environment of their new homeland and retained Hebrew as the language of prayer. Importantly, these Jews coming to the United States were not bothered by the Zionist programme itself. They even stated that they felt part of the Jewish race and nationality, hence the accusation raised against the Zionists that they were doing nothing to turn the arriving migrants into Americans, who would adapt to the conditions in the USA and develop links with that country. Opponents of Zionism even claimed that if such an attitude had been adopted by people of other nationalities who came to the USA, the most powerful country in the world would have disintegrated into 'German Americans', 'Irish Americans' and consequently into 'Palestinian Americans'. Zionism seemed to pose a threat to the American *raison d'être*¹⁵. Thus, statements

¹⁵ Two paragraphs based on: *Oppose Jewish Nationalism. Zionism Long Outgrow, Says Central Conference of Rabbis*, 'WP', May 5, 1918, p. 6; *Peril in Zionism, Jews Tell Wilson. Committee Asks Him to Reconsider Indorsement*, 'WP', September 7, 1918, p. 7; *Sees Danger in Zionism. Rabbi Philipson Explains Opposition to Jacob H. Schiff's Views*, 'NYT', September 14, 1918, p. 7; Gaster, *New Judean State*, 'LAT', September 23, 1918, p. II4; *Americanism vs Zionism. Many American Jews Unsympathetic to a Political Homeland in Palestine, Says Former Attorney General of New York*, 'NYT', December 22, 1918, p. 40; *Rabbis Favor British Plan. New York Jewish Convention Indorses Palestine Homeland*, 'WP', December 26, 1918, p. 3; *Calls Plan for Jewish Nation Absurd Dream. Semitic Scholar Says Bible Prophecies Cannot Be Taken Literally*, 'ChDT', February 3, 1919, p. 13; *Kahn Opposes Zionism. California Regrets that President Has Ignored It*, 'NYT', February 6, 1919, p. 24; J. Kahn, *Why Most American Jews do not Favor Zionism. Their Allegiance to This Country Is the First Reason, and They Object to a Union of Church and State in Palestine or Elsewhere*, 'NYT', February 16, 1919, p. 70; G.J. Kasper, *New Hyphenism in Zionism, Declares Julius Kahn, Who Puts United States First*, 'WP', February 16, 1919, p. 12; *Most Jews Oppose Zionism, Says Kahn. Representative Explains Views to Be Put before Peace Conference. Against Special State. Declared Question of Race Will Vanish if Civil and Religious Liberty Is Granted*, 'NYT', March 9, 1919, p. 9; *Jews Will Honor Dr. Wise's Memory. Meeting at the Harmony Club Lays to Raise Fund*

of opponents of Zionism evidently mixed religious arguments with political at almost every step.

Therefore, the dispute continued, and it was becoming less and less likely that the Congress of Jews living in the USA would convene, even though it was to take place on September 12, 1917. By that time, however, the US government had become involved in the Great War and opponents of Zionism gained another argument to play for time¹⁶, even though delegates had already been elected in many places, which was accompanied by significant emotional outbursts. At the beginning of July 1917, 'The New York Times' wrote about the disputes during the annual convention of the United Synagogues of America, a very representative and influential conservative organisation of the Jewish community in the USA. When the motion to accept the Zionist proposal to appoint a delegate of the organisation to the Congress was put to a vote and won the majority, Dr Cyrus Adler, writer, historian, religious scholar, head of the organisation and member of the American Jewish Committee, resigned as the chairman. Although his resignation was not accepted, Professor Israel Friedlander from the Jewish Theological Seminary was appointed the delegate to the American Jewish Congress. However, the vote was not unambiguous. It was attended by fifty participants of the convention of eighty eligible. Of these, twenty two voted in favour of appointing Friedlander, eleven against and the rest abstained. Friedlander's candidacy was therefore supported by a little over a quarter of the voting members of the summit. The mood was not much improved by the very placid final declaration. It avowed support 'for the rehabilitation of the land of our forefathers' and the fulfilment of hopes for the establishment of a national home for Jews in Palestine, 'and as a mean for the consummation of the religious ideals of Judaism'¹⁷. Henry Morgenthau, former American ambassador to Turkey, made a decision similar to Adler's, resigning from the position of chairman of the Executive Committee of the Free Synagogue in New York. In a letter to the Committee he explained that he could no longer cooperate with the rabbi of this congregation,

