OCCASIONAL PAPERS · 4
THE THIRD
GOLDMAN LECTURE

The Failure of Jewish Assimilation in Polish Lands and its Consequences

ANTONY POLONSKY

Oxford Centre for
Hebrew and Jewish Studies

THE GOLDMAN LECTURE SERIES

The biennial Martin Goldman Memorial Lectures in the history and culture of Polish Jewry have been established at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies through the generosity of his mother, Mrs Helen Goldman, in memory of Dr Martin Goldman, a young man of exceptional talent who died in an accident in 1984 at the tragically early age of 34.

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How did we come to this? How did we lose ourselves
In this vast world, strange and hostile to us?

Julian Tuwim, 1926

I should like to take as my starting point the first Goldman Lecture, delivered by one of the leading historians of Polish Jewry, Ezra Mendelsohn, in which he examined what he described as 'the ambiguous "lessons" of modern Polish-Jewish history'. He defined the 'hegemonic reading' of the Polish-Jewish past, dominant in Israel and widely accepted elsewhere in the Jewish world, as follows: '[It] 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 principles of Jewish nationalism, and the inescapable conclusion that only *aliyah*-centric Zionism provided an answer.'[1] In addition, this reading stresses 'the utter futility of assimilation . . . [the blindness] of all those Jews in Poland . . . 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.'[2]

As he points out, this analysis of the Polish-Jewish past has serious defects. In the first place, it ignores the Orthodox response to modernity, which, in its own terms, has been highly successful. In addition, while anti-Semitism was clearly widespread in Poland, there has been considerable argument about how all-pervasive it was and is, and how its intensity has varied at different periods. The dominant paradigm has also greatly underestimated the degree of acculturation and Polonization, particularly in the interwar period. Zionism in Polish lands was not always as dominant as is suggested, while other Jewish political movements, in particular the socialist Bund, had more success than is sometimes conceded.

Mendelsohn concludes that while 'it is only natural for polemicists

[1] Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Ambiguous 'Lessons' of Modern Polish-Jewish History* (The First Goldman Lecture), (Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, 1995) 8.

[2] Ibid. 4.

and politicians to talk about the "lessons" of history . . . historians would do well to avoid them'. In my view, this exhortation should have come at the start of the lecture and have been even more strongly emphasized. Historians from Ranke to Butterfield have constantly warned of the distorting effects of seeing past developments through the preoccupations of present-day political imperatives. They have rightly counselled us that the past is a foreign country which has to be understood on its own terms and that the goal of historical investigation is to reveal things 'as they actually were'. In spite of all the questions raised by the new historiography, this still seems to me a realizable aim and one for which we should strive.

Perhaps more importantly, it seems to me that almost all Jewish historians of Polish Jewry have operated with a set of what my Oxford tutor, James Joll, described as 'unspoken assumptions', a set of attitudes which have led them to overemphasize some developments and underemphasize others. Firstly, there is in the work which Mendelsohn describes a marked disinclination to take very seriously the Polish context in which the Jews found themselves. Their point of view is reminiscent of the cartoon in the *New Yorker*, where civilization ends at the East River. In their universe, the Jews, in the centre of the picture, are surrounded on the perimeter of their world by an undifferentiated mass of 'goyim', often hostile, sometimes indifferent and occasionally friendly. This disregard of the wider context in which the fate of Jews has been played out is well described by Polish-born Richard Pipes, one of the most eminent historians of the Russian revolution:

> To a layman like myself, Jewish historiography seems to suffer from a higher degree of ethnocentricity than most. Jewish historians traverse the two millennia of the diaspora carrying barometers which they frequently consult to determine the atmospheric pressure: are times good for the Jews or are they bad? They rarely bother to enquire as to the Gentile environment within which Jewish history develops. As a result, they fail to take into account that Gentile society normally concentrates on its own affairs so that the treatment it metes out to the Jews in its midst, whether favourable or unfavourable, is a byproduct of concerns that have little to do with the Jews themselves. The unwillingness to perceive Gentile society on its own terms strikes me as a major shortcoming of the Jewish psyche.[3]

[3] Richard Pipes, 'Catherine II and the Jews', *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 5 (1975) 3.

In addition, there has been a tendency to see the world of Polish Jewry as fundamentally different from that of the Europeanized and 'inauthentic' Jews of Western Europe and the United States. According to the German-Jewish writer, Alfred Doeblin, who had grown up in a Jewish family, married a Jewish woman and had mostly Jewish friends, in 1923:

I discovered I did not really know Jews. I could not label my friends who called themselves Jews, as Jews . . . . Thus I asked myself and I asked others: Where are there Jews? I was told: in Poland . . . . Yes, I was there, and [it was there] for the first time I saw Jews . . . I thought that those industrious people I had seen in Germany were Jews, those merchants revelling in their sense of family and slowly growing fat, the nimble intellectuals, all those insecure, unhappy, fine people. Now I see; those are shabby exemplars, far away from the nucleus of the Jewish people that lives and works in Poland.[4]

This view was even more poetically articulated by Abraham Joshua Heschel in 1946:

There in Eastern Europe, the Jewish people came into its own. It did not live like a guest in somebody else's house, who must constantly keep in mind the ways and customs of the host. There Jews lived without reservation and without disguise, outside their homes no less than within them. When they used the phrase 'the world asks' in their commentaries on the Talmud, they did not refer to a problem raised by Aristotle or Averroes. Their fellow student of Torah were to them the 'world' . . . .

