

Michał Sobelman*

Zionists and “Polish Jews”. Palestinian Reception of *We, Polish Jews*

In memory of professor Chone Szmeruk

At the beginning of the sixties, Allenby street – the main commercial thoroughfare of Tel Aviv – was a Polish street. There, one could find all the official institutions like the embassy of the People’s Republic of Poland, where MP Antoni Bida resided, and in front of which masses of poor people gathered (according to the modified proverb “When in poverty, visit a Jew”). There were the offices of “Orbis”, a branch of the PKO bank and as many as three Polish bookshops, each of which would have been considered the best in any Polish city, Warsaw included. After the Six-Day War in June 1967 both the embassy and Orbis vanished, and a year later, after the memorable events of March, new immigrants from Poland appeared in Allenby street. If a list of best-selling books had been published in those bookshops at the time, I have no doubt that beside the Israeli stories by Hłasko, the top places would have been taken by *Tuwim for children*, *The rhyme market* and, first of all, *Polish Flowers*.

I remember the bookshop of Edmund Neustein in the underground passage at Allenby particularly well, where, between the shelves, you could still feel the spirit of Marek Hłasko, who had died a few months earlier. One Friday afternoon in spring 1970 was especially memorable, when from the speaker of a Bambino turntable came the voice of Ewa Demarczyk singing *Tomaszów* and *Grande Valse Brillante*, and, soon after, Stanisław Wygodzki, a poet and a friend of my father from pre-war Będzin, recited emotionally the beginning of the prayer from *Polish Flowers*:

Let clouds above us glow afire
Pound through our hearts like a bell of gold,
Open our Poland like the entire
Sky you split open with a lightning bolt
J. Tuwim, *Polish Flowers*

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Among the emigrants of March, Wygodzki must have been one of those few who remember the once popular and then forgotten shocking lament and manifesto by Tuwim, *We, Polish Jews*. It was created in New York 25 years earlier, probably on the first anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and was first published in London in August 1944 in the monthly “Nowa Polska” (“New Poland”) edited by Antoni Słonimski. Soon after publication it was translated into a number of languages, including Hebrew, Jewish, Russian, English, French, German, Italian and Czech, reaching first of all the places where the Jews who had survived the Holocaust were. Piotr Matywiecki writes in *Tuwim’s Face*: “The address was of great moral significance to the thousands of Jewish survivors”¹. Stanisław Wygodzki was one of them:

The first tidings about Tuwim reached me in the late summer of 1945 in a small village near Munich, where I was being treated for tuberculosis after leaving the camp in Dachau... To our hospital came a sickly little boy from Ozorków... That fifteen-year-old boy, as well as a small bundle with underwear, had with him a creased sheet of paper filled with typewriting. It was a copy of Tuwim’s text sent from New York to Poland in 1944. A painful letter, opening old wounds it smote fascism, cruelty, thoughtlessness... That letter carried by a small boy through a number of European countries was his certificate, his identification card. The boy participated in the same tragedy and had the right to the same words that have never been spoken in Polish².

At the same time in the demolished Warsaw a sixteen-year-old Halina Birenbaum tried to recover from the memory of the Warsaw Ghetto, from the nightmarish months and years spent in Majdanek, Birkenau, Ravensbrück and Neustadt-Glewe. Of all the family only her brother had survived and on to his advice she decided to return to school. In a conversation with a teacher from Israel, she recalled that the school was Polish and each morning the classes started with a prayer. In time, she too started to cross herself, which triggered never-ending quarrels with her brother. One day she found on a table next to the bed a brochure by Tuwim. She read it and was touched, with emotional chills she understood that she was Jewish, that she couldn’t escape that fate and two years later she left for Palestine³.

Tuwim’s manifesto reached Moscow before the end of the war, where it was published in the body of Union of Polish Patriots, reaching thousands of Poles and Jews. Professor Chone Szmeruk, who was staying at that time in the USSR, said that “until that moment, this country had seen no document – not in any language

¹ P. Matywiecki, *Twarz Tuwima*, W.A.B., Warsaw 2007, p. 324.