for Famous School He Founded, 'NYT', March 11, 1919, p. 5; *Anniversary Banquet of Hebrew Free Loan Society*, 'BG', March 20, 1919, p. 10.

¹⁶ *Set Date Tuesday for American Jewish Congress*, 'BG', November 15, 1918, p. 6.

¹⁷ *United Synagogues Clash over Zionism. Dr. Adler Resigns as a President when Delegate to Jewish Congress Chosen*, 'NYT', July 3, 1917, p. 7.

Stephen Wise, one of the most significant activists of the Zionist movement in the USA¹⁸.

Among the opponents of Zionism there are many eminent personalities from both the Jewish and the American world. The best-known figures include Julius Kahn, representative from California in the United States House of Representatives for ten consecutive terms, Henry Morgenthau, W.D. Philipson, a Cincinnati clergyman, Simon Wolf from Washington (B'nai B'rith), or judge Simon Rosendale from Albany, former Attorney General of the State of New York. They addressed a letter of protest signed by three hundred Jews to President Wilson¹⁹ when he officially supported the aspirations of the Zionist movement in early March 1919²⁰.

The entire cited argumentation of the anti-Zionists demonstrates how many emotions the Palestinian question provoked among the Jewish diaspora in the USA. This was the key reason why the American Jewish Congress could not be convened throughout the World War I. Nevertheless, life went on and on November 11, 1918, the hostilities in Europe ceased. This information was followed by ominous news in the press about the ill-treatment of Jews in East Central Europe. After the pogrom in Lviv (November 21–23, 1918), it seemed that the worst prognoses were becoming true in the lives of the followers of Judaism and it was necessary to act quickly in order to prevent further such incidents. The situation required the unity of action of all Jews who could have any impact on the improvement of the situation of their brothers and sisters in the lands of the former multinational Russian and Habsburg Empires. In November and December 1918, the fate of these areas was difficult to predict, despite the plans of the Powers to rebuild the Polish state. After the anti-Jewish incidents reported by the press, the formation of Poland did not particularly inspire enthusiasm among the leaders of the most important political groups within the Jewish diaspora. They were

¹⁸ *Quit Because of Zionism. Morgenthau Explains Resignation as President of Free Synagogue*, 'NYT', March 7, 1919, p. 18.

¹⁹ *Protest of 300 Jews against Zionism*, 'BG', March 6, 1919, p. 4; *Anti-Zionists Oppose Nation in Palestine. President Wilson's Given Views to Take to the Peace Meeting*, 'ChDT', March 6, 1919, p. 4.

²⁰ *Wilson Favors Jewish State. Zionist Commonwealth in Palestine Approved. Views Are Voiced at White House Conference. President Predicts Allies' Fullest Support*, 'LAT', March 4, 1919, p. II8; *Zionist Given Approval by President. Wilson Assures Jews Efforts for New Palestine*, 'ChDT', March 3, 1919, p. 3.

also not optimistic about the talks they conducted in the USA with Roman Dmowski, leader of the Polish National Committee (*Komitet Narodowy Polski*, hereinafter: KNP) in October 1918²¹. In addition to their own respective activity²², judge Julian Mack, president of the FAZ, and Louis Marshall, head of the AJC, made a joint appeal. They expressed fear that massacres of Jews in East Central Europe could take place on a scale exceeding that of the 1905 Russian pogroms. In this situation, they called on the governments of the Entente powers to oppose such a scenario, especially likely to happen in Poland and Romania²³.