Because the ideals of the Ashkenazic Jews were shared by all, the relations between the various parts of the community – between the scholarly and the ignorant, the Yeshiva student and the trader – had an intimate organic character. The earthiness of the villagers, the warmth of plain people, and the spiritual simplicity of the *maggidim* or lay preachers penetrated into the *beth ha-midrash*, the house of prayer that was also a house of study and learning. Labourers, peasants, porters, artisans, storekeepers, all were partners in the Torah. The *maggidim* – the term presumably originated in Eastern Europe – did not apply for diplomas to anyone. They felt authorized by God to be preachers of morals.[5]

[4] Alfred Doeblin, *Reise in Polen* (Berlin, 1926, reprinted Munich, 1987) 137.

[5] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in East Europe* (New York, 1950) 102.

In fact, the Jews of Eastern Europe were bound by innumerable links to the rest of the Jewish world, particularly the Jews of Western and Central Europe; and the same processes of modernization and secularization which were transforming communities in the more developed parts of Europe were also acting, though more slowly and less comprehensively, in the East, in the areas which had made up the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and which had been partitioned between Russia, Prussia and Austria at the end of the eighteenth century. Prussian Poland acted in many ways as a half-way house. It was from here that the ideals of the *haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, spread to the remaining parts of Poland. The founder of the first 'modernized' synagogue in Warsaw, the 'Daytshe Shul' on Daniłowiczowska Street, established in 1802 when Warsaw was under Prussian rule, was the banker Isaac Flatau, born in the town of Zlotów, near Poznań, and a resident of Danzig. The first permanent preacher there, Abraham Meir Goldschmidt, was born in the town of Krotoszyn, near Poznań. When Goldschmidt succeeded Dr Adolf Jellinek as preacher of the synagogue in Leipzig in 1858, he was replaced by Dr Mordecai (Marcus) Jastrow, who was born in Rogozin in the Poznań region and had been educated in the Polish High School in Poznań and the Faculty of Philosophy in Berlin University. In addition, Jews from Prussian Poland were to play an important role in German-Jewish history; and the area became a sort of Alsace-Lorraine for German Jews, a reservoir of more traditional and, in some ways, more nationally conscious Jews. Among those who came from this area were leading figures in Jewish studies such as Heinrich Graetz and Ismar Elbogen, the politicians Rafal Korsch and Edward Lasker, religious figures like the cantor Ludwik Lewandowski, responsible for transforming much of the liturgical tradition of Prussian Jewry, the rabbi Leo Baeck and writers like Maksimilian Harden. The assumption that one encountered a totally different sort of Jewry when one crossed the Elbe or Warta rivers is to leave out a large part of the Jewish history of the area. Indeed, the 'hegemonic' discourse described by Mendelsohn could be seen as reflecting above all the experience of Jews in the Russian partition of Poland.

There is a third distorting lens of which one has constantly to be aware. Polish Jewry was almost entirely destroyed in the brief years of the Nazi Holocaust. However one assesses Polish behaviour in this period, and most assessments are quite severe, it is clear the genocide

was carried out with relatively little Polish assistance. Most of Polish society, whether because it was terrorized by the Nazis or out of a lack of a feeling of solidarity, was rather indifferent to the fate of the Jews, while a significant minority offered them assistance despite the fact that discovery carried the death penalty not only for oneself, but for one's family. The important point here is that the destruction of Polish Jewry did not follow logically from earlier developments. Attempts to argue that it did, as in Celia Heller's *On the Edge of Destruction* (New York, 1977), where it is asserted that the period between the two World Wars was a rehearsal for the Holocaust, on the grounds that Polish actions had by 1939 pushed the Jews to 'the edge of destruction' and that it only remained for the Nazis to complete what they had begun, do not really convince. They illustrate very clearly the problems involved in counterfactual history. For the historian, the dilemma is that, while it is impossible to cast out of one's mind the tragic fate of Polish Jewry, one also cannot see clearly how Polish Jewry might have evolved in different conditions.

One final feature of the historiography which Mendelsohn describes is its static quality. It concentrates, above all, on the interwar years and on the Holocaust. The period between the wars was rather brief, and even here most analysis of the situation of the Jews has tended to see it unitarilly as a test-case for the various Jewish ideologies. The very significant differences, for instance, between the relatively optimistic 1920s and the apocalyptic and doom-laden 1930s tend to be glossed over. More importantly, the neglect of what Eric Hobsbawm has described as 'the long nineteenth century' telescopes the history of Jews in the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and oversimplifies many aspects of their development.

It is to this 'long nineteenth century' that I want now to turn, and to the central issue which I wish to examine here: the failure of assimilation in Polish lands during this period. I should start by defining terms. I have used the term 'assimilation' as a convenient shorthand for granting the Jews civil rights and political equality. This is no longer how the term is used in scholarly discourse, where it is employed to describe the process by which the host society absorbs, more or less completely, minorities within it. A related term is 'acculturation', used to refer to the voluntary acquisition by Jews of some of the values and ways of behaving of the host society. What I shall be

talking about is the process of integration, which can be divided into two subcategories: political and social integration. Political integration involves the acceptance of some or all Jews as citizens with political rights; while social integration refers to their full participation in all aspects of the life of the society, political, economic and social.

What I should like to do is to examine three questions. Why did the politics of integration fail in Polish lands? What was good and what was bad about the 'new Jewish politics' which replaced the politics of integration? What residues did the politics of integration leave behind in Polish lands?

