



THE FIRST
GOLDMAN LECTURE



*The Ambiguous
'Lessons' of Modern
Polish-Jewish
History*



EZRA MENDELSON

Oxford Centre for
Hebrew and Jewish Studies

THE GOLDMAN LECTURE SERIES

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JEWs are always on the lookout for 'lessons' they may learn from their history. They seem to write and talk about this subject endlessly, bringing to mind John Donne's line that 'Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce'. A famous Jewish historian has claimed that 'surely no people has used its history for such a variety of national purposes as have the Jews'.¹ This sounds a bit like the familiar Jewish refrain (well known to all historians of Polish Jewry) to the effect that 'all minorities suffered, but the Jews suffered the most', but it may well be true, given the highly ideological and politicized nature of modern Jewry in Europe and America.

E. L. Doctorow's autobiographical novel on growing up in America presents us with a good example of this obsession with lessons. The young hero's mother, a Jew of East European origin, encounters some unpleasant German-Jewish refugees in New York in the 1930s: "They thought they were Germans", she told me, "and look what's happening to them now. With their snobbish, highfalutin ways. You'd think, barely getting out with their skins, they would change."² Obviously, the German Jews had not learned the bitter lessons of German-Jewish history. Here is a cautionary tale that must be taken to heart.

Like the modern history of German Jews, the modern history of the Jews in Polish lands is often seen in the Jewish world (and not only in the Jewish world) as being full of lessons. It has been so regarded by politicians, artists, writers and even historians. Indeed, it would seem that of all modern Jewish historical 'experiences' the Polish case is the most heavily laden with such lessons, and has therefore become the subject of a great search for what we call in Hebrew the *lekah* ('learning' or 'teaching') or more precisely the *lekah histori*.

¹ Lucy Dawidowicz, *What is the Use of Jewish History?* (Syracuse 1980) 3.

² E. L. Doctorow, *World's Fair* (New York 1985) 188.

That this should be so is hardly surprising, given the remarkable nature of modern Polish–Jewish history, of which one might say that it contains something for just about everyone. After all, we are speaking of a huge Jewish community, the largest in Europe and, during the interwar period, the most ‘Jewish’ (save only the tiny one of independent Lithuania). Here were located the centres of so many vital modern Jewish autonomous movements, whether religious, cultural or political—Zionism, Hasidism, Hebraism, Yiddishism, Socialism and *Agudas Yisroel*. Moreover, this was a community whose creativity was allowed more or less free rein by a regime that, while no model of democracy, never went the way of Soviet totalitarianism. Also, the Polish environment was not characterized by the intensely assimilationist pressures of the third great centre of East European Jewry, namely the United States. Poland was the land where all modern Jewish proposals to resolve the Jewish question could compete freely for the allegiance of the Jewish masses. Here was a historical setting which, if properly studied, might well reveal whether Jews could or could not survive and even prosper in the context of an East European-style multicultural, multireligious and multinational state. And, finally, this was the place where millions of Jews were murdered, a fact that must inevitably have a tremendous influence on those searching for lessons in the Polish–Jewish past.

LET me begin my admittedly selective survey of the ‘lessons’ of modern Polish–Jewish history by presenting what might be called the ‘hegemonic reading’ of this historical ‘text’.³ According to this almost canonical reading, the most obvious lesson of modern Polish–Jewish history is that, given the all-pervasive, perhaps even uniquely virulent character of Polish anti-Semitism, the Jews had absolutely no future in that country. This sentiment is shared by politicians, writers, historians, contemporaries and those whose only knowledge of the subject derives from study. Menachem Begin tells us in his memoirs, published in 1951, that ‘In Poland there lived millions of Jews surrounded by violent anti-

³ I have discussed aspects of this question in my introduction to Yisrael Gutman, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jehuda Reinharz and Chone Shmeruk (eds) *The Jews in Interwar Poland* (Hanover 1989) 1–8, and in my article ‘Jewish Historiography on Polish Jewry in the Interwar Period’, *Polin* IX (1994) (originally published in Hebrew in *Mada’e ha-yahadut: Bamat ha-igud ha-olami le-mada’e ha-yahadut* XXXI (1991) 23–32. See also my article ‘Interwar Poland: Good for the Jews or Bad for the Jews?’ in Ch. Abramsky, M. Jachimczyk and A. Polonsky (eds) *The Jews in Poland* (Oxford 1986) 130–9.