² St. Wygodzki, *Będzin!*, in: *Wspomnienia o Julianie Tuwimie*, W. Jedlicka, M. Toporowski (eds.), Czytelnik, Warsaw 1963, pp. 170–171. See P. Matywiecki, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

³ Y. Zahavi, Educational material in Hebrew.

– which would express the suffering of Jews with such power”⁴. Even though Tuwim’s lament was not printed in Russian, “Tuwim’s words written in blood”, as Ilia Erenburg put it, were rewritten in thousands of copies⁵.

In Palestine, however, the situation was very different. The first news about the situation of Jews in occupied Poland started coming in in 1939. At the beginning of 1940 a brochure *Extermination of Polish Jews* was published in Jerusalem. One of its editors was Apolinary Hartglas, Tuwim’s later adversary and a Member of Parliament in the years 1919–1930, who wrote: “If no miracle occurs, there will be nothing more in the Polish land than a great cemetery of the Jewish nation”. It was but a single voice, because at that time the nearly half-a-million-strong Jewish community in Palestine was facing entirely different problems, dreaming of creating an independent state.

Tom Segev, an Israeli historian and the author of a book on the attitude of the Jewish community of Palestine and later of Israel to the Holocaust survivors, writes in his monograph *The Seventh Million* that Hebrew newspapers time and time again accused each other of exaggeration in presenting the dramatic experiences of Jews in occupied Europe. They criticised their competition claiming that printing unproven accusations was out of order, saying “Don’t Jews have enough of their own problems”⁶.

Tuwim’s manifesto, however, quite quickly reached Palestine, where the Anders Army was still stationed, there were still Polish schools, Polish publishing houses still worked, Polish newspapers were still printed and where Władysław Broniewski was creating his shocking poems in memory of the murdered Jews. Several weeks later the text was translated into Hebrew by Nechemia Raban, a renowned translator and publicist, and on 27th October 1944 it was printed in the Jerusalem weekly “Hed Jeruszalim”, sparking a lot of interest. In fact, within the next few months the discussion of Palestinian writers over Julian Tuwim’s manifesto was printed in the most influential Hebrew-language newspapers and magazines of Mandatory Palestine. Tuwim’s opponents came from various backgrounds. Among them were ardent Zionists, far from written Polish, who had already spent dozens of years in Eretz Israel, and on the other hand there were the newcomers from pre-war Poland and those who had reached Palestine after the war had broken out. Contrary to what Ryszard Lōw writes in his pioneering publication *Hebrajska obecność Juliana Tuwima (Julian Tuwim’s Hebrew presence)*, i.e. that “the Hebrew polemicists originated from outside the circles of publicists or even writers”⁷, some of them could easily count themselves among the most

⁴ Ch. Szmeruk, *Wstęp*, in: J. Tuwim, *My, Żydzi polscy... (We Polish Jews...)*, Fundacja Shalom, Warsaw 1993, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ R. Lōw, *Hebrajska obecność Juliana Tuwima*, Oficyna Bibliofilów, Lodz 1996.

brilliant writers of the Hebrew language. One of them was undoubtedly Gershon Shofman (1880–1972), considered a master of the novella and short stories, who in 1957 received the Israeli Literary Prize. Shofman was also a renowned translator into Hebrew, especially of German and Russian literature, and a popular publicist in Polish, German, Russian and even English periodicals. He spent a few years in Warsaw at the beginning of the XX century and even though he probably never met Tuwim himself, he knew his work very well. A short article by Shofman, which was published in the same issue of the Jerusalem weekly that carried Tuwim's manifesto, from 27 October 1944, can be treated as a peculiar introduction and a commentary⁸. Shofman, comparing the situation of Tuwim to the lives of other outstanding Jewish artists, like Franz Werfel of Sholem Asch, who experienced at one point in their lives the state of suspension between Jewishness and Christianity, writes about a deep conflict and the tragic circumstances of a Polish poet with Jewish descent:

Here stands before us a Polish assimilated poet who doesn't like his ethnic background and, at the same time, a proud Jew, who reacted to the extermination of his own nation with a shock verging on hysteria⁹.