Let me start with the central feature of modern Polish-Jewish history, the failure of the politics of integration in Polish lands. The attempt initiated in Europe from the middle of the eighteenth century to transform the Jews from a religious and cultural community, linked by a common set of values and culture, into citizens of their respective nations – Englishmen, Frenchmen and even Germans or Poles 'of the Mosaic faith' – had different results in various parts of Europe. In the states of Western Europe, such as England, France, the Netherlands and in some ways Italy, the Jewish communities were small and their progress towards constitutional government fairly rapid. The emergence of industrial society with a large middle class had been more or less accomplished by the beginning of the twentieth century. Here Jews were rapidly integrated both politically and socially into the rising middle class. In German-speaking Central Europe the progress towards constitutional government was slower and had not been completed before 1914. Industrial development began later and the middle class was much weaker. In this area, as also in Hungary, the Jews formed a large part of the commercial middle class and were seen by many as responsible for the ills of capitalism. Political integration was not, by and large, followed by social integration.

It was in the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, where the bulk of European Jews lived, that integration was least successful.[6] Only in the area of Poland incorporated by Prussia in

[6] I have ignored another important aspect of the historical controversies about the Jewish experience in Polish lands: the question to what extent Poland was a 'paradisus Judaeorum' as was often claimed. This issue was thoroughly examined by Gershon Hundert in the Second Goldman Lecture, published in the *Journal of Jewish Studies* 48:2 (1997) 335–48.

the eighteenth century were Jews transformed fully into citizens, in this case of Prussia. In the Kingdom of Poland, whose autonomy, established at the Congress of Vienna, was almost entirely done away with after the Polish insurrection of 1863, and in the Tsarist Empire, the slow development of constitutional norms, the weakness of the middle class, the size and conservatism of the Jewish community, the fact that it had a critical mass large enough to sustain a largely independent communal life and the strength of hostility to the Jews, both governmental and popular, impeded the granting of civil rights. Jews achieved civil equality in the Kingdom of Poland in 1862, in Galicia in 1868 and in the Tsarist Empire only after the revolution of February 1917. Outside a small Polonized élite in Galicia and the Congress Kingdom, and a not much larger Russified élite in the Tsarist Empire, there was very little social integration.

As I have indicated, it was most successful in Prussian Poland, where most anti-Jewish restrictions were done away with in 1848 and where the Jews identified strongly with German culture. There were a number of reasons for this development: the eagerness of the Prussian government in the first half of the nineteenth century to integrate the Jews and make them the bourgeoisie in this area, the Prussian reforms which transformed a State composed of different estates into a civil society, and the fact that at the outset of this process the Jewish population constituted a significantly smaller proportion of the population than elsewhere in the Polish lands.

In the second part of the nineteenth century the conflict between the Polish majority and the German government determined to Germanize the area became the dominant feature of political and social life in the Grand Duchy. This created serious difficulties for the local Jewish population, with its allegiance to a liberal concept of the German idea. The Jews of the area reacted to the growing radicalization of the national conflict here, which was accompanied by expressions of anti-Semitism by both Poles and Germans, by reaffirming their belief in liberal ideas as a way of bridging the gap between the two sides. Many Jews sought safety by fleeing the area, while a minority reacted by arguing that Jews could not be expected to choose between two nationalisms struggling for control of an area, but should rather assert their own national separateness.

In the Kingdom of Poland, established as an attempt to reconcile

Polish national aspirations with Russian *raison d'état* at the Congess of Vienna in 1815, the politics of integration seemed to be achieving significant successes in the years between 1860 and 1890. In the first half of the nineteenth century the Polish nobility, which, even after the failure of the revolution of 1830–1, was the dominant force in the area, took the view that Jewish emancipation was conditional on the Jews abandoning their religious and social separateness, a development which was regarded as rather unlikely, or, at best, likely to take a very long time. The run-up to the insurrection of 1863 changed this situation, as a competition developed between the Viceroy of the Kingdom, Alexander Wielopolski, a Pole who was trying to introduce a measure of self-rule which would also be acceptable to the Tsarist authorities, and the growing national movement. As a result, the Jews of the Kingdom received their emancipation from Wielopolski on 4 June 1862, and this was not rescinded after the failure of the uprising. In emancipating the Jews, Wielopolski had hoped that they could form a significant element in an emerging Polish middle class which would carry out the capitalist transformation of the Kingdom of Poland and give it a much more balanced and Western social structure. This was also the hope of the Polish liberals, who called themselves Positivists because of their admiration for the secular and pro-industrial ideas of Auguste Comte, people like Alexander Świętochowski and Eliza Orzeszkowa. It was also supported by the Jewish commercial and financial élite which was benefiting from the economic boom in the Congress Kingdom which followed the opening of the Russian market in 1858 and the abolition of unfree cultivation in 1864.

In Galicia, too, the Polish nobility, which gained control of the province in the 1860s, had accepted the granting of full legal equality for the Jews under pressure from Vienna. In the last decades of the nineteenth century an alliance developed between the Polish governing stratum in the province and the Jewish leadership, which worked very successfully for quite a long time.