Soon the press reported that the Administrative Committee of the American Jewish Congress, chaired by Colonel Harry Cutler associated with the Federation of American Zionists, was to set a new date for its commencement. Out of all key subjects, two were considered to be the most important. Firstly, to rebuild Jewish life in Palestine and, secondly, to guarantee equal rights for Jews in Europe. In both cases the summit was all the more urgent due to the upcoming Peace Conference in Paris. The American Jews wanted to send their own delegation in order to present their point of view on both issues²⁴. The prevailing view among the American Jews seemed to be that the Zionism vs. anti-Zionism controversy should not divide them. They knew from personal contacts that delegations from many countries were going to Paris, and if Jews were to attend as seven or eight such separate representations, they would have no chance of winning. In the official statements of leaders, such as Jacob Schiff, more and more harsh phrases began to appear: Palestine is not necessary for American or British

²¹ A. Kapiszewski, *Stosunki polsko-żydowskie w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki*, [in:] *Polonia amerykańska. Przeszłość i współczesność*, eds H. Kubiak, E. Kusielewicz, T. Gromada, Wrocław 1988, pp. 621–622; J. Lerski, *Dmowski, Paderewski and American Jews. A Documentary Compilation*, 'Polin' 1986, pp. 99–114. See also Dmowski's account – R. Dmowski, *Polityka polska i odbudowanie państwa*, vol. II, Warszawa 1989, pp. 93–94.

²² G.D. Best, *op. cit.*, pp. 216–218; *Protect Jews. American Jewish Committee Urges the Allies to Guard Rights of Their Countrymen*, 'ChDT', November 11, 1918, p. 11.

²³ *Jews Fear Vast Pogroms in Eastern Europe*, 'ChDT', November 14, 1918, p. 2.

²⁴ *Jewish Congress to Meet. Administrative Committee to Fix Date Tomorrow for Session*, 'NYT', November 25, 1918, p. 15; *Jewish Congress Meeting in Philadelphia, Dec 15*, 'BG', November 27, 1918, p. 20; *Jewish Congress to Meet. Will Assemble with 400 Delegates in Philadelphia on Sunday*, 'NYT', December 11, 1918, p. 17; *Jews Ask Voice at Peace Table. Congress in Philadelphia to Take Up Palestine and Other Questions*, 'WP', December 14, 1918, p. 9.

or French Jews, but for 'hounded Jews in Poland, Galicia and Romania'. The banker realised that while it was possible to win equal political, religious and civil rights at the Peace Conference, this did not automatically mean gaining support from the population of the majoritarian peoples. He therefore considered the Palestinian question to be equally important²⁵.

Opponents of Zionism had therefore no other option than to collaborate with the Federation of American Zionists to set an example to Jews from European countries, mainly France and the United Kingdom, that it was possible and even necessary to join forces. Thus, they agreed for the congress to be held in Philadelphia. On that occasion, they won two concessions from the Zionists. First of all, they were supposed not to raise the postulate of recognising Jews as a separate nation on a global scale at the Peace Conference. It should be remembered that the World Zionist Organisation announced its post-war programme at the Copenhagen conference on October 28, 1918. It consisted of four points: that Palestine within its historical borders be recognised as the national homeland of the Jews; that equal rights be granted to persons of Jewish nationality in all countries of their settlement; that their cultural and national autonomy be secured; and finally: that Jews be recognised as a separate nation and allowed to become members of the League of Nations²⁶. The second concession of the Zionists was the promise that the Philadelphia Congress would be a one-off initiative, followed by no institutional continuation of the joint representation of American Jews²⁷.

After the agreement was reached, there was nothing left to do other than to start the Congress. According to Jewish religious regulations, on the first day after the Sabbath, Sunday, December 15, 1918, the long-awaited summit began in Philadelphia. Colonel Harry Cutler, head of the Administrative Committee, officially opened the Congress. The Chief Rabbi of Philadelphia, B.L. Levinthal, led the prayer for the success of the meeting. In his opening speech, Cutler reminded those present about the persecution of that the 'Jewish people' had been facing for thousands of years and expressed hope

²⁵ *Jews Will Honor Dr. Wise's Memory. Meeting at the Harmony Club Lays to Raise Fund for Famous School He Founded*, 'NYT', March 11, 1919, p. 5.

