“Polish Acculturation, Jewish Nationalism? On Political Consciousness of the Jewish Youth in Interwar Poland.”

Kamil Kijek

Work in Progress: Copyright. Please do not cite without the author's consent.

Introduction.

The modernization of the Jewish community in Poland had its roots in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century but it assumed a specific character in the Polish state reborn in 1918. The “nation-oriented” state became an arena of unbridled rivalry of political parties, and of the national, religious and ethnic groups. Poles, national minorities, and among them the Jews, organized themselves almost exclusively along the ethnic lines and in opposition to the others. Jewish community in interwar Poland noted strong decline of political meaning and support for integrationist (being usually called “assimilationist”) movements. Commonly shared knowledge about the Jews in Interwar Poland defines its social experience as

---

1 This is revised and changed English version of an article originally published in ‘Wokół assimilacji i akulturacji na Ziemiach Polskich’, ed. Konrad Zieliński, Lublin 2009 (“Polska akulturacja, żydowski nacjonalizm? Paradigma „akulturacji bez asymilacji a świadomość polityczna międzywojennej młodzieży żydowskiej na podstawie autobiografii YIVO.”). I would like to thank Agnieszka Jagodzińska, Marcos Silber and Marcin Wodziński for important comments on the first version of this article.

2 Kamil Kijek, born 1981, studied sociology and Jewish history at the University of Wrocław and at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (one year graduate program). He has a M.A. in Sociology from University of Wrocław. During his doctoral studies he was an intern in Mordechaj Anielewicz Centre for the Research and Teaching of the History of the Polish Jews at the University of Warsaw, Hebrew and Jewish Studies Department at University College London, the Bucerius Institute at the University of Haifa and the Institute for the History of Polish Jewry and Israel-Poland Relations at the University of Tel-Aviv. He was a bursar of Fondation Pour la Memoire de la Shoah in Paris. He is writing his doctoral dissertation at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Science in Warsaw. In his doctoral work he deals with political consciousness of the last generation of the Polish Jews before the Holocaust. Besides his doctoral studies Kamil Kijek works for the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews in Warsaw, on the XIX and XX century permanent exhibitions of the museum. e-mail: kamil.kijek@gmail.com


4 For the Second Republic as the archetype of a “nation-oriented state” or “a state whose national project has not yet been put into effect” see, Rogers Brubaker, Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe, Cambridge 1996, 85-103.
“acculturation without assimilation”\(^5\). In reference to the politics, the fact of almost exclusive support for parties defining themselves as purely Jewish, is seen as the one of the strongest corroborations of this process. While under the influence of the modern nationalistic state institutions, especially the youngest generation was getting acculturated in the realm of daily language,- its community norms, values, patterns of thinking about social reality, self definitions as national, ethnic or religious entity, are seen as purely Jewish.

The goal of this article is to argue with this thesis and to add a new context to the explanation of the character of political consciousness of the Jewish community in Interwar Poland. This new context of the social and political experience, is defined by the new experience of living and growing up in modern, democratic, later on authoritarian, nationalistic state. It is my contention that new spheres of social life and of socialization processes introduced by the state, had important impact on the political consciousness of the Jewish community. In order to present new understanding of this context and its meaning, article will focus on the discussion of the concepts such as assimilation, acculturation and polonization. They will be discussed in reference to the two main contexts of the Jewish political socialization in Interwar Poland. First one is that of educational activities of the state and private Jewish educational systems. Second is Jewish political discourse and political activity. What was the role of the Polish state and Polish national culture in education of the Jewish children? What was its influence on the educational activities of the Jewish private sector? What was the influence of the newly created state on the Jewish politics and its young followers? These will be the main questions that we will refer to, in order to accomplish our goal of introducing the Polish state experience into explanation of the specific character of the political consciousness of the Jewish youth in Interwar Poland.