Why then did integration fail? In the Kingdom of Poland the position of the integrationists was weakened by the slow progress of acculturation, in the context of an educational system controlled by Russian authorities determined to prevent another Polish uprising. In addition, a large and self-confident Polish bourgeoisie did not emerge

and from the 1890s there was growing revulsion against the excesses and injustices which accompanied the progress of capitalism. According to the turn-of-the-century critic, Ignacy Matuszewski: 'Alas! The golden age remained a dream, the heroic engineers, praised by contempory writers, were transformed into legal bandits. [Organic] work, which was to raise the spirits of the individual and of the collective, changed into a nightmare which preyed on the sweat of the poor and the brains, nerves and hearts of the rich and those determined to become rich.'[7]

This inevitably had an adverse effect on attitudes towards Jews, who were widely blamed for the defects of capitalism. There is a whole series of *fin-de-siècle* Polish novels which describe the unsuccessful attempts of Polish characters to free themselves from the capitalist cobwebs that entangle them. 'In all cases, the "flies" are ultimately strangled and become the prey of a swarm of Jewish "spiders".'[8]

Around the same time, the European-wide revival of nationalism led to the emergence in Poland of the National Democratic movement. Its chief ideologist, Roman Dmowski, was a Social Darwinist, who believed that if Poland were to survive as a nation it would have to abandon the naive belief in international brotherhood which had characterized the gentry revolutionaries of 1830, 1848 and 1863. '[S]truggle and oppression are a reality and universal peace and universal freedom are a fiction',[9] he asserted. In these conditions, the Poles should create an organic national movement which would defend their national interests. In this, there could be no place for the Jews, who were a disruptive force and could never be integrated into the national substance. Increasingly, Dmowski and his movement saw anti-Semitism both as a means for mobilizing Polish society and as a catch-all ideology to explain every ill from which Poland was suffering.

Progress towards Jewish integration was further undermined by the transformation of the Jewish consciousness which spread from Tsarist Russia to the Congress Kingdom and the rest of the Jewish world in

[7] Ignacy Matuszewski, 'Przemyśl i powieści', *Tygodnik Illustrowany* 48 (1899).

[8] Magdalena Opalski, 'Trends in the Literary Perception of Jews in Modern Polish Fiction', in Antony Polonsky (ed.) *From* Shtetl *to Socialism. Essays from Polin* (Oxford, 1993) 162.

[9] *Mysli nowoczesnego Polaka* (Lvov, 1903, reprinted London, 1953) 87.

the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In Tsarist Russia proper (the Pale of Settlement), policies towards the Jews had never really sought their integration and this had fostered a different sense of identity with peoplehood as the main mark of Jewish difference. Increasingly, the assimilationist solution was rejected by Jews as unrealistic and involving a series of compromises which proved both humiliating and fruitless. Autonomist Jewish political movements now emerged, of which the most important were Zionism, Folkism and Bundism (according to which Jewish national autonomy should be sought within the framework of the socialist millennium). These movements were underpinned by the development of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literatures. The new politics, characterized by a more strident and anti-Semitic form of Polish nationalism, by a socialist challenge to the Tsarist Empire and by Jewish autonomist claims, were both more populist and more demagogic.

In Galicia, too, integration was now widely seen as discredited. Increasing democracy in Galicia (universal male suffrage was granted in 1907) brought the Polish peasantry into politics and disrupted the noble–Jewish alliance. So too did the exacerbation of the Polish–Ukrainian conflict, which created particular problems for Jews, since most of them lived in areas in which Ukrainians were the majority and it was there that they began increasingly to stress their separate ethnic identity. Jewish–Ukrainian relations in Galicia were mostly hostile, and the alliance between the Jewish political élite and the Ukrainians in the first parliamentary elections in autonomous Galicia was not to be repeated until the early twentieth century when some common ground was found between the Zionists and moderate Ukrainian nationalists. The growth of political anti-Semitism and the influence of Dmowski's National Democrats in East Galicia also stimulated the emergence of autonomous Jewish politics.[10]

What was the character of the 'new Jewish politics' which replaced the politics of integration? We are inclined to concentrate on its positive aspects – the development of political Zionism and its culmination in the successful establishment of the State of Israel, the

[10] On this see Leila P. Everett, 'The Rise of Jewish National Politics in Galicia', in Andrei S. Markovits and Frank E. Sysyn (eds) *Nationbuilding and the Politics of Nationalism. Essays on Austrian Galicia* (Cambridge, MA, 1982) 149–77.

miraculous revival of Hebrew as a spoken language and the achievements of both modern Hebrew and modern Yiddish literature and the new sense of pride at no longer having to make humiliating and unsuccessful compromises to acquire rights to which one was clearly entitled. But there was another side to this triumph. In a story entitled *Samooborona*, published in 1907, Israel Zangwill describes a Polish shtetl to which he gives the ironic name Milovka ('agreeable'). A young man, David Ben Amram, arrives to organize the local Jews in the face of anti-Jewish violence sweeping the Tsarist Empire. He is unable to accomplish his mission because of the deep ideological divisions which have developed even in this remote backwater. The Jews are split between the integrationists and assimilationists (of which there were several varieties), the religious (divided into hasidic and misnagdic), several variations of Zionism (socialist Zionism, Zionist Zionism, cultural Zionism, Mizrachi), Sejmism, territorialism, socialist territorialism and Bundism. The young idealist is brought to the brink of dispair: 'He had a nightmare vision of bristling sects and pullulating factions, each with its Councils, Federations, Funds, Conferences, Party-Days, Agenda, Referats, Press-Organs, each differentiating itself with meticulous subtlety from all the other Parties, each defining with casuistic minuteness its relation to every contemporary problem, each equipped with inexhaustible polyglot orators, speechifying through tumultuous nights.'[11]

It is clear that the principal reason for the fractious and querulous character of the 'new Jewish politics' was the increasingly desperate situation of the Jews, first before 1914 and even more in the darkening world scene of the 1930s. Politics has a number of functions, including mobilizing opinion, changing social consciousness and comforting groups in difficult times. But if it is above all the 'art of the possible', then what is to be done in 'impossible' situations, in what Dubnow characterized in a 1939 essay as 'Haman's times', 'the epoch of the counter-emancipation'?[12] At the same time, it is

[11] Israel Zangwill, 'Samooborona', in *Ghetto Comedies* (New York, 1907) 481. I am indebted to Ezra Mendelsohn's *On Modern Jewish Politics* (New York, 1993) for this reference.