Semitism', and that Poland was 'a country with millions of poverty-stricken Jews, persecuted, dreaming of Zion'. His successor as Israeli Prime Minister, Yitshak Shamir, is reported to have remarked that the Poles imbibed anti-Semitism with their mothers' milk.⁴ Isaac Bashevis Singer writes of interwar Poland as a kind of prison for its Jewish population;⁵ while someone with quite a different place in the Jewish world, the illustrious Polish avant-garde poet Alexander Wat, writes that 'I had the same feeling that every Jew, even the most assimilated, had: the absolute certainty that as soon as you turned around, your friends would say, "that Jew!"'⁶ No wonder Jan Kott's father had his son baptized when Poland regained her freedom, 'because he felt that otherwise there would be no future for me among the Poles'.⁷ How right Kott's father was, most Jewish observers would say, even though he was naïve to imagine that converts would be saved. There may be some debate about the impact of anti-Semitism on the Jewish community, but even Joseph Marcus, whose provocative study on interwar Polish Jewry tries to prove that this impact was not as great as most scholars believe, emphasizes the pathological quality of Polish anti-Semitism.⁸ This has been well summed up by Lewis Namier, who observed in 1941 that the Jews of Poland between the wars 'suffered from the all-pervading anti-Semitism of an intensely nationalist regime and people, in an overcrowded and impoverished country'; by the late 1930s their position had become 'politically and economically disastrous'.⁹ Obviously, they had to get out.

Polish-Jewish history, therefore, serves as a prime illustration of the relentless Gentile hatred for Jews, a hatred without which the Nazis would never have succeeded in their diabolical schemes. It is the back-

⁴ Menachem Begin, *The Revolt* (New York 1978) 3, 32; Yitshak Shamir's remark was widely quoted in the press in 1993. See also his *Summing Up: An Autobiography* (Boston etc. 1994) 4–7.

⁵ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Lost in America* (New York 1981) 4.

⁶ Alexander Wat, *My Century. The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, edited and translated by Richard Lourie (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1988) 91. Wat is speaking about the late 1930s.

⁷ Jan Kott, *Still Alive. An Autobiographical Essay*, translated by Jadwiga Kosicka (New Haven and London 1990) 17.

⁸ Joseph Marcus, *Social and Political History of the Jews in Poland* (Berlin 1983) 211–47.

⁹ L. B. Namier, *Conflicts. Studies in Contemporary History* (London 1942) 141–2.

ground to some of Uri Tsvi Greenberg's bitter poetry (for example his *Lo nidmeynum le-khlavim*, 'We were not likened to dogs among the Gentiles') and to the diatribe of the Israeli settler recorded by Amos Oz in his book *In the Land of Israel*.¹⁰ In the historical literature this view is well expressed by the title of Celia Heller's pioneering book on interwar Polish Jews—*On the Edge of Destruction*.¹¹

From this widely held point of view other 'lessons', having to do largely with Jewish politics and Jewish behaviour, inevitably flow. One such lesson, much harped on by the adherents of our hegemonic reading, has to do with the utter futility of assimilation. There is a well-known picture by the artist Artur Szyk representing the heroic death of Bronislaw Mansperl, an officer in Pilsudski's legions killed in action in 1915, 'mort pour la Pologne'.¹² Here is an example of a futile, senseless sacrifice, emblematic of the great folly of assimilation, of the absurd hopes for 'Jewish-Polish brotherhood', of the slogan 'for your freedom and ours', and of all those Jews in Poland—ranging from Wat and Kott to the members of the interwar organization preaching Jewish-Polish brotherhood, *Zjednoczenie*, and from Berek Joselewicz who fought with Kosciuszko to Mansperl—who fooled themselves into thinking that Jews could actually integrate themselves into the Polish nation, an obvious impossibility and a degrading, cowardly, 'mayofes'-like position.¹³ In the historical literature this reading is well represented by the title of a new and important book by Israel Bartal and Magdalena Opalski: *Poles and Jews: A Failed Brotherhood*.¹⁴

Closely related to this 'lesson'—the failure of assimilation—is the claim that all efforts to make close political alliances with the Gentiles

¹⁰ Amos Oz, *Po va-sham be-erets yisrael be-stav 1982* (Tel-Aviv 1988) 70–82 (translated as *In the Land of Israel* [London 1983] 87–100).