I. Nationality, language and state educational activities.

For the national minorities essentially important and new element was obligatory universal education in the Polish language introduced and controlled by the Polish State. Polish language became not only an instrument indispensable in political

\(^5\) For the secondary literature references and discussion with the concept, see below.
activity of the minorities, but also an important element of private life, for it was the language of public administration, a factor which determined social status and increased educational and occupational chances. On the basis of the General Census of 1921 (when respondents were asked about their nationality as well as their religion), Celia Heller has assumed that less than 10 per cent of the whole Jewish population, that is 270,000-280,000 persons, were assimilated Polish Jews. She included in that group some persons who declared they were of Polish nationality and of Mosaic religion. Researchers studying assimilation are now reluctant to give even approximate figures and the assimilation process is susceptible of various interpretations. In the next census held in 1931, the question about nationality was replaced by one about language. Eighty per cent of the persons who stated they were of Mosaic religion declared that their mother tongue was Yiddish, 12 per cent said it was Polish, and 8 per cent that it was Hebrew. These data, like that of the 1921 census, arouse suspicion. In protest against the removal of the nationality question from the questionnaire, Jewish political groupings called on Jews to declare Yiddish or Hebrew as their mother tongue. Historians agree that the number of Jews for whom Polish was the natural language of communication must have been much higher. It is also certain that 8 per cent of the Jewish population did not use Hebrew in their daily life. The data mentioned above are in fact a better, though not an ideal, indicator of nationality. We can assume that many persons who declared that Polish was their mother tongue, regarded themselves as Poles in the national meaning of the word. It is important to note, that the Jewish national parties called their supporters, to declare Yiddish or Hebrew as their daily language, and many of their Polish speaking supporters followed that call.

---

6 See Celia Heller, On the Edge of Destruction. Jews of Poland between Two World Wars, New York 1980, 188. The author says that this figure was thought to be too high by several historians whom she had consulted; in their opinion it was between 150,000 and 200,000. Detailed data from the first general census can be found in the successive yearbooks of, Statystyka Polski [Polish Statistics], See in particular, Statystyka Polski 31, Pierwszy Powszechny Spis Rzeczpospolitej z 30.IX,1921. Mieszkania. Ludność Stosunki Zawodowe. Tablice Państwowe [Polish Statistics. First universal census of the Polish Republic from the 30th of September 1921. Apartments. Population. Occupations. State Tables], Warszawa 1927.

7 In Silesia and the Vilna region the 1921 census was conducted by Polish military authorities; 25.5 per cent of persons of the Mosaic faith, that is 707,400, declared they were of Polish nationality. Ibid, 56.

8 See for example, Anna Landau-Czajka, Syn będzie Lech… Asymilacja Żydów w Polsce międzywojennej [The Son will be called Lech… Jewish Assimilation in Interwar Poland], Warszawa 2006, 45-50.

The term “assimilated” is not a fortunate expression here. Even if a person declared he/she was Polish of the Mosaic faith, this did not necessarily mean support for “assimilation” that is, for the obliteration of all ethnic Jewish features, even if the only language he/she used was Polish. Ezra Mendelsohn points out that sympathizers of Zionism could declare they were of Polish nationality. Most of the Zionist parties, among them General Zionist under leadership of figures such as Icchak Grunbaum, Yehoshua Thon or Leon Reich, while advocating ethnic Jewish nationalism simultaneously opted for full individual and collective citizen rights for the Jews in Poland, seen as “civil Poles”. The adherents of the orthodox Agudat Israel party who had an ambivalent attitude to the term “Jewish nationality” for, in their view, it had explicitly secular connotations, could, in response to the appeal of some of their leaders, make such declaration.\textsuperscript{10} Persons who said they were Polish in 1921 frequently declared ten years later that their mother tongue was Yiddish, and the Zionist ideologues, especially in Galicia, who glorified Hebrew as the language of the reborn Jewish nation used the Polish language in their daily life.\textsuperscript{11}

This is why, for lack of a better definition, the term “assimilated Jews” is applied to those Jews in interwar Poland who declared that they belonged to the Polish nation or negated the existence of such an entity as “the Jewish nation”. But it is impossible to describe the number of these people precisely. The term “assimilation”, which in general means that a nationality’s norms of social life and the patterns binding outside it converge, is narrowed down in the above-mentioned definition to a simple declaration of being or not being a Pole, of belonging or not belonging to the “chosen community” of the Jewish nation. In consequence, we have situations when Jewish communists from the poorest Jewish strata who poorly knew the Polish language and Polish culture, had a different life style and remained in their own community, have been recognized as assimilated, while fully culturally polonized representatives of the Jewish intelligentsia who had adopted Polish customs and the life style of upper Polish urban groups are excluded from that group if they supported one of the versions of Jewish autonomy or nationalism.