[12] 'What should one do in Haman's Times? (A Letter to the Editors of *Oyfn Sheydveg*, 1939)', reprinted in Koppel Pinson (ed.) Simon Dubnow, *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism* (Philadelphia, 1958) 354-60.

clear that the profound ideological rifts and inability to compromise were deeply imbedded in the 'new Jewish politics'.

There is further the problem inherent in trying to achieve group national rights in an era of national States for a territorially dispersed minority. It is clear that one of the reasons for the growing strength of Polish anti-Semitism was the belief that the Jews had rejected the offer of integration. The transformation in attitudes here can best be charted in the views expressed by the doyen of Polish liberalism, Alexander Świętochowski. Confronted by the phenomenon of Zionism, he wrote in his journal, *Prawda*, in April 1902, that he did not believe that the Jews possessed the 'cultural material needed to create their own homeland or to build a separate nation'. If, however, they were to pursue such an ideal, then friendly coexistence with such an alien and separate nation would become impossible for the Poles. In a second article, in February 1903, significantly entitled 'Take care with fire', he claimed that the spread of Zionism would result in the rise of hostility to the Jews in segments of society which until then had been free of hatred. This anti-Zionism would quickly turn into anti-Semitism and would destroy all hope of Polish–Jewish reconciliation. In his memoirs, written later (in the 1920s), he explained: 'I admit only to the name of evolutionist in philosophy and national humanist in sociology. Because of my views, I defended the Jews fifty years ago, when they wished to be Poles, and, because of the same views, I do not defend them today, when they wish to be Jews, enemies of the Poles.'[13]

This problem became more acute after the First World War, which fundamentally transformed the situation of Jews in Eastern Europe. The collapse of the Tsarist, Austro-Hungarian and German States made possible the creation of Polish and Lithuanian national States. The peacemakers at Versailles were determined to safeguard the rights of the national minorities in these States, and these guarantees were not only inserted in the respective Polish and Lithuanian constitutions, but were guaranteed by the Allied and Associated Powers in the peace settlement. It also gave international underpinning to the British promise in the Balfour Declaration to establish a Jewish National Homeland in Palestine. The Jewish delegations at Versailles were an uneasy mix of old-style integrationists like Lucien Wolf and

[13] Alexander Świętochowski, *Wspomnienia* (Warsaw, 1966) 86.

Louis Marshall and proponents of the new politics. But the final settlement seemed to fulfill the dreams of those who thought in terms of Jewish peoplehood, both in underpinning Zionist aspirations and in establishing conditions for the creation of a system of non-territorial national autonomy in Eastern Europe.

The autonomists focussed their highest hopes for the creation of such a system on Lithuania. According to Leo Motzkin, who represented the World Zionist Organization at the Second Jewish National Assembly in Lithuania held in Kaunas on 14 February 1922, 'Fifteen million Jews are watching your experiment in the struggle for national rights'. In response, Dr Max Soloveitchik, Minister for Jewish Affairs in the Lithuanian Government, affirmed that 'Lithuania is the source from which will flow ideas which will form the basis for new forms of Jewish life'.[14]

Lithuanian Jewry, with a specific character derived from the strength in the region of the *haskalah* and Zionism, the absence of much acculturation and the vigour of its misnagdic and *mussar* traditions, seemed the ideal vehicle for the establishment of a system of Jewish autonomy. This seemed to be in the interests both of Jews and Lithuanians. The two groups had cooperated before the War in elections to the Duma, and Lithuanians hoped that Jews would support their claims to Vilna (Vilnius). There seemed to be no fundamental economic conflict between the emerging Lithuanian intelligentsia and Jews, and Lithuanian nationalists were more comfortable with specifically Jewish cultural manifestations than with Jewish acculturation to Russian, Polish or German culture. Given the mixed character of the area, Jewish national autonomy would also make the State more attractive to Belarussians and Germans who might be incorporated into it.

By the mid-1920s it was clear that the system, launched with such high hopes, was collapsing. In May 1926 a new leftist government came to power and made important concessions to national minorities. This, and general dissatisfaction with the functioning of the democratic system, led in December 1926 to a coup led by a right-wing nationalist,

[14] 'Proceedings of the Second Congress on the Jewish Communities and the Jewish National Assembly. Stenographic Reports', *Yidishe shtime*, Kaunas, February 1922, quoted in Samuel Gringauz, 'Jewish National Autonomy in Lithuania (1918–1925)', *Jewish Social Studies* 14:3 (July 1952) 225–46. See also Sarunas Liekis, 'Jewish Autonomy in Lithuania', Brandeis University PhD Thesis, 1997.

Antanas Smetona. The political system became increasingly autocratic and no longer had any place for Jewish or indeed any sort of autonomy, though the highly developed Jewish private-school systems and the Jewish cooperative banking system survived.