¹¹ Celia Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction. The Jews of Poland Between the Two World Wars* (New York 1977).

¹² I reproduce this picture in my recent book *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York 1993). This icon of assimilation also appears in the new Polish version of Polish-Jewish history under the editorial direction of Jerzy Tomaszewski, entitled *Najnowsze dzieje Żydów w Polsce w Zarysie (do 1950 roku)* (Warsaw 1993) 125.

¹³ The term 'mayofes' (in Modern Hebrew 'Ma yafit') refers to the first words of a well-known Sabbath song. In old Poland Jews were sometimes obliged to sing this song in the presence of members of the Polish nobility, and the phrase came to refer to degrading Jewish behaviour, something like 'Uncle Tomism' among African Americans.

¹⁴ Israel Bartal and Magdalena Opalski, *Poles and Jews: A Failed Brotherhood* (Bloomington 1993).

are, in the long run (and sometimes also in the short run) futile. This condemned to failure the famous 'national minorities bloc' championed (it must be admitted) by many Zionists. How could one imagine that Ukrainians and Germans, no less anti-Semitic than Poles, would act to help improve the situation of the Jews?

There is an even more potent 'lesson' lurking here, namely the folly of linking up, either on a personal or on an organizational basis, with the non-Jewish left. How could Polish Jews have imagined that the Polish socialists or communists, hostile to Jews and to Jewish survival as they obviously were, would be prepared to work for an amelioration of the Jews' lot? There is much gnashing of teeth and moralizing in Jewish historiography and polemics concerning those legions of presumably idealistic young Jewish men and women who made the terrible mistake of dedicating their lives to the false god of socialist universalism.¹⁵ A particularly apposite and awful example from the Polish environment is Rosa Luxemburg, a Jewess from Zamosc who hardened her heart against the cry of the ghetto. Those Jewish organizations that linked their fate with the Polish left—above all the Bund—have been shown by the harsh verdict of Jewish history to have been suffering from the gravest illusions. Again, the name of a scholarly work on this subject reveals the clarity of the lesson—Bernard Johnpoll's book on the Bund of interwar Poland, *The Politics of Futility*.¹⁵

Speaking of the Bund, yet another 'lesson' of Polish-Jewish history is the absurdity of all cultural and/or political plans to establish some kind of national autonomy on Polish soil, plans sponsored by the Bund, the small party known as the Folkists, and to an extent also by Zionists and even the Orthodox. The principle of *doikeyt* (literally 'here-ness') has clearly failed the test of time, and should therefore be relegated to the dustbin of Jewish history, together with all those grandiose plans put forth in Poland for Jewish ministers, Jewish national councils, Yiddish schools, the clamour over Yiddishism—all nonsense and illusion. The same is true of the misguided emphasis placed by certain elements within the Zionist movement on *Gegenwartsarbeit*, a word in the Zionist lexicon connoting the necessity to devote some time and energy to work in the diaspora (as opposed to work for building up Jewish Palestine).

¹⁵ See Robert Wistrich, *Socialism and the Jews: The Dilemmas of Assimilation in Germany and Austria-Hungary* (Rutherford, N.J., etc. 1982).

Also to be deplored were certain illusions fostered by that section of the Orthodox community which clung to its own version of *doikeryt*, believing as it did that the Jews were fated to reside in the diaspora until God decided otherwise. Our hegemonic reading of Polish–Jewish history indeed takes a dim view of at least some of the activities of the Orthodox political party *Agudas Yisroel*, accusing it not only of blind adherence to its particular version of *doikeryt* and of failing to alert the Jewish masses to the impending storm, but also of breaking rank with the positive forces within Polish Jewry in its pathetic efforts to ally itself with Pilsudski and his wretched government, an alliance no less illusory, and in many ways worse, than the failed alliances with the left or with the national minorities.¹⁶