²⁶ J. Parkes, *op. cit.*, p. 111; B. Bouffał, *Ochrona mniejszości w prawie narodów*, Warszawa 1928, p. 156.

²⁷ M. Epstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

that after the Great War that community would be able to stand on its own. The latter phrase was interpreted as an allusion to Palestine and rewarded with enthusiastic applause by the overwhelming Zionist majority at the Congress. Cutler concluded his speech by stating that Jews all over the world deserve equal civil, religious and political rights because of the sacrifices they suffered during the war. This theme was also present in many speeches delivered in Philadelphia. On the first day they were repeated by Professor David Abram from the University of Pennsylvania and Nathan Straus as the honorary chairman of the Congress, known for his New York tableware factory, which earned him a fortune.

The first day of the Congress had one more important aspect, namely the election of the authorities. Julian Mack (FAZ) and Louis Marshall (AJC) were appointed chairmen. In his inaugural speech after assuming his new function, Mack conciliatorily declared that the most important thing in the post-war reality was to guarantee the rights and prosperity of Jews in Poland and Romania. It was necessary to determine the methods of action that would make cooperation with Jews from other countries possible. Once common ground was achieved, there was also the question of the Peace Conference compelling all governments, both those existing and those to be formed in the future, not to persecute Jews for any reason. He considered the Palestinian question, although not yet in the form of an independent state, to have already been resolved by the victorious world powers. It was undoubtedly an exaggerated assertion and at the same time it stressed the willingness to cooperate with non-Zionist circles represented at the Congress. It should be noted, however, that during the debates, and already on the first day, there was no shortage of statements that could raise the temperature of the political dispute among the delegates. Among other things, some of them stated that the transformation of the Peace Conference into the League of Nations would lead to the restoration of the 'Jewish nationality'. Throughout the day, admiration for president Wilson was expressed many times, as he was expected to help the delegates in fulfilling their hopes²⁸.

²⁸ Two paragraphs based on: *Jews Plan Unity in First Congress. Nathan Straus Addressed Philadelphia Meeting Held for Defining of Aims. Makes Plea for Liberty. Wilson's Name Stirs Delegates to Prolonged Cheering. Judge J.W. Mack President, NYT*, December 16, 1918, p. 24; *Jewish Congress Voices Its Hopes*, 'BG', December

However, the real work did not start until the following day. It was no longer a matter of verbal clashes but rather specific resolutions, which should have been adopted as a programme for further action. First, the Palestinian issue was addressed and a declaration entitled 'Jewish Commonwealth in Palestine' was adopted after heated debates. It was presented by Professor Harry Friedenwald from Baltimore. It proclaimed the need to rebuild the Jewish homeland in Palestine. Support was expressed for the British trusteeship over this territory on behalf of the expected League of Nations. The Congress delegation, who were to travel to Paris, were tasked with working with the World Zionist Organisation to persuade the Peace Conference to recognise the 'age-long dreams' of the Jews for Palestine, according to Lord Balfour's declaration. Counting on the help of the British on the ground, but also of the other victorious powers, they wanted to create 'such political, administrative and economic conditions' for the settlement of the Jews. At the same time, the intention to grant equal civil and religious rights to other 'non-Jewish communities' living in Palestine was declared. American Zionists presented their plans for the economic development of Palestine and many rich Congress participants declared specific sums to support their activities. The resolution was adopted almost unanimously (a single vote against) in a very solemn atmosphere and with great enthusiasm. A reporter from 'The New York Times' writing about the Congress noted that the *Hatikvah* anthem was sung while both the American and the Zionist flags were flying²⁹.