Scholars conducting research on the Jewish community during the interwar period are on safer ground when they write about the linguistic process of Polonization

\textsuperscript{10} Ezra Mendelsohn, The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars, Bloomington 1983, 29f.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
(usually called acculturation). As far as the younger generation was concerned, the acculturation process was speeded up above all by the modern state education system. Alongside this system, there were also private Jewish schools. For our interest is important to establish proportions between state and private systems, and answer a question what was the role of the second one played in the ongoing process of acculturation of the Jewish youth.

In 1923, two years after the establishment of the Central Jewish School Organization (which in the first few years included representatives of the left-wing Bund, the Poalei Zion Left and the Folkists), the Jewish CISzO schools (including nursery schools, secondary schools and teachers’ training colleges) had ca 13,000 pupils. More than ten years later, in the 1934/1935 school year, this figure was similar, amounting to 15,486. For many reasons more popular were the Zionist “Tarbut” schools supervised by centrist or moderately leftist parties. In 1923 they had 30,672 pupils and in 1934/1935 as many as 37,000. In 1933 some 15,000 pupils were acquiring education in the religious-Zionist schools of the “Mizrachi” party, which were combined into one network in 1927. The largest of all Jewish private systems of education was the system organized by the Orthodox Agudat Israel party. In 1937, ca 70,000 Jewish boys were receiving education in the schools of the “Chorev” system (traditional hedarim, modernized “Talmud Torah” and yeshivas). The Orthodox community also scored a success in developing religious schools for girls, unprecedented in this part of the continent; in 1937 the ”Beit Yakov” network had 248 schools attended by 35,000 girls. According to a publication brought out by Aguda, 109,000 pupils attended the institutions supervised by it in 1937.

---

12 Ibid, 98. A different figure, 9,936 pupils, is mentioned by Sprawy Narodowościowe [Nationality Papers], a liberal periodical publisher by the state administration and devoted to questions concerning the national minorities in Poland. See, Samuel Chmielewski, Stan szkolnictwa wśród Żydów w Polsce [State of Jewish schooling in Poland], Sprawy Narodowościowe 9 (1937), No.1-2, Warszawa 1937.
16 Ibid, 96.
17 Gershon Bacon The Politics of Tradition. Agudat Yisrael in Poland. 1916-1939, Jerusalem 1996, 162f. In his publications Bacon draws attention to the fact that many pupils of the Chorev network attended its schools only in the afternoon, parallel to their education in Polish primary schools.
schools, the private sector had 180,681 pupils in 1936. According to a report of the same institution published one year later, the “Tarbut” schools had 44,780 pupils, the CISzO schools 16,496, Shul-Kult (set up in 1928 by Poalei Zion Right after it left CISzO) had 2,243, and Yavne had 15,923 pupils.

Despite the unprecedented development of private secular and modernized religious education, an overwhelming majority of Jewish youth attended Polish state schools. Simultaneously ongoing acculturation of the youngest generations made presence of the Polish curriculum stronger also in the Jewish private educational sector. According to recent estimates, based on governmental data, 81 per cent of young Jews of school age attended Polish schools in 1937. In the same school year (1937/1938), comparing to the 24,047 primary schools teaching exclusively in the Polish language, there was only 226 registered institutions (with 28,5 thousand pupils) teaching in Polish and one of the Jewish languages, and the same number of schools (36,5 thousand pupils), based only on the Jewish language curriculum. In the 1920s small proportion of Jewish students attended the so-called “Sabbath schools”, state schools for Jews, which in respect for the Jewish tradition did not work on Sabbath. But the predominant Polish symbolic culture exerted an irresistible influence also on Jewish children in private Jewish schools. The curricula of all Jewish schools, even the religious ones supervised by Agudat Israel, had to include secular subjects taught in Polish, in particular history and geography. These matters were regulated by the Law of 13 September 1923 and the famous “Jędrzejewicz Reform” of March 1932. The agreement reached by the managers of the system of Orthodox-Chorev schools and representatives of the government in 1935 envisaged that every year the Jewish pupils should participate in at least 128 lessons in the Polish language, of which 38 were to