The reasons for the collapse of the autonomous experiment in Lithuania are clear. The two sides had unrealistic expectations of each other. Lithuanians believed that Jews would aid them in acquiring Vilna and Memel and in attracting Belarussians to a multi-national Lithuania. They had much less need of Jews in the fairly homogeneous Lithuania which actually emerged, while it soon became clear that Jewish support would not be a significant factor in acquiring Vilna. Jews, for their part, took far too seriously assurances made by the leading Lithuanian politicians, whose commitment to Jewish autonomy was always dependent on their larger goals. Further reasons for the failure of the experiment were that it fell prey to Lithuanian party conflict and that the degree of consensus necessary for its success was absent within the Jewish community. It may be, too, that there is an inherent contradiction between the basic principles of the liberal State and the guaranteeing of group rights.

I have examined the attempt to establish Jewish autonomy in Lithuania because it does explain some of the otherwise puzzling features of interwar Jewish politics in Poland and illustrates some of what one might describe as the 'discontents' of the new Jewish politics. The bitter dispute between the Zionists of the former Austrian partition, led by Leon Reich, and those of the area formerly ruled by Russia, led by Yitzhak Gruenbaum, has to be understood in the context of what seemed like the successful achievement of Jewish national autonomy in Lithuania. Gruenbaum, coming from an area where ethnic antagonisms had become quite pronounced, stressed the need for a vigorous and uncompromising defence of Jewish national rights, especially as they had been guaranteed by the constitution and the National Minorities Treaty. Jews, in his view, would find a reasonable place for themselves only when Poland had been transformed from a national State into one of nationalities, in which the various ethnic groups enjoyed a wide measure of autonomy. This view of the Polish situation lay behind Gruenbaum's advocacy of a united front of the minorities – Jews, Germans, Ukrainians and Belarussians – which led to the establishment of the National Minorities Bloc in the

elections of November 1922. This policy could only have been pursued by someone who had unrealistic goals in, and no practical experience of, politics: it bitterly antagonized Poles, already hostile to Jews because of their support for the Lithuanian claim to Vilna and their neutrality in the Polish–Ukrainian conflict in East Galicia. Moreover, the Jews' objectives were quite different from those of the other minorities with whom they sought an alliance. While Jews wanted only the implementation of rights they were guaranteed, Germans were openly revisionist and the Slavic minorities wanted at least territorial autonomy and at the most secession.

Reich, coming from Galicia where the existence of a constitutional régime had somewhat softened ethnic tensions, rejected Gruenbaum's maximalism and favoured a direct approach to the Polish authorities. This resulted in the agreement of May 1925 with the Polish prime minister, Władysław Grabski, which soon collapsed amid a welter of accusations and counter-accusations of bad faith by the parties involved. Yet, after the May coup, Reich (who died in 1929) and his associates, who dominated the Jewish Parliamentary Club, still hoped to establish lines of communication with the government. They were generally satisfied with government behaviour in the 1920s and, although uneasy about the impact of the Depression, still regarded the government as far better than the alternatives, whether to the right or the left. They felt particularly justified in this view by the actions of the government in August 1929, when the National Democrats attempted to make use of an alleged Jewish profanation of a Corpus Christi procession in Lvov to initiate a campaign of anti-Jewish disturbances. The prime minister, Felicjan Sławoj Składkowski, who was later to make himself notorious by his encouragement of the economic boycott in parliament in April 1936, acted firmly and swiftly to restore order and stop attacks on Jews.

The main Orthodox political organization, Agudas Yisrael, in accordance with its understanding of the talmudic principle of *Dina de Malkhuta Dina* ('The Law of the State is Law'), had quickly established friendly relations with the Pilsudski régime after May 1926.[15] It

[15] On the Agudah, see Ezra Mendelsohn, 'The Politics of Agudas Israel in Inter-War Poland', *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 2 (1972) 47–60; G. Bacon, *The Politics of Tradition, Agudat Yisrael in Poland, 1916–1939* (Jerusalem, 1996).

had been rewarded by a decree in 1927 extending and reorganizing the Kehillot (communities), which were now granted wide powers in religious matters, including the maintenance of rabbis, synagogues, *mikva'ot*, religious education and *shechitah*. Some welfare for poor members of the community was also to be provided. The Agudah, in return, supported the government in the elections of March 1928 and November 1930. In 1928 one of its leaders, Eliasz Kirszbraun, was even elected on the government (BBWR) list.

All these groups found their political positions drastically undermined by the increasingly anti-Semitic stance of the government and the national minorities, particularly the Germans and Ukrainians, after 1935. Gruenbaum moved to Palestine in 1929. But for his followers the idea of transforming Poland into a State of nationalities was now a pipe-dream. Reich's attempt to find a *modus vivendi* with the Polish authorities which would reconcile Polish national interests and Jewish group rights had also clearly failed. In addition, the hope of a large-scale emigration to the Middle East was now chimerical, which undermined the position of the more moderate Zionist groupings. The position of the Agudah was also crumbling. It had continued to regard the government as sympathetic in the early 1930s, and in these circumstances it came as a particularly cruel blow when in April 1936 the government introduced a law effectively banning ritual slaughter. This move was justified on hygienic and humanitarian grounds, but it was clear to all that its main objectives were to make life difficult for Jews and to damage the Jewish slaughterers who also sold meat to Christians.[16]

It was these circumstances which brought the socialist Bund to the centre of Jewish politics in Poland – its links with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) seemed to tie it to a group which had a real chance of taking power and was more sympathetic to Jewish aspirations than most other political movements in Poland. It also explains the support for radical Zionist groups, above all the Revisionists, and leftist movements, primarily the Communists. These are all examples of the politics of desperation. The politics of the possible had been abjured