The second important item on the Congress agenda was the election of delegates who were to travel to Europe. Their task was to leave the USA as quickly as possible and establish cooperation with Jews from other countries in order to achieve the goals outlined in the Congress. Delegates were required to submit

16, 1918, p. 6; *American Jews Ask Full Rights in All Nations. Judge Mack, Chicago, Named President of Congress*, 'LAT', December 16, 1918, p. 15.

²⁹ *Indorse Jewish Palestine State. Congress at Philadelphia Favors British Protectorate. Peace Conference Delegates Chosen. Equal Rights in All Nations Asked*, 'BG', December 18, 1918, pp. 1-2; *Adopts Palestine as Jewish Homeland. Philadelphia Congress Votes to Establish Commonwealth under Britain's Trusteeship. Delegates Going to Paris. Elkus, Straus and Morgenthau Are Mentioned as Envoys to the Paris Conference*, 'NYT', December 18, 1918, p. 24; *Jews Look to Britain. Philadelphia Congress Wants London Trustee in Palestine. For Non-Hebrew Rights*, 'WP', December 18, 1918, p. 8.

a mission report no later than one year after the signing of the peace treaty. Thus, it was an indirect announcement that the work of the Congress would not be a one-off occasion. Another gateway to continue the activities of the American Jewish Congress was the possibility of applying for new instructions in the event of a change in the operating conditions of the delegation. For obvious reasons, the election of delegates provoked the most emotional response. Initially there were to be seven but ultimately two more were elected. The debated concerned the best composition of the delegation. The idea was to focus on experienced diplomats such as Henry Morgenthau, Abraham Elkus (also a former US Ambassador to Turkey) or Oscar Straus, who knew his way around the world of world politics. Although the author of the article in the press did not write it, one can guess that the opponents of Zionism supported this option. The alternative idea was to send a delegation that would be the most representative for the whole Congress. Then all groups would have a number of delegates proportional to number of their representatives at the Congress. As expected, the Zionist proposal gained the support of the majority of those gathered and was ultimately implemented³⁰.

In the end, the delegation of the American Jewish Congress finally was composed of: Julian Mack from Chicago as chairman, Rabbi Stephen Wise from New York – representing the FAZ (he was already in Europe at that time and was elected *in absentia*), Rabbi B.L. Levinthal of Philadelphia for Mizrachi and Orthodox rabbis, Colonel Harry Cutler of Providence as Zionist, Jacob de Haas – another New York representative – Secretary General of the FAZ, Louis Marshall of New York on behalf of the AJC, Dr Joseph Barondess – related to Louis Brandeis – radical New York clothing trade unionist, Morris Winchefskey – New York writer representing socialist revolutionists and Nachman Syrkin from Poale Zion. Bernard G. Richards joined the delegation to act as secretary. It is evident that the Zionists and representatives of the New York Jews dominated in the delegation³¹.

³⁰ *Adopts Palestine as Jewish Homeland. Philadelphia Congress Votes to Establish Commonwealth under Britain's Trustship. Delegates Going to Paris. Elkus Straus and Morgenthau Are Mentioned as Envoys to the Paris Conference*, 'NYT', December 18, 1918, p. 24; *Jews Look to Britain. Philadelphia Congress Wants London Trustee in Palestine. For Non-Hebrew Rights*, 'WP', December 1, 1918, p. 8.