19 Eisenstein, Jewish Schools in Poland, 96.
20 See Gershon Bacon, National Revival Ongoing Acculturation – Jewish Education in Interwar Poland, in: Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook 1 (2002), 71-92, here 76. Large part of the Jewish children studied simultaneously in the daily Polish government and in private Jewish afternoon schools, or during their educational trajectory, moved from one sector to another. Polish official statistics stating that in the 1930s about 80% of the school-age Jewish children studied in the Polish schools, do not mean that only 20% of Jewish children studied in the private educational sector. Still the problem of proportions between state and private education of the Jews is important and not yet fully resolved.
22 Though these norms were not everywhere observed, especially in the traditional hedarim.
be devoted to the Polish language, eight to history, 10 to geography, 10 to physics and biology, 22 to mathematics, eight to manual work, five to drawing, five to singing, and six to physical education.\(^{23}\)

Researchers into Jewish education attribute the popularity of Polish schools to the bad financial situation of Jewish parents; they sent their children to state schools because they were free. Another thing of great importance was also the fact that good knowledge of the Polish language made it possible for young Jews to pass the matriculation examination and acquire a university education. Polish was the language of the administration, the language used at work. Its good knowledge was the main instrument for improving one’s social status\(^{24}\). In the 1930s even the Hebrew and Yiddish private secondary schools greatly extended the number of subjects taught in Polish. A network of bilingual schools was set up.\(^{25}\) Gershon Bacon points out that the ideological aspirations of the organizers of private schools (who propagated distinct Jewish religious or national identity) should be distinguished from practice, which was enforced by the situation and by the aspirations of parents. Although the development of Jewish schools was undoubtedly an indication of national revival and an important achievement in the struggle for Jewish national autonomy, it had to adapt itself to the growing acculturation of Jewish youth.\(^{26}\) According to Chone Schmeruk, statistics referring to Jewish secondary school pupils emphasize that the Polish language and Polish culture were gaining a dominant position among Jewish youths.\(^{27}\) Schmeruk created an interesting definition of interwar Jewish culture, describing it as a specific polysystem which combined three (or rather four) linguistic cultures: the traditional Yiddish, modern Hebrew, modern Yiddish and Polish. The majority of the Polish Jews of that period probably used several languages, the Polish language in one sphere of social life (e.g. in the public sphere) and Yiddish at home. The Polish language

\(^{23}\) Seidman, Żydowskie szkolnictwo, 21-22, Quoted after Bacon, The Politics of Tradition, 153.

\(^{24}\) It is important to note that the Polish language proficiency had different utilitarian meaning depending on the social stratification. It was indispensable for the ‘inteligencja’, while traditionally daily and work language of the most of Jewish traders and artisans was Yiddish. Situation started to change in Interwar period, when the state introduced strong polonization pressure on these biggest of Jewish occupations. Receiving the artisan or merchant certificate that allowed legal work was dependent on the passing of the Polish proficiency language exam. See Jerzy Tomaszewski „Between the Social and the National- The Economic Situation of Polish Jewry, 1918-1939” in “Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook” vol. I 2002, p. 65. It had to influence also the educational preferences of the parents coming from this economical stratum.

\(^{25}\) Frost, Schooling as a Socio-Political Expression, 49-50.

\(^{26}\) Bacon, National Revival Ongoing Acculturation, 71-76.

became the language of school, university, theatre and literature, especially for the generations which grew up in independent Poland. This process could not but have an effect on the political imagination of the Jewish youth.

Could the acculturation presented above be confined to the narrow technical sphere of language? Did not the elements of a broader, symbolic culture predominant in the Second Republic become internalized too?

II. The Evolution of Jewish Politics in the 1930s

During the twenty interwar years, radical and authoritarian political trends grew in force- in Europe as a whole. Their development in Poland had a specific dynamism owing to internal factors. The processes inside the country were also influenced by events in other parts of the continent. In the view of historians engaged in research on Jewish politics in Poland during the interwar period, the above mentioned context determined the evolution of the Jews’ political stance in the 1930s. The effects of the economic crisis of 1929, which deeply affected provincial Jewish shopkeepers dependent on peasant farming, were aggravated by the discriminatory economic policy pursued by the successive Sanacja\(^{28}\) governments, by boycotts and other right-wing activities directed against the Jewish intelligentsia (attacks on Jews at universities) and the “lower middle class” (shopkeepers, artisans).\(^{29}\)