ALL these are ‘negative lessons’, ones that illustrate what not to do. But of course Polish–Jewish history bears its positive lessons as well. For one thing, Polish–Jewish history in the modern period teaches everyone the obvious lesson that the Jews are a modern nation. The German novelist Alfred Döblin went to Poland in 1924 and noted that in this country the Jews ‘are a nation. People who know only Western Europe fail to realize this.’ And he adds: ‘Numbering three and one-half million, the Jewish nation is now growing in Poland.’¹⁷ This observation by Döblin is born out by the data collected in the two all-Polish censuses, when most Jews proclaimed themselves to be ‘Jews by nationality’ and speakers of one or another Jewish language. It is also born out by the great flourishing of Jewish culture in Jewish languages—it is enough to look at the bibliographies of the Yiddish press compiled in the last few decades to be astounded at the quantity of Yiddish newspapers that appeared in Poland. Of course this Yiddish press had no future (as we have already seen), but it was proof that the modern Jewish nation was alive and well. Yet another sign of this was the proliferation of modern national Jewish schools of both the Yiddish and the Hebrew varieties. It must also be admitted that the perseverance of Jewish Orthodoxy in the Polish environment was a clear additional indication that the Jews were a

¹⁶ See Shmuel Ettinger’s well-known textbook *The Modern Period in the History of the Jewish People* (Jerusalem 1969) 960. This work, written by a leading Jewish historian at the Hebrew University, constitutes a classic formulation of the hegemonic reading of modern Jewish history in general.

¹⁷ Alfred Döblin, *Journey to Poland*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel, edited by Heinz Graber (New York 1991) 50–1.

nation, one in which religious and secular elements were inextricably mixed. The Orthodox may have been misguided politically, but their stubborn refusal to conform played an important role in the preservation of Jewish separateness and uniqueness.

Another positive lesson to be learned from the Polish–Jewish experience was the splendid and courageous Jewish struggle for national rights, even if some aspects of this ‘struggle’ were wrong-headed and doomed to failure. It is remarkable how many Jewish historians use this very word, ‘struggle’ (in Hebrew *ma'avak*) or the even stronger word ‘war’ (*milhamah*) in the titles of their works on the recent Polish–Jewish past, from Yitshak Grunbaum, who wrote several influential volumes called *The Wars of Polish Jewry*, to such contemporary historians as Shlomo Netser and Moshe Landa.¹⁸ It was this noble struggle that provided a model for the heroic battles still to come—during the Holocaust, of course, and ultimately in the Land of Israel.

Polish–Jewish history in the interwar period also teaches us that of all Jewish political and cultural movements one towered above the rest. Zionism may have started out as a movement of a small minority within East European Jewry, but by the 1920s and 1930s it had become by far the leading force among Polish Jews. Those Polish Jews who read the historical map correctly entered the movement in great numbers, and elected its leaders to positions of authority within the community. To be sure, history has shown that not all forms of Zionist activity were equally valuable. Those who really understood which way the winds of history were blowing were the activists in the various youth movements, and above all in the pioneering movement (*he-haluts*), or in the Tarbut educational movement which was busy shaping the new Hebrew-speaking Jewish youth destined to go to Palestine. It is remarkable how much has been written on the pioneer movement—a number of thick volumes that give the impression that this movement attracted a large number of Polish–Jewish young people.¹⁹ These people eventually came to Palestine in great numbers and did their essential bit to strengthen the *yishuv*.

¹⁸ See my comments in the introduction to Gutman *et al.* (eds) *The Jews in Interwar Poland* (see n. 3) 4.

¹⁹ The leading historian of the pioneer movement is Yisrael Oppenheim, who has written two long volumes on *He-haluts* in Poland. Other multi-volume studies are by Aryeh Sarid and Leyb Shpeyzman.

To sum up, our hegemonic reading of the Polish–Jewish past emphasizes the all-pervasive quality of anti-Semitism, the illusory nature of alliances with Gentiles, the need for an honourable, activist Jewish response based on the principles of Jewish nationalism, and the inescapable conclusion that only *aliyah*-centric Zionism provided an answer. This reading has, of course, been greatly reinforced by the impact by the *Shoah*. Indeed, it is perfectly formulated in Yitshak Katzenelson’s poem of 1943–4 which he entitled *The Murdered Jewish People*, in which he mocks all those—the believers in *doikeyt*, the Orthodox, and even the Zionists—who understood too late that escape from Poland was the only answer.²⁰ This is the lesson that Jews of other lands—from Russia to Ethiopia—are now taking to heart, and one that even American Jews should seriously ponder.

THIS ‘hegemonic reading’ is very widely accepted in contemporary Israel where it is preached by virtually all shades of Zionist opinion, from left to right. It is especially integral to what might be called the Likud interpretation of Jewish history, in which an emphasis on the curse of traditional Jewish powerlessness and a radical disbelief in the future of the diaspora naturally co-exist with an emphasis on the need for Jewish power and (in the Israeli context) for a ‘greater Israel’.