³¹ *Jews Propose Equal Rights. Hebrew Congress Drafts Bill for Peace Discussion. Would Have Principles Incorporated in New States. Racial and Religious Freedom*

Another subject addressed at the Congress was the issue of equal civil, religious and political rights for Jews in the countries of East Central Europe. Speaking at the plenary session, Louis Marshall limited the number of states that would be covered by the 'Bill of Rights', as the list of Jewish demands was called. This subject was in a way introduced by a discussion about Romania, which legally discriminated the Jews in the years preceding World War I³². On the third day of the Congress, Marshall called for the diplomatic recognition of the countries of East Central Europe to be contingent on their consenting to the following commitments:

- 1) all persons and their families residing in the territory of a given country prior to August 1, 1914 are entitled to citizenship if they fled from the war turmoil or were resettled and would decide to return within ten years (unless they formally declared that they want to stay in another country) – this is the echo of the pre-war policy of Romania;
- 2) for ten years after these provisions enter into force, no laws restricting the aspirations of former residents of a given territory to become nationals of a given state may be introduced;
- 3) equal treatment without any discrimination and equal civil, religious, political and national rights regardless of race, nationality or religion should be guaranteed – implementation of a typically liberal concept of negative equality, i.e. the same rights for all citizens in the country;
- 4) legal representation of minorities in bodies representing majoritarian nations;
- 5) members of all nationalities and religions (a compromise approach to the dispute between American Zionists and anti-Zionists is evident here) in a given country would have an autonomous rule over their religious, educational, charitable and all other institutions – this is the main postulate of the concept of cultural and national autonomy, separating minorities as distinct entities, having legal personality in relations with the authorities of the country;

Urged on All Nations, 'LAT', December 19, 1918, p. II7; *To Present Aims of Jews at Versailles. Committee of Nine Named at Philadelphia. Commission Named to Look into Situation in Poland*, 'BG', December 19, 1918, p. 3.

³² *Indorse Jewish Palestine State. Congress at Philadelphia Favors British Protectorate. Peace Conference Delegates Chosen. Equal Rights in All Nations Asked*, 'BG', December 18, 1918, p. 2.

- 6) rejection any legal restrictions on the free use of one's own language;
- 7) persons celebrating the Sabbath were guaranteed the option to settle their secular affairs on Sundays and were not compelled to carry out any official activity on Saturdays and other holidays – Marshall meant elections or court hearings³³.

The Congress accepted these demands of the AJC leader, which were preceded by negotiations with the Zionists. Compared to Marshall's earlier demands, for example those he made during his conversation with Roman Dmowski on October 6, 1918, only two items were added (the second on the right of option and the fourth on the proportional representation of minorities in electoral bodies). The rhetoric, on the other hand, became harsher. The diplomatic recognition of countries such as Poland was questioned³⁴. This may mean that the leader of the American Jewish Committee had already carefully considered his aspirations earlier, and it was him who set the tone for the Congress at that point. Undoubtedly, it is not true that in their demands Marshall, and with him the entire American Jewish Congress, were guided by liberalism and focused only on safeguarding the fate of individuals distinct from the majoritarian nation for religious, linguistic or racial reasons. Undoubtedly, the Congress delegation leaving for Paris had on their agenda the fight for the collective rights of Jews in East Central Europe, that is, for the so-called positive equality or, in other words, for supporting separateness³⁵.

The remaining issues raised during the Congress were of tertiary importance: the attempt to address the problem of recognising Jews as a nationality on a global scale, Tomáš G. Masaryk's letter about stopping the deportation of Galician Jews from Prague, protest against the arrest of four Lviv Zionists in Przemyśl, regards sent from the Congress of Ukrainians living in the USA that was held

³³ *Jews Propose Equal Rights. Hebrew Congress Drafts Bill for Peace Discussion. Would Have Principles Incorporated in New States. Racial and Religious Freedom Urged on All Nations*, 'LAT', December 19, 1918, p. II7. See also D. Jeziorny, *Akcja amerykańskich organizacji żydowskich na rzecz międzynarodowej ochrony praw mniejszości (1918–1919)*, 'Acta Universitatis Lodziensis', Folia Historica 59, 1997, pp. 9–10.