In response to this situation, Jewish electorate began gradually to turn towards the previously unpopular radical parties, support the Bund, Zionist left-wing parties (at the cost of the center- General Zionists), or the Communist Party of Poland. In the Zionist movement a dynamic growth of popularity was noted by revisionism whose leader Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky openly criticized the weakness of the Zionist elites, the lack of activities inspired by Jewish pride and honor. The Revisionists’ HaZohar party, the New Zionist Organization set up in 1935, its youth organization Beitar, and the Palestinian military organization, the Irgun Cwei Leumi (the National Army’s Organization which had cells also in Poland) drew on the symbolic arsenal of the Polish independence movement and the Polish Right.\(^{30}\) Support also increased for left-

---

\(^{28}\) Pol. “sanitation”- popular name of the political camp of Marshal Józef Piłsudski after his coup’ d’état in May 1926. According to its members, camps main task was to heal seriously ill Polish politics.


\(^{30}\) The best work on the ideology of the revisionist movement is Yaakov Shavit’s book, Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Movement 1925-1948, London 1988. For links between the ideology of the revisionism movement
wing Zionist organizations, political parties, and the pioneers’ movement, HeChaluc. There was growing interest in preparations for emigration to Palestine (hahszara). While in 1929 HeChaluc had only 6,000 members in Poland, in the 1930s it was already a mass movement. The League of Working Palestine, which in the 1930s united left-wing Zionist parties, organizations and youth groups, received 8 per cent of Polish votes in the 1929 election of delegates to the 16th Zionist Congress; two years later support for the party increased to 30 per cent, and in 1933 over 40 per cent of Zionist electors voted for left-wing delegates (the Revisionists did not take part in the election).

Mizrachi, a traditional, right-wing religious Zionist party, also went through deep transformations. In defiance of older colleagues and party leaders, its youngest generation identified itself with the working class movement and left-wing Zionism. The ideology of Tora ve-Avoda [“Tora” and “Work”] inspired the ideas and program of the “Mizrachi Worker”, a movement of youth organizations.

The most interesting changes occurred in the orthodox Agudat Israel party. This party which fought by modern means to keep up Jewish distinctness as long as possible probably experienced the most far-reaching evolution in the interwar period. In the 1920s, even though it was interested in the orthodox community’s matters in Palestine, it was unequivocally hostile to Zionism and to establishing cooperation with a secular “national” Jewish organization in preparing emigration to Palestine. As regards economic matters, the economic organization of the religious community both in the Holy Land and Poland, it expressed explicit support for private property and the capitalist system. As early as the 1920s conflicts arose over this matter between the rabbinical elites of the party and its annex Poalei Aguda [Aguda’s Workers] which grouped its young, professionally working members. In 1924, as a result of the deterioration of the economic situation in Poland (and the beginning of economic anti-Semitism) a vehement dispute broke out in the party over whether its cells should not be allowed to organize hahszara (agricultural and craft training that would prepare

31 See, Sprawy Narodowościowe, 1929, p. 291.
33 Bacon, Politics of Tradition, 77.
34 As a matter of fact, the questions of workers’ rights, of organizing orthodox workers, of the scope of their commitment to the socialist doctrine, questions which were important for the movement of workers’ orthodoxy, became a constant source of tension in the Aguda camp. See Ibid, 100-107, especially 100.
people for emigration to Palestine).\textsuperscript{35} In 1937, at the world conference of the Aguda movement, the Polish organization, under the pressure of the younger generation, came out against the leader, Jacob Rosenheim, and expressed support for a Zionist plan to set up a Jewish state in the frontiers proposed by Peel Commission.\textsuperscript{36} In 1937-1939 the Polish delegation was in favor of all Zionist actions supporting Palestine.\textsuperscript{37} This means that the old principles of religious and consequently also ethnic separatism gave way to demands for engagement in and fight for autonomy in a secular world even in the orthodox camp.