Given the centrality of Israel in today’s Jewish world (and the equal centrality of the memory of the *Shoah*), it is not surprising to find this interpretation flourishing in the diaspora. It is certainly in vogue in certain circles within American Jewry. Of course America is not Poland, and the lessons of Polish–Jewish history cannot be uncritically applied to American Jewry. But in some circles within American Jewry—often identified with the new Jewish right—we do find, I think, an effort to apply these ‘lessons’, at least to a degree, manifested as an emphasis on the need for Jewish strength (meaning support for a strong Israel) and an intense suspicion of alliances with the left. In this connection the title of a recent book by a leading spokesperson for this group, the scholar of Yiddish literature Ruth Wisse—*If I Am Not for Myself: the Liberal Betrayal of the Jews*—is apposite.²¹ If it was folly to link up with

²⁰ Yitshak Katzenelson, *The Song of the Murdered Jewish People*, edited by Y. Tobin (Tel–Aviv 1980). See David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse. Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1984) 223–4.

²¹ Ruth Wisse, *If I Am Not for Myself: The Liberal Betrayal of the Jews* (New York 1992).

Ukrainians and other national minorities in the 1920s, it is folly today to maintain links with such minority groups in America as the African-American community, a community whose anti-Semitism is not in doubt. If American Jews cannot be expected to emulate Polish Jewry's Palestino-centrism, then at least they must emulate its readiness for fearless 'struggles' and 'wars' to advance the Jewish interest. They must also reject the assimilationist option (naturally) and develop an appreciation for modern Orthodoxy, which is strong in its support for the Jewish State and, in America as once in Poland, fearlessly proclaims its right to be different.

THERE is yet another aspect of this 'hegemonic reading' that I wish to emphasize, which has to do with a positive view of nationalism in general, not only in the Jewish case. According to this reading the modern history of Polish Jewry, of Poland itself, and of Eastern Europe, teaches us that all proper nations have the right to states of their own in which their own unique genius will be allowed to flourish. There is ample room here for a positive attitude towards at least one aspect of Polish history—namely the heroic Polish struggle, against all odds, for national freedom. Indeed, one can say that an essential lesson of Polish-Jewish history is the necessity for Jews to emulate the Polish national model. To cite Namier again, 'There is beauty, grandeur and pathos in Poland's history. . . No one would question the fine qualities and heroic deeds of the Poles', qualities and deeds that, we may suppose, the Jews would do well to copy.²² When Begin wrote: 'We fight, therefore we are', he sounded very, very Polish.²³

In short, integral nationalism of the Polish variety, while in some ways obviously 'bad for the Jews', was helpful in providing them with a heroic model of action. Indeed, Poland's heroic struggle against Russian oppression might well be compared with Israel's heroic struggle against its Arab enemies. In this regard there is much to be learned from the Polish example.

LET us now go on to consider some of the challenges to this hegemonic reading of the Polish-Jewish past. There is, of course, what might be called an 'ultra-Orthodox' reading of this history. The reading I have summarized is, as we already know, ambivalent with regard to this

²² Lewis Namier, *Facing East* (New York and London 1947) 90, 93.

²³ Begin, *The Revolt* (see n. 4) 46.

faction within Jewry, the so-called *haredim*, finding in their activities both positive and negative aspects. The representatives of this camp, of course, would find the true lessons of the story not in the heroism of the atheistic Zionist pioneers, but in the steadfastness and loyalty of the *Matmid* (the heroic Talmudic student) and of the Orthodox masses, thanks to whom the Jewish people survived.²⁴

Outside the Orthodox camp, some interesting efforts have recently been made by scholars and polemicists alike to subvert the reading presented above. For example, there has been a reassessment of the issue of anti-Semitism, both regarding its impact of the Jews and its supposedly all-pervasive quality. No serious scholar denies the existence of Polish anti-Semitism, of course, but some have argued that given Poland's poverty, the enmity of its neighbours, and the inevitable problems deriving from the fact that so many of her citizens were non-Poles, the record is not nearly as bad as some Jewish authors (who have an obvious axe to grind) would have us believe.²⁵ Naturally enough most of these 'revisionists' are Poles, but anyone who has read Yitshak Zuckerman's remarkable memoirs of the Holocaust years in Warsaw will note his emphasis on the heroism of a large number of Poles who risked their lives to save Jews.²⁶ If this was the case, how anti-Semitic was Poland? Should we really learn from the experience of Polish Jews that Gentiles have always been, and will always be, hostile to Jews?