³⁴ See J. Lerski, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

³⁵ See faulty analysis by L. Rig and J. Kennedy, *Tolerant Majorities, Loyal Minorities and 'Ethnic Reversals': Constructing Minority Rights at Versailles 1919*, 'Nations and Nationalism' 2009, vol. XV, No. 3, pp. 462–470, 477–478.

at the same time, and a visit to the place where the Declaration of Independence of the United States was adopted at the conclusion of the Congress³⁶. From Poland's point of view the most important was the fact that Louis Marshall, followed by the entire Congress, agreed to sending a mixed commission to Poland to examine the actual situation of Jews in the lands subject to the sovereignty of Warsaw. It was proposed by Jan Smulski, head of the National Department in Chicago, a well-known Polish diaspora activist in the USA. The American Jewish Congress did not believe the Poles who denied rumours of pogroms and agreed to send its own representatives³⁷, but eventually the initiative was fell through.

The entire American Jewish Congress ended on December 18, 1918 in an atmosphere of great enthusiasm. It adopted two important documents concerning Palestine and the fight for the rights of Jewish minorities in East Central Europe. The Congress delegation sent to Paris for the Peace Conference had strong legitimacy to present their demands. It was elected by the entire Jewish community of more than three million people living in the USA. After arriving in the French capital, however, the delegates faced two serious disappointments. First of all, they were not treated as official participants of the conference, as such status was reserved only for members of the victorious coalition³⁸. The delegation was therefore only able to exert informal influence on the Peace Conference debates. Secondly, the attempt to create a unified body representing all the Jews who came from different countries of the world proved a complete failure. Despite attempts to base the programme on a compromise developed in Philadelphia,

³⁶ *Indorse Jewish Palestine State. Congress at Philadelphia Favors British Protectorate. Peace Conference Delegates Chosen. Equal Rights in All Nations Asked*, 'BG', December 18, 1918, p. 2; *To Present Aims of Jews at Versailles. Committee of Nine Named at Philadelphia. Commission Named to Look into Situation in Poland*, 'BG', December 19, 1918, p. 3.

³⁷ *Jews Propose Equal Rights. Hebrew Congress Drafts Bill for Peace Discussion. Would Have Principles Incorporated in New States. Racial and Religious Freedom Urged on All Nations*, 'LAT', December 19, 1918, p. II7. See KNP report, Philadelphia, December 15, 1918, Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie / The Central Archives of Modern Records, Komitet Narodowy Polski / The Polish National Committee, file 159, p. 117.

³⁸ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States. Paris Peace Conference*, vol. III, Washington 1943, pp. 535–537, 540–541 (minutes of the meeting of the Council of Ten, January 13, 1919); M. Hankey, *The Supreme Control at the Paris Peace Conference 1919. A Commentary*, London 1963, pp. 79–80.

organisations reluctant towards Zionism from France (Alliance Israélite Universelle) and Great Britain (Joint Foreign Committee) refused to cooperate, and even tried to sway Louis Marshall to their side. As a result, American Jews entered into an agreement with delegations from East Central Europe, dominated by Zionists. The anti-Zionist French and British Jews, on the other hand, acted completely separately, although their programmes to guarantee the rights of their brethren in the new states did not differ much from Marshall's proposals³⁹.

During the diplomatic struggle at the Peace Conference, two important decisions concerning Jews were made. Firstly, Palestine was made a class A British Mandate. London had been formally in charge of it on behalf of the League of Nations since July 1922, but since the capture of Jerusalem in December 1917, it administered the territory. At the beginning it was a military administration, and then, from July 1, 1920, a civilian one headed by a High Commissioner. They therefore had the opportunity and, from 1922, the obligation to implement what Balfour had declared on November 2, 1917⁴⁰. We can therefore safely conclude that with regard to the main postulate of the Zionists, the Jews obtained exactly what they wanted at that time. Later disappointments with British politics in the thirties of the 20th century could not have been foreseen. Secondly, countries of East Central Europe were forced to sign the so-called minority treaties. As far as their content is concerned, for the most part they matched the demands of the American Jewish Congress. The difference was the omission of all elements that might suggest anything other than the protection of individuals who belong to racial, religious or linguistic minorities (the concept of negative equality). Thus, cultural and national autonomy could not be won, which was undoubtedly a blow against one of the basic postulates of Zionists. The interpretation of Wilson's principle of self-determination of nations, assuming that only one nation could live in one country, ultimately prevailed. Therefore, there is no mention of national minorities in the so-called minority treaties. The main promoter of such a formulation of the commitments of the East Central European countries was British diplomacy, contrary to the position

³⁹ For more see D. Jeziorny, *Londyn...*, pp. 56–61, 106–108.