Other articles were much harsher, though. On 27 October 1944, the newspaper "Hacofe", an organ of the national-religious party Mizrahi, published an article written by Ben Zion Zang, its head journalist, entitled "'We, Polish Jews' – the confession of Julian Tuwim"¹⁰. Zang, being a long-time resident of Palestine, recalls his private meeting with Tuwim in Krynica in 1936. He informs the Hebrew reader in Palestine that Tuwim comes from an assimilated family and had been attacked for his Jewishness a number of times, but never responded to those offences. During the conversation with Zang in Krynica, Tuwim spoke about his personal tragedy:

Poles take him for a Jew and Jews take him for a Pole. He himself, however, considers himself a Jew. He claims that he intends to leave for Palestine and spend some time in a kibbutz. Even though he doesn't know the language, he's planning to publish an anthology of young Hebrew poetry in Poland¹¹.

⁸ G. Szołman, *Dwaśz ve-okec Julian Tuwim* [Hebrew: *Honey, sting and Julian Tuwim*], "Hed Jerusala'im", 27.10.1944.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ B.Z. Zang, *Anu jehudej Polin* [Hebrew: *We, Polish Jews*], "Hacofe" from 27.11.1944. The daily newspaper "Hacofe" (Hebrew: *Observer*) was published in Palestine and later in Israel in the years 1937–2008. The organisation of Zionist-Orthodox "Mizrachi" was created in Vilnius in 1902. In 1957 the organisation changed its name in independent Israel to the Mizrahi National Religious Party.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

Next, Zang describes Tuwim’s life and emphasises that after the war broke out, when he was in France, he intended to go to Palestine, but didn’t receive a certificate. In his manifesto, Tuwim confirms his Jewishness, but there is something shocking in his text, which the journalist of a Hebrew newspaper can’t comprehend and thus arrives at a most peculiar conclusion:

And so Tuwim identifies himself with Polish Jews, which almost don’t exist, but forgets about the Jews still existing in Eretz Israel¹².

A few days later, on 27 November in “Jerusalem’s Echo” an article by Zussmann Segalovitsh (1884–1949) appeared. He was considered to be one of the most renowned Yiddish writers in interwar Poland. Segalovitsh, who began his literary career in Lodz and Odessa with narrative and other poems, and who became a rather popular author of prose in Warsaw during the twenties, left Poland in 1939, just like Tuwim. Segalovitsh probably felt bitter about Tuwim for selling his Jewishness, making friends with the Polish elite and – most of all – for writing poems in Polish, becoming one of the most brilliant poets of the post-war era. The frustrated Jewish artist expressed that in a bitter text entitled *Julian Tuwim, where were you before?*¹³.

A few days later in a weekly “Hapoel Hacair” (this literary Hebrew newspaper, first published in 1907, became an organ of the party MAPAJ after 1930) an interesting text by Daniel Tenenbaum appeared – *The Brotherhood of spilled blood*¹⁴. Its author accuses Tuwim of not drawing the right conclusions from the war, which still wasn’t over at that time:

That cruel war has wreaked material, as well as spiritual havoc and caused many individual traumas. But despite that great tragedy a certain group of Jews remained faithful to their historic roots...

So far, Tuwim has approached his Jewish descent cautiously. The tragedy has changed little, since Tuwim still claims “I am a Pole and will come back to Poland”¹⁵.

Tenenbaum, having some knowledge of the history of Polish literature, didn’t follow Tuwim’s life during the war thoroughly, claiming that he “visited Palestine for a short time, from where he moved to Argentina (sic! – MS)”.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Z. Segalowicz, *Julian Tuwim, Heichan haita kodem* [Hebrew: *Julian Tuwim, where were you before*], “Hed Jeruszalim” 27.11.1944.