What of the notion that the triumph of Jewish nationalism and the emergence of the Jews as a fully-fledged nation is a great lesson of modern Polish-Jewish history? Recent studies have emphasized the considerable degree of Polonization among Polish Jews, a process that was rapidly gaining speed during the 1920s and 1930s. The work of the Israeli scholar Chone Shmeruk is particularly important here.²⁷ Scholars

²⁴ See Mendel Piekarz's recent volume (in Hebrew) on the attitudes and activities of Poland's Orthodox community during the interwar period, and also Gershon Bacon's PhD dissertation on the Polish *Agudas Yisroel*, soon to be published in book form by the Center for the Study of the History and Culture of Polish Jews in Jerusalem.

²⁵ See Norman Davies, *God's Playground—A History of Poland II* (Oxford 1981) 408–9; Jerzy Tomaszewski, 'The Role of Jews in Polish Commerce', in Gutman *et al.* (eds) *The Jews in Interwar Poland* (sec n. 3) 141–57.

²⁶ Yitshak Zuckerman (Antek), *A Surplus of Memory. Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, translated and edited by Barbara Harshav (Berkeley 1993) 492.

²⁷ See his article 'Hebrew–Yiddish–Polish: a Trilingual Jewish Culture', in Gutman *et al.* (eds) *The Jews in Interwar Poland* (sec n. 3) 285–311.

have also noted the relative unimportance of the Jewish secular national school networks—*Tsisho* and *Tarbut*—of which such a great fuss has been made, pointing out that they attracted only a small minority of Jewish children, mostly in the less Polonized eastern provinces.²⁸ Indeed, one might say that the lesson of Polish–Jewish history is that even here, in a backward region of Eastern Europe, acculturation was the dominant future trend; and that had the Polish Jews endured for one more generation it would have been Yiddish (not to mention Hebrew) that would have been in serious trouble, prevailing perhaps only among the dwindling Orthodox population.²⁹

Along the same lines, the notion that a great lesson of Polish–Jewish history was the political hegemony of Zionism has also come under attack. How strong was Zionism in Poland? It cannot be disputed that at some times it was very strong (in the mid-1930s, for example), but just as certainly there were periods (such as 1937–9) when it was weak. And the number of Jews who actually went from Poland to Palestine was but a tiny percentage of the total Jewish population.³⁰ Given all this, how can one read Polish–Jewish history as a sign of the inevitable victory of Jewish nationalism in general, and of the Zionist version in particular?

Moreover, the scorn for the perfidious left embedded in our reading of Polish–Jewish history may lose much of its force if we recall the triumphs of the Bund in the late 1930s, triumphs concerning which Israelis (as I can attest from my own experience) are often totally unaware. If we keep in mind the fact that, by the 1930s, the greatest political influence among Jews was surely some version of the left—Bundist, Communist, Socialist, Zionist—it becomes more difficult to read an anti-socialist message into Polish–Jewish history in general. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that given the circumstances and the times, it made a lot of sense for Jews to ally themselves with the

²⁸ E. Mendelsohn in *Zionism in Poland. The Formative Years, 1915–1926* (New Haven and London 1982).

²⁹ Of course the transition to Polish did not automatically imply an abandonment of Jewish identity or even of Jewish nationalism. See on this point the important book by Eugenia Prokop–Janiec, *Miedzywojenna literatura polsko-żydowska* (Cracow 1992).

³⁰ See Ezra Mendelsohn, 'Ha-im yadah shel ha-tsiyonut haytah al ha-eliyonah be-folin?', in *Ha-tsiyonut u-mitnagdebah* (Jerusalem 1990) 241–6. See also Mendelsohn, 'Zionist Successes and Zionist Failures in Interwar Eastern Europe', in Ruth Kozodoy, David Sidorsky and Kalman Satalnik (eds) *Vision Confronts Reality. Historical Perspectives on the Contemporary Jewish Agenda. The Herzl Yearbook IX* (1989) 190–209.