In the 1930s the socialist, revolutionary Bund experienced a rapid growth of support. Researchers attribute its successes first and foremost to the growth of authoritarian trends in Poland and Europe, the economic depression which restricted the possibility of emigration to Palestine or the United States, and to the Bund’s determined propagation of Jewish self-defense. Of all Jewish radical parties Bund was the only one which fought with determination for the Jews’ place in Poland. Socialism seemed to be the only remedy for the fascist menace. It was expected that the Polish Jews, being unable to leave, would support the party that fought for their rights in Poland and, what was important, had potential or real Polish allies.\textsuperscript{38}

This seems to be a correct interpretation of the trends in Jewish politics in the 1930s. It seems important that the explanations mentioned above should be supplemented by an analysis of yet another factor, the fact that a new generation entered adult life, a generation whose political consciousness was shaped in independent, nationalistic Poland.

The growing segments of the Jewish population that spoke and read mainly in the Polish language, to be precise those segments that were in favor of Jewish national distinctness, remained, objectively and subjectively, an imagined community separate from the Polish community. In a symbolic sense the language of their press and political publications differed from the Polish language used by the other citizens. Though they used the Polish language, the Polish-speaking Zionists or adherents of

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 88-89.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 111-112; Marcus, Social and Political History of the Jews, 285. This act marked a breakthrough for it meant agreement on the establishment of a secular Jewish state. It envisaged that the orthodox communities should stop boycotting the plan and instead try to extend their own autonomy in the future secular state to the greatest possible degree. The basic principles of this model are being put into effect in Israel by the main political currents of the Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox community.
\textsuperscript{37} See also Heller, On the Edge of Destruction, 180.
\textsuperscript{38} Marcus, Social and Political History of the Jews, 282-283. For the nexus of factors that contributed to the rise of political radicalism among Polish Jews see, Mendelsohn, The Jews of East Central Europe, 74-81.
Bund (thought this party was strongly yiddishist oriented, many of its youngest members used Polish in their daily life)- continued to regard themselves as members of the Jewish community, separate from the Poles in spite of the increasing use of elements and ways of thought related to the “Polish” culture, which includes the imagined vision of the "nation". It should be emphasized that elements of pre-modern Jewish ethnicity undoubtedly occupied an important place in modern ideologies represented by all sectors of Jewish politics. With admirable inventiveness Jewish nationalist, socialist, orthodox and integrative movements drew on the inexhaustible resources of frequently the same (though differently interpreted) traditions, beliefs or myths. However, it is my contention that frequently the Polish (ethnic) culture was a toll to reinterpret those old resources. This process puts at doubts the popular notions describing the character of the political consciousness of the Jews in interwar Poland.

III Acculturation without Assimilation?

In view of the conclusions mentioned above, the historians quoted in this article have put forward the theory that what happened to the Polish Jews during the interwar period was “acculturation without assimilation”.39 While growing segments of the Jewish community (especially the youngest generation born just before the First World War, during it, or already after, united by the experience of adolescence and socialization taking place already in Independent Poland) succumbed to linguistic Polonization and the crisis in traditional Judaism deepened, there was no mass decline of Jewish ethnic consciousness.

We know that the patterns of social life were converging and that the Jewish economic structure was becoming more diversified. The majority of political parties pointed out that the economic structure should be normalized. Their representatives and electors wanted to be present in industry, education and state administration (in all professions in which people of the Mosaic faith were weakly represented). The demands to make the Jewish population more productive reflected the aspiration to normalize the life of the Jewish nation and make it more similar to that of the

39 For a general justification of the theory that acculturation can take place without assimilation see also the preface to Ezra Mendelsohn, Zionism in Poland. The Formative Years 1915-1926, New Haven/London 198, 1-36.
neighbors. In the 1930s demand for this kind of “normalization” was not alien to right-wing groups such as the Revisionists, “Agudat Israel” or “Mizrachi”. It was not only the life style of the Jewish population but also the popular visions of the sound foundations of national existence that became similar to those of other ethnic groups. In this respect the differences within the still strongly fragmented political scene concerned rather the methods of solving the “Jewish problem” than the final effect of the chosen solution. A decisive majority of the Jews continued to vote for “their” political parties, thus emphasizing that they differed from other national groups. In addition to asserting that the character and national interests of the Jews differed from those of other ethnic groups, the popular Jewish groupings (perhaps with the exception of Bund) referred to original Jewish ethnic symbolism. They glorified “Jewish national pride” and “Jewish morality”. Even the general Zionists who were stubbornly fighting to gain full civic rights for the Jews in the Second Republic and constantly rhetorically referred to “civic Polishness”, kept stressing that the Jews constituted a separate national group which in the Polish state should enjoy equal rights not only individually but also collectively.