¹⁴ D. Tenenbaum, *Achwat hadam haszafuch* [Hebrew: *Brotherhood of spilled blood*], “Hapoel Hacair” from 3.12.1944.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

Above all, he is upset about the fact that the poet makes his confession in Palestine, and from this, one can conclude that “Tuwim is not only speaking to the Jews, but also in their name”¹⁶. Aharon Reuveni, a known writer and translator of English, French and Russian, makes his point in a similar tone in “Moznaim” – a yearly magazine published by the Hebrew Writer’s Association¹⁷. Reuveni (1886–1971), the younger brother of the second president of Israel, Icchak Ben Zvi, was born in Ukraine, and moved to Palestine in 1910. He was considered one of the most engaged Hebrew writers before Israel was established as a state. Reuveni appreciates Tuwim’s literary gift, claiming that *We, Polish Jews* is a beautiful poem written in prose, and he can even understand the decision to be a Polish poet, but in no way can he accept the desire to become an “honorary Jew”. One has to earn their “Jew Doloris Causa”, and Tuwim himself admits that he did not actually do anything¹⁸.

The open letter written by Azriel Omer-Lemer, which was printed in the well-known monthly “Gazit” in April 1945, has an entirely different nature¹⁹. Omer-Lemer introduces himself as a simple Jew from Józefów, near Zamość, who emigrated to Palestine in the twenties. In reality, he was quite a prolific Hebrew prosaist and playwright, with excellent knowledge of Polish literature. Omer-Lemer, unlike his predecessors, does not criticize Tuwim too much, nor does he accuse him of hypocrisy. He gives him some friendly advice instead. Like Tuwim, he too misses his home town and his youth spent by the riverside of Niepryszka. He adds, however, that the history of Polish Jews ended tragically and that it is no coincidence that the Germans chose Poland as a place to build their concentration camps; next he recalls the desertion from General Anders’ Army of its Jewish soldiers due to the Polish soldiers’ anti-Semitism, he does not believe in the new democratic, Jew-friendly Poland at all, and finally calls on Tuwim to abandon his naive fantasies, come to Palestine, where “along with others they will build a homeland in the desert for their exhausted nation”²⁰.

The harshest, and at the same time least expected criticism of Tuwim’s piece came from Apolinary Hartglas. Maksymilian Apolinary Hartglas was one of the most brilliant Jewish politicians of the interwar period. He was born in 1883 in Biała Podlaska, into an assimilated Jewish family which differed very little from the Tuwims from Łódź. He earned a law degree at the University of Warsaw,

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ A. Reuveni, *Polaniuto we jehadutu szel Julian Tuwim* [Hebrew: *Polishness and Jewishness of Julian Tuwim*], “Moznaim” 1945.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ A. Omer-Lemer, *Anu Jehudej Polin...* [Hebrew: *We, Polish Jews... A reply to Julian Tuwim*], “Gazit” 1945 (April). The monthly “Gazit” was published in the years 1931–1982, it was devoted to plastic arts and belles-lettres.

²⁰ Ibidem, pp. 55–57.

and later opened a legal practice in Siedlce and Warsaw. He came into contact with the student Zionist movement relatively early; it was here that he met Icchak Grünbaum, the later leader of the General Zionist Party, and the first minister of internal affairs of Israel, and became his friend and closest colleague. He was a representative in the Sejm for eleven years (1919–1930), and the chairman of the Sejm’s Jewish community in the years 1926–1927. He was also a member of the first Jewish Council in the Warsaw ghetto, from which he managed to escape and leave for Palestine through fascist Italy at the end of December 1939. During the Second World War, Hartglas was an activist of the Jewish Agency, secretary of the Committee for the Rescue of European Jews, and the author of a brochure called *The Holocaust of Polish Jews* which was already out in Jerusalem at the beginning of 1940. After the State of Israel was established, Hartglas was the general director of the ministry of internal affairs, which was led by his friend Icchak Grünbaum. He died in Jerusalem in 1953, several months before Tuwim. In spite of his serious involvement in the activity of the Zionist movement, in Poland Hartglas was an avid Polish patriot, which is proven by the fact that in 1920 he fought as a volunteer in the Polish-Soviet war. Three years before his death, he wrote a memoir in Polish, which was not printed until 1996²¹. The memoir does not mention a word about the (then famous) crushing criticism of Tuwim’s manifesto, which had appeared nearly seven years before, towards the end of the war²². In the introduction to the memoir, Hartglas writes about his relationship with Poland and Polishness:

I called my memoirs “At the border of two worlds” not because I had in mind the world of today and the eternal ever existing world, but for a much more mundane reason. I, myself as a human being found myself at the border of the Jewish world and the Polish world. To elaborate, throughout my whole life, two forces, difficult to reconcile, strove within me: a Polish childhood and upbringing, an attachment to the Polish nation, its culture and its soil together with a self-formed love for the Jewish nation, its suffering and troubles, and the hope of its rebirth in its own homeland. My whole life I suffered a split within myself since there is no power that could have fused these two different souls. I loved both nations as a man and I was at times critical and angry at both of them: as a Jew I could not forget the wrongs that my people sometimes suffered in Poland (personally I have not suffered these) and as one assimilated into Polish culture I shared some of the grief that even the best of Poles occasionally had towards the Jews²³.

²¹ A. Hartglas, *Na pograniczu dwóch światów*, introduction and compilation by J. Żyndul, Rytm, Warsaw 1996.

²² Idem, *Anu jehudej Polin* [Hebrew: *We, Polish Jews*], “Davar” from 8.12.1944. The daily “Davar” was published in the years 1925–1996.

²³ Idem, *Na pograniczu...*, p. 18.

Hartglas's earlier article, which he published in one of the two most important Hebrew newspapers, is in no way similar to the introduction of his memoirs²⁴. Basically, it is similar to earlier criticism of Tuwim's manifesto, much harsher even. The author, recalling Tuwim's satirical poem *Jews*, accuses him of serving the fascists and anti-Semites²⁵:

Tuwim has served someone all his life, and now plans on doing the same. I myself am not a Pole, and it is unrelated to the fact whether or not I want to be one, because nationality is independent of will and desire. One cannot simultaneously be a Polish Jew and a Polish Pole. I am not a Pole, even though I was born and raised in Poland, even though I was happy and more often unhappy there. I am not a Pole even though Polish was my first language, and Polishness was the reason for my incarceration in a German prison. Nationality is not a question of choice²⁶.

The last part of Hartglas's article is dedicated to Tuwim's desire to be accepted into the "society of innocently spilled blood" and receive the rank of a "Jew Doloris Causa". In this case, Hartglas's judgment is very categorical:

One does not easily receive the title of a Jew Through Suffering, and it is not moral, all the more so if he did not himself suffer, and other Jews who have different citizenships, not just Polish, have earned the yellow patch order with their suffering, their blood, their stay in the ghettos, while Tuwim is simply appropriating something he has no right to, if need be it can be called exploitation. If a Polish Jew wants to join the community of the Jewish nation – he may, but first he must do something for the Jews. Let him suffer with them²⁷.

As I mentioned before, the interest in Tuwim's manifesto in Palestine lasted only a few months. War was coming to an end, on January 27, 1945 the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp was liberated, and ten days earlier over fifty thousand of the last Jewish prisoners had been led out of the camp in a so-called march of death. In spring of 1945, the last concentration camps on German territory were liberated, Berlin fell on May 2, and a week later Hitler's Germany announced its defeat.

Thousands of Jewish survivors appeared on the roads of free Europe, and many of them directed their thoughts and dreams towards the Jewish state, which was to be established three years later, and where, for the next several years a thick web of silence around the topic of the Holocaust would be woven. Tuwim's dramatic lament and manifesto was quickly forgotten, and if it was still alive, then

²⁴ Idem, *Anu jehudej Polin*.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

mainly in the hearts of Holocaust survivors who got to know him in Polish, and to whom Tuwim remained a favourite poet of their youth.