[16] The issue of *shechitah* has given rise to a vast literature which is well reviewed by Emanuel Meltzer in *Ma'avak medini be-malkodet: Yehudei Polin 1935–39* (Tel Aviv, 1982) 97–110, issued in English as *No Way Out. The Politics of Polish Jewry 1935–1939* (Cincinnati, 1997).

because it did not exist. How desperate this situation was, with the government – pressed by the persistence of the economic crisis and the encouragement to the anti-Semites given by the Nazi success in disenfranchizing and expropriating one of the best-integrated and prosperous Jewish communities in Europe – adopting a policy of encouraging the emigration of a large part of Polish Jewry, is reflected in the comment of a cautious historian of the period, Jerzy Tomaszewski. After pointing out that mass emigration was not a feasible possibility at this time for dealing with the 'Jewish question', he comes to the following conclusion: 'A lasting solution of the social and economic problems of the Jews had thus to be sought in Poland, in close association with the whole range of problems faced by the country. It is difficult today to reach a conclusion on the chances of finding such a solution, because the outbreak of War made a breach in the normal evolution of the country. If one takes into account the situation which prevailed at the end of the 1930s, the prospects for lasting solutions must seem doubtful.'[17]

One cannot determine whether the judgement of Tomaszewski, which echoes the more extreme views of Jabotinsky in the 1930s that the Jews had no future in Poland or anywhere in Eastern Europe, is correct. Earlier dire predictions of a 'Polish–Jewish war', frequently uttered on the eve of 1914, had proved misplaced (an even earlier 'Polish–Jewish war' in 1859 had, in fact, been followed by the Polish–Jewish rapprochement which preceded the insurrection of 1863) and under German occupation from 1915 Polish–Jewish tensions abated. On the eve of the Nazi occupation, during which the Nazis murdered over 90 per cent of Polish Jewry, Polish–Jewish relations were certainly envenomed. But it is only with the benefit of hindsight that we know that in 1939 the bulk of Polish Jewry was doomed. It could equally be argued that the bark of Polish anti-Semitism was rather worse than its bite and that had the Polish régime moved back, as seemed possible in 1938–9, to some form of liberal democracy, some new Polish–Jewish *modus vivendi* would again have become possible.

What is clear is that the creation of appropriate arrangements for

[17] Jerzy Tomaszewski, 'Niepodłegla Rzeczpospolita', in Jerzy Tomaszewski (ed.) *Najnowsze Dzieje Żydów w Polsce* (Warsaw, 1993) 215.

nationally conscious Jews in national States, such as emerged from the collapse of the multinational empires in East-Central Europe after the First World War, is a highly complex matter. In this sense, the failure of the politics of integration certainly made the situation of the Jews in the Diaspora much more difficult. The bankruptcy of the attempt to establish Jewish autonomy in Lithuania, where there was considerable goodwill on both sides at the outset, should lead to serious reflection. So too should the involvement of a significant number of Lithuanians, previously regarded by many Jews as not particularly prone to anti-Semitism, in the Nazi anti-Jewish genocide. The fundamental problems posed by the 'new Jewish politics' remain and their implications go far beyond the Jewish world. How is one to guarantee minority rights, particularly those of a non-territorial minority, in a national State? How much do Jews have to give up to live securely as Jews in the Diaspora? Is it only in a Jewish national State that Jewish national rights can be guaranteed?

Let me now turn to my final question. What were the residues of the politics of integration? There were many, but I have time here to discuss only one – the large body of literature produced in the Polish language by Polish Jews. Polish-Jewish writing went back to the nineteenth century and had originally been closely linked to the integrationist ideology. Such obviously programmatic work was unlikely to be great art. Nevertheless the years before the First World War did see the emergence of some significant Polish-Jewish writers. It was in the interwar period that Polish-Jewish literature began to flourish on a significant scale. The phenomenon now became bifurcated. On the one hand, there were those writers whose backgrounds were Jewish, but who considered themselves to be Polish writers, dealing with specifically Jewish themes only rarely if at all. On the other hand, there were consciously Jewish writers who made the choice to use Polish as their language of expression. Of the interwar writers who saw themselves as primarily part of the central Polish literary tradition the most important were Bolesław Leśmian, Julian Tuwim, Antoni Słonimski and Bruno Schulz, a writer who should perhaps be placed in an intermediate position between this group of writers and those who thought of themselves as Jewish writers producing work in Polish.

The group of consciously Jewish writers did not attain the artistic

level of Tuwim of Schulz, but emerged as a distinctive presence in the interwar years. Their point of view was well articulated by Roman Brandstaetter, perhaps the most gifted of their number. In his words: 'We express our own Jewish longings in the Polish language, we set the pain of a Jewish heart to the sound of Kochanowski's words for the first time on Polish land, we associate the words of Mickiewicz with the holy words of the Bible . . . . We are a group that rehabilitates with its output the activity of the renegade Klaczko, which contradicts Feldman's ideology with existence . . . . The soul of the Polish Jew speaks through us for the first time.'[18]

Mercifully, a fair number of Polish writers of Jewish origin survived the War. Among them, the division between writers of Jewish origin who saw themselves as working in the mainstream Polish literary tradition, and Polish-Jewish writers preoccupied with Jewish themes, re-emerged in the new conditions of Communist Poland. The distinction between these two groups was not always clear-cut and, indeed, one of the leading representatives of the Polish-Jewish school in interwar Poland, Roman Brandstaetter, always an extremist, converted to Catholicism under the influence of the Holocaust and became a committed Christian writer, severing his links with the Jewish world.[19] Other prominent prewar writers of Jewish origin who continued to publish in postwar Poland were Antoni Słonimski, Julian Tuwim and Aleksander Wat. Writers of Jewish origin were also prominent in *Kuźnica* ('The Forge'), a group of writers who hoped to restructure Polish cultural life in the new political situation, drawing on the traditions of the Polish Enlightenment and avoiding as much as possible the extreme versions of Marxism and social realism.