Polish left, the only political force willing to stand up against Polish fascism.

Of course I do not insist that these remarks have the force of upsetting the mainstream reading, but they do call it into question to some extent. Let me extend this 'revisionism' by examining some other readings which relate to the question of nationalism and relations between nations.

THERE are a number of scholars and onlookers for whom the main lesson to be learned from the historical experience of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Poland (and, by extension, of Polish-Jewish history and East European history in general), is the utter folly of modern nationalism. Nationalism is regarded by these people as a horrible artificial construct and not as the inevitable and positive result of modern historical development. I have in mind such scholars as Elie Kedourie and Eric Hobsbawm. The former has written that the idea that 'the world is composed of separate, identifiable "nations", and . . . that these nations are, as such, each entitled to form a sovereign state' is basically 'a recipe for perpetual war',³¹ while Eric Hobsbawm has noted that 'Essentially the permanent collapse of the Hapsburg and Turkish empires and the short-lived collapse of the Tsarist Russian Empire produced the same set of national successor-states with the same sort of problems, insoluble in the long run, except by mass murder or forced mass migration'.³²

These sentiments are often expressed in literature—in the works of Joseph Roth, for example, in which we are informed that in the good old days, before the disease of nationalism took hold, 'the peoples [of Austria-Hungary] loved their dynasty and acclaimed it, in many different kinds of peasant costume.' This quotation is from Roth's novel *Radetsky March*, and in the same novel we are told by Chojnicki, a Pole, that 'What people all want nowadays is to form independent states. You see they no longer believe in God. And their new religion is nationalism. In Austria the nations don't go to church, they go to independence meetings instead.'³³ The implication is that this is bad for everyone, and

³¹ Elie Kedourie, *The Crossman Confessions and other Essays in Politics, History and Religion* (London and New York 1984) 99, 101.

³² Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge 1992) 164.

³³ Joseph Roth, *Radetsky March*, translated by Geoffrey Dunlop (New York 1933) 177, 210.

certainly for the Jews, the one truly cosmopolitan nation of the Empire that embraces with love the idea of supra-national states, a people much valued by the emperor but soon, as Polish history teaches us, to be despised by integral nationalists of the Dmowski school.³⁴

Interestingly, this view dovetails with a certain Polish view on the 'lessons' of Polish-Jewish history that maintains that in the 'good old days', before the advent of unpleasant forms of modern Polish and Jewish nationalism (Dmowski on the one hand, and the so-called *Litvaks*, Jews from the Russian Pale of Settlement who 'immigrated' to the Kingdom of Poland and were known for their allegiance to Jewish nationalism, on the other), Jews and Poles got along very well. This is, perhaps, an Eastern European version of the idea, perhaps still alive in the American South, that in the old days, before the advent of the civil-rights movement, Blacks and Whites were amicable neighbours if not great friends. There is a picture by Canaletto (Bernardo Bellotto) called *Ulica Miodowa w Warszawie*, dating from 1777, which seems to express this notion perfectly: two Jewish men in traditional garb are shown talking in an elegant Polish street while a fine horse and carriage passes by. Here we have an accurate depiction of 'old Poland', in which Jews were an integral part of the 'scenery' harmoniously co-existing with their Polish neighbours. It is no accident, I think, that this picture is included in an interesting but perhaps slightly apologetic book which has just appeared in Poland on the depiction of Jews in Polish art.³⁵

IT is, of course, difficult to draw any concrete lessons from this jaundiced view of modern nationalism; one can only, as Hobsbawm says at the end of his book, hope that it will eventually give way to a more rational politics, or at least go into remission. But one aspect of this critical view of modern nationalism does appear to have a direct bearing on current issues. I have in mind the idea, very prevalent on the Israeli left, that the history of Eastern Europe in general, of Poland in particular and specifically of Polish-Jewish relations, teaches us the necessity of avoiding, at all costs, the transformation of Israel into a multi-national or

³⁴ On the Austrian patriotism of Viennese Jewry, for example, see the interesting material in David Rechter, *Neither East nor West: Viennese Jewish Politics in World War One*, PhD dissertation, The Hebrew University (1994) 25–30.