Today, after seventy years have passed, it is difficult for us to understand the animosity felt by Hebrew journalists towards the Polish-Jewish poet. Unlike Zionist leaders, who were focused exclusively on the fight for a Jewish homeland, the tragedy of European Jews touched many of them personally. All the stranger seems the attack on a poet moved by the scale of the Holocaust, grieving his mother’s tragic death in occupied Poland, and convinced that there is no way out of the Jewish fate. One should doubt if Tuwim was aware of this bout of aggression towards him taking place in Mandatory Palestine, one way or another, it did not influence Tuwim’s level of involvement in Jewish or Israeli issues. This is evidenced by the fact that in February 1948, Tuwim became head of the Society of Hebrew University Patrons, which resumed its activity in the new Poland. Forty years later, professor Chone Szmeruk from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, published Tuwim’s manifesto in Polish with Hebrew, English, and Yiddish translations through his Alma Mater’s publishing house. The topic came back to life for a while in the Israeli press. The prestigious newspaper “Haaretz” published a review from the well-known literary critic and translator Joram Bronowski²⁸. The way he saw it, the manifesto was one of the most important documents of its type written within the last two centuries. “This manifesto was written by a man who symbolizes the Jewish fate in its entirety”²⁹. Echoes of Szmeruk’s initiative can be found in the contemporary Hebrew literature of recent years, in which Julian Tuwim’s character is painted in completely different colours. Miriam Romm, the author of an autobiographical tale, comes to Cracow to look for signs of her father, who had disappeared in 1944. There, she meets a handsome eighty year old, who was wounded in the war and, due to this, has lost his memory; she imagines that this man may be her lost father. The conversation described in the book pertains to Tuwim and his manifesto *We, Polish Jews...*:

That morning I was strolling along the streets which emerge from the market square. To my surprise, I discovered huge posters with Julian Tuwim in the windows of one of the bookshops. It was the birthday of this great Polish-Jewish poet, as he has introduced himself his whole life. I bought several of his books right away, and took one of them with me to meet “the man from Planty park”.

- This... This is a book by Julian Tuwim, surely you’ve heard of him?
- Of course, he is considered to be one of our most outstanding writers.
- Your outstanding writers? But he is a Jewish writer. Have you heard of the “Jewish manifesto” which he wrote while in New York?

²⁸ J. Bronowski, *Jehudi Dolores Causa* [Hebrew: *Dolores Causa Jew*], “Haaretz” from 13.07.1984.

²⁹ Ibidem.

- You are right. Please accept my apologies, but when this manifesto was published, I was in a difficult place physically and psychologically. It was not until many years later that I heard about it, and understood that many Poles were moved by its contents. It was the first time that a Jew, and a brilliant writer on top of that, had thrown the truth right at our faces.
- Yes, see, I do not mean to be rude, but he did not exactly lie on a bed of roses here. He had to flee during the war, he was persecuted for his heritage, and after he came back from America, the communists made his life difficult.
- Living with two identities is not easy. But he described himself as a Pole first, and a Jew second. And he did come back here after the war.
- On the other hand, he never denied his Jewishness. He suffered anti-Semitism. Critics and poets did not want to recognize the Jewish elements of his creative work, even if he did not write much about it. Besides the poem *Kike*, which was a manifesto filled with pain, and articles which described the gigantic scale of the Holocaust, he did not present Jewishness in his books.
- Your knowledge is surprising, how do you know all this?
- This particular tragic character drew me. When I read his manifesto, one sentence about blood pouring from a body haunted me. Generally speaking, Tuwim was critical of Poland, and like many Polish Jews, he was disappointed with Poles, even if at the same time he could not live without them. It is a tragedy of two homelands, so much so that even I am starting to feel it³⁰.

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³⁰ M. Romm, *Nocot Jaen* [Hebrew: *Ostrich feathers*], Gwanim, Tel Aviv 2007, p. 69.

Wygodzki Stanisław, *Będzin!*, in: *Wspomnienia o Julianie Tuwimie*, W. Jedlicka, M. Toporowski (eds.), Czytelnik, Warsaw 1963.

Zang Ben Zion, *Anu jehudej Polin*, “Hacofe” from 27.11.1944.

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Zionists and “Polish Jews”. Palestinian Reception of *We, Polish Jews*

(Summary)

The article discusses the reception of Tuwim’s manifesto in Israel, focusing in particular on the 1940s. The author analyses various critical responses to the poem expressed by Jewish critics in Palestine. Tuwim’s reception in Israel is presented from a new perspective which has not been explored so far.

Keywords: Julian Tuwim, reception in Israel, Jewish identity