Fewer of the prewar 'Polish-Jewish' writers survived the Holocaust. Several of those who perished left behind important literary testimonies. The most important are those of Władysław Szlengel,

[18] *Opinia* 25 (1933) quoted in E. Prokop-Janiec, 'The Sabbath Motif in Interwar Polish-Jewish Literature', in Yisrael Gutman, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jehuda Reinharz and Chone Shmeruk (eds) *The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars* (Hanover and London, 1989) 417.

[19] Some of his postwar works are *Pieśń o moim Chrystusie* ('A Song of My Christ', 1960), the plays *Powrót syna marnotrawnego* ('The Return of the Prodigal Son', 1947) and *Król i aktor* ('The King and the Actor', 1952) and the tetralogy *Jezus z Nazaretu* ('Jesus of Nazareth', 1967–73).

Henryka Łazowertówna and Zuzanna Ginczanka. There is actually very little continuity with the prewar Polish-Jewish literary group. Most writers who can be regarded as Polish-Jewish are either those who, under the influence of the Holocaust, felt compelled to devote at least a significant part if not most of their work to Jewish topics, or, indeed, became Jewish writers because of them. Adolf Rudnicki is the best-known representative of the first group, while the most obvious example of the second group, which was spurred into creativity by the Holocaust, is Julian Stryjkowski, who began his masterpiece, *Głosy w ciemności* ('Voices in the Darkness'), in Moscow in 1943 when news came to him of the annihilation of Polish Jewry. One of the important literary phenomena of the 1960s and early 1970s in Poland was the arrival on the literary scene of a younger generation of Polish-Jewish writers who had been children during the Holocaust. They include Bogdan Wojdowski, Henryk Grynberg and Hanna Krall.

Limitations of space prevent me from giving this important group of writers the attention they deserve. Let me close by quoting from one of the most gifted of them, Julian Tuwim. While in exile in New York he wrote a prose-poem, *My, Żydzi Polscy* . . . ('We, Polish Jews . . .' [1944]),[20] in which he explains his double identity as Jew and Pole. He dedicated it 'To my Mother in Poland, or to her beloved Shadow'. He did not know, although he must have suspected, that his mother had been taken out of the mental asylum in Otwock to which she had retreated and been murdered by the Nazis. He went on:

> And immediately I can hear the question: 'What do you mean – *We*?' The question, I grant you, is natural enough. Jews to whom I am wont to explain that I am a Pole have asked it. So will the Poles, to the overwhelming majority of whom I am and shall remain a Jew. Here is my answer to both.
>
> I am a Pole because I want to be. It's nobody's business but my own. I certainly have not the slightest intention of rendering account, explaining, or justifying it to anyone. I do not divide Poles into pure-stock Poles and alien-stock Poles. I leave such justification to pure and alien-stock advocates of racialism, to domestic and foreign Nazis. I divide Poles just as I divide Jews and all other nations into the intelligent and the fools, the honest and the dishonest, the brilliant and the dull-witted, the exploited and the exploiters,

[20] A facsimile edition, with translations in English, Hebrew and Yiddish, was produced by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1984.

gentlemen and boors. I also divide Poles into fascists and anti-fascists. Neither of these groups is of course homogeneous; each shimmers with a variety of hues and shades . . . .

If, however, it comes to explaining my nationality, or rather my sense of national belonging, then I am a Pole for the most simple, almost primitive reasons. Mostly rational, partly irrational, but devoid of any 'mystical' flourishes. To be a Pole is neither an honour nor a glory nor a privilege. It is like breathing. I have not yet met a man who is proud of breathing.

I am a Pole because it was in Poland that I was born and bred, that I grew up and learned; because it was in Poland that I was happy and unhappy; because from exile it is to Poland that I want to return, even though I were promised the joys of paradise elsewhere . . . .

Above all a Pole – because I want to be . . . .

'All right', someone will say, 'granted you are a Pole. But in that case why we *Jews*?' To which I answer: *Because of blood*. 'Then racialism again?' No, not racialism at all. Quite the contrary.

There are two kinds of blood: that inside veins, and that which spurts from them. The first is the sap of the body, and as such comes under the realm of physiologists. Whoever attributes to this blood any other than biological characteristics and powers will in consequence, as we have seen, turn towns into smoking ruins, will slaughter millions of people, and, at last, as we shall yet see, bring carnage upon his own kin.

The other kind of blood is the same blood, but spilled by this gang-leader of international fascism to testify to the triumph of his gore over mine, the blood of millions of murdered innocents, a blood not hidden in arteries, but revealed to the world. Never since the dawn of mankind has there been such a flood of martyr blood, and the blood of Jews (not Jewish blood, mind you) flows in widest and deepest streams. Already its blackening rivulets are flowing into a tempestuous river. *And it is in this new Jordan that I beg to receive the baptism of baptisms; the bloody, burning, martyred brotherhood of Jews* . . . .[21]

Civilized life depends on the ability to transcend narrow ethnic and national divisions. The tragedy of the twentieth century is that so little space has been left for cultural hybrids like Tuwim, reviled by both Poles and Jews as treacherous, naive and dangerous. These hybrids are the product of liberal societies in which Jews have flourished most.

[21] *My, Żydzi Polscy* . . . , pp. 17–19.

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