⁴⁰ A. Patek, *Żydzi w drodze do Palestyny 1934–1944*, Kraków 2009, pp. 35–38.

of Americans, who stayed in touch with the representatives of the American Jewish Congress during their stay in Paris⁴¹.

Despite two important accomplishments won in Paris by Jewish delegates from across the Atlantic Ocean, the idea of the American Jewish Congress did not achieve the expected success. Immediately after the report on the activities in Paris, representatives of non-Zionist groups withdrew from the organisation. It was mainly about the American Jewish Committee and socialist parties. The American Jewish Congress continued its activity as a Zionist organisation, presided over by Rabbi Stephen Wise for nearly thirty years. It has been functioning in this form to this day, although after 2010 it significantly reduced its activity due to lack of money – it fell victim to Bernard Mudoff's financial machinations⁴².

The Philadelphia Congress was therefore a one-time event as a meeting at which all political factions of American Jews were represented. It aroused great hope and enthusiasm among ordinary people of Jewish descent, being a symbol of unity in the face of the momentous changes in global politics after the end of the World War I. It was the result of a compromise between competing political organisations, which made it possible to send one strong representation to the then capital of the world. It had enjoyed indubitable prestige in the Jewish world – to the point that on the Committee of Jewish Delegations at the Peace Conference, the functions of chairman and vice-chairman were entrusted to delegates from the United States, Julian Mack and Louis Marshall. In Paris, they managed to achieve the vast majority of the postulates they were entrusted with regard to the Palestinian question and the protection of minority rights in East Central Europe. In this sense, the congress was one of the 'most momentous epochs in Jewish life'.

⁴¹ See more in D. Jeziorny, *Londyn...*, pp. 127–154.

⁴² N. Glazer, *op. cit.*, p. 27; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Jewish_Congress.

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DARIUSZ JEZIORYN

**‘Jedne z najdonioślejszych epok w życiu Żydów’
Kongres Żydów Amerykańskich w Filadelfii
(15–18 grudnia 1918 roku)**

Kongres Żydów Amerykańskich jako organizacja mająca na celu reprezentowanie wszystkich Żydów zamieszkujących Stany Zjednoczone zapoczątkował swoją działalność od zjazdu w Filadelfii. W dniach 15–18 grudnia 1918 r. doszło do spotkania 400 delegatów reprezentujących wszystkie żydowskie stronnictwa polityczne i grupy społeczne w USA. Budził on ogromne nadzieje, ponieważ przed Żydami otwierały się nowe możliwości co do rozwiązania kwestii palestyńskiej, głównego projektu syjonistów, a także zagwarantowania równych praw mniejszościom żydowskim w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. W artykule została udzielona odpowiedź na pytania o to, jak doszło do zwołania Kongresu Żydów Amerykańskich. Jak ustosunkowały się do niego główne ugrupowania polityczne Żydów w USA? Co było przedmiotem obrad? Jakie decyzje podjęto? A następnie w jaki sposób je zrealizowano i jakie były dalsze losy inicjatywy zapoczątkowanej w Filadelfii? Odpowiedzi na powyższe kwestie pozwolą sformułować wniosek co do tego, jaką wagę miał grudniowy kongres w dziejach Żydów w USA oraz czy wypełnił stawiane przed nim zadania.

Słowa kluczowe: Żydzi w USA, Kongres Żydów Amerykańskich, kwestia palestyńska, syjonizm, prawa mniejszości.