³⁵ *Zydzi w Polsce. Obraz i słowo*, edited by Mark Rostworowski, Part I (Warsaw 1993) 150. See also Mieczysław Wallis, *Canaletto. Malarz Warszawy* (Warsaw 1959) 5–34.

rather bi-national state, and that Israel must therefore get rid of the 'territories' occupied since 1967. Indeed, anyone who teaches modern Polish-Jewish history in Israel becomes immediately aware of the relevance of this aspect of the story to the most burning issue of contemporary Israeli politics. Consider the remarks of the distinguished Polish-born Israeli historian Jacob Talmon, a notable 'dove', who in 1970 raised the spectre of 'the Jews of Greater Israel being swamped in no time by the higher birth-rate of the Arab minority'.³⁶ Talmon was presenting an Israeli version of a standpoint forcibly expressed by his mentor Lewis Namier, also a Polish Jew by origin, who wrote in 1947 that 'no [Polish] government could have satisfied "national minorities" which comprised not "nearly" but considerably more than one-third of the total population, and formed, in fact, the majority in about one-half of the country'.³⁷ I have little doubt that when such leading Israeli politicians as Shimon Peres (also Polish-born) voice their tremendous apprehension concerning the demographic relationship between Jews and Arabs in Israel they are thinking of the Polish case.³⁸ And I know for a fact that the East European model in general, and the Polish one in particular, was very much on the minds of some of the supporters of the leading Israeli peace movement, *Shalom akhshav*, when they launched their appeal to save Israel from the menace of demographic parity between Arabs and Jews.

THE study of Polish-Jewish history in the modern period may convince one of the ambiguity to which I refer in the title of this paper: does it not demonstrate both that the Jews were a nation, and that acculturation was on the ascendancy? The Polish-Jewish historian may claim that the Polish-Jewish past justifies the survivalist strategy of ultra-Orthodox Jewry or the absolute necessity to renounce the Orthodox past in favour of an activist, secular position. One lesson of this historical text may be the need for maintaining Jewish strength at all costs, another the conclusion that in certain circumstances strength is only apparent, and that real security resides in avoiding the terrible mistakes of triumphant nationalism. We can learn from Polish-Jewish history to celebrate the victory of the modern nation-state or to long for the old,

³⁶ Jacob Talmon, *Israel Among the Nations* (London 1970) 175.

³⁷ Lewis Namier, *Facing East* (New York and London 1947) 92.

³⁸ See Oz (see n.10) 116/145.

tolerant, easy-going multinational dynasties of the pre-First World War period.

How, then, to conclude? We have here a good example of 'the Babel of orientations' in an era when 'all living things are interpreters', and perhaps we should be content to throw up our hands and say: let everyone arrive at his or her own conclusions, so long as they have some support in the historical record.³⁹ If we assume that all interpretations of the Jewish past in Poland are merely representations of hidden or not so hidden Jewish political and/or cultural agendas, then that is conclusion enough.

I would only add that, in my opinion, it would be wise for Jewish historians to avoid all forms of triumphalism when thinking about the 'lessons' of the Polish-Jewish past. If Jewish nationalism (meaning Zionism) and modern Orthodoxy look like the winners of the Jewish history sweepstakes today, and the Jewish left looks like a loser, we should probably avoid the temptation of claiming that a study of the recent Jewish past teaches us that this is the inevitable (and also desirable) outcome. After all, if an atom bomb were to finish off the State of Israel, would we still argue that the lesson of modern Polish-Jewish history is that the proper Jewish response to the dilemmas of the modern age is the Zionist imperative to urge all Jews to go to Palestine/Eretz Yisrael?

It is only natural for polemicists and politicians to talk about the 'lessons' of history, but historians would do well to avoid them. This does not necessarily mean that one should abandon the effort to discover what happened in the past. In this regard one could do worse than to go to the novelists and the poets. If we want to understand the truth of Polish-Jewish history, and the relations between Poles and Jews in modern times, we would do well to study Czesław Miłosz's celebrated poem 'Campo Dei Fiori', which deals with the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and its impact on Poles on the 'aryan side' of Poland's capital.⁴⁰ What the lessons of this poem are I will leave to my readers.

³⁹ See Frank Lentricchia, 'Reading History with Kenneth Burke' in Hayden White and Margaret Brose (eds) *Representing Kenneth Burke* (Baltimore and London 1982) 122.

⁴⁰ Czesław Miłosz, *Wiersze* (London 1967) 89–91. For the English version see Miłosz, *The Collected Poems 1931–1987* (New York 1988) 33–5.

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