The definition that this complex process constituted “acculturation without assimilation” reflects the fact that the Jews kept their distinct national identity. But unfortunately, it also removes from the researchers’ view the influence which the above-mentioned changes in the Polish Jews’ patterns of life and thought exerted on their political consciousness. Such a statement, expressed outright or implicitly in scholarly studies, implies that despite the profound changes which the Jewish community experienced, its consciousness remained purely Jewish in politics. The aim of this article is to pose questions and supply hypothetical answers which may undermine this uniform picture and help extend our knowledge of Jewish politics in the 1930s. Did the fact that the Jewish youth grew up in a modernistic, nationally-oriented Polish state have no influence on the popular patterns of thinking about politics and the Jewish nation? Did not representatives of the Jews, while explicitly expressing their consciousness of being Jews, think in practice of politics as their non-Jewish colleagues did, for they were also under the influence of modern institutions, such as the Polish school or the specifically Polish political disputes? Is it possible that the Jewish youth which defined itself as part of the “imagined Jewish community” should have, in accordance with the ideological interests of popular political parties, visualized this through the symbols and patterns of thinking acquired through its
participation in the Polish linguistic universum and, more broadly, in the Polish symbolic reality? Did “the Jewish problem” as the problem of Polish nationalistic hegemony have no effect on the Jewish youth influenced by socialism in the Second Republic? When the Jewish youth referred to its own ethnic symbols did it not also make use of Polish national symbolism? Did “Jewish politics” really remain exclusively “Jewish” on the level of the masses (which have a different attitude to politics than the party elites)? Did anti-Semitism, which grew in strength in the 1930s, have no effect on the political consciousness of the generation which grew up in independent Poland?

IV School experiences as reflected in The YIVO Autobiographies of Jewish Youth

As we have seen, universal education and the national educational canon offered new experiences to the Jewish youth in the Second Republic. The autobiographies sent in for a competition organized by the Jewish Scientific Institute in Vilnius (YIVO) mention Polish books which set the canon of school education as the most important reading items of Jewish youth. This is by no means only the case of persons from towns, from bourgeois, already Polonized families. Polish culture, the “symbolic pressure” of the Polish national school influenced much wider circles than the assimilated ones. This is illustrated by the following quotations from the autobiographies of persons who belonged to the first generation exposed to this influence.

---

40 Highly interesting idiosyncratic effect that the Polish state education had on Jewish youth was never studied as the separate subject. Education was arena of fierce rivalry between the right-wing, left and later on also, Sanacja camps. Glance on the school textbooks and teachers conference documents shows that among them there was strong consensus on the national character of the school, predominance of the polish, heroic, historical narrative present it the program and practice. Right wing doubted if the Jews can become the Poles (in the way as defined the Polishness was), left wing and Sanacja at least in theory included also the Jews. But Sanacja, who after 1926 had decisive voice, introduced this “inclusion” in highly idiosyncratic manner. Its statist ideology placed the fidelity to the Polish State of all of its citizens in the center of its educational content. Paradoxically it was created by the polish historical narrative, underlining the collective national struggle. Historical narrative that in subtext was fully concluded by the ethnic and catholic Poles. In the editions of the School Wall Paper, that was obligatory in the government schools, edited by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education one can hardly find non-Polish minorities, there are no children with non-polish names. See “Szkolna Gazetka Ścienna” 1933-1939, for example, nr. 4, 6 of November 1933, nr. 16, 18th of December 1933, nr. 21, 25th of January 1934, Nr. 43, 23rd of April 1934, Nr. 14, 6th of December 1934, Nr. 27, 26th of March 1936, Nr 11, 19th of November 1937. My hypothesis is, that this specific mixture of patriotism and simultaneous feeling of exclusion had an radicalizing political effect on the big numbers of the Jewish youth. Contrary to the goals of the state education planners.
The authors of compulsory school reading which constituted the foundation of civic and patriotic education in Polish schools, such as Sienkiewicz, Mickiewicz, Slowacki and Orzeszkowa, and authors of popular literature, e.g. Helena Mniszkówna, appear in the reminiscences of young people of all walks of Jewish life. An author from an orthodox Jewish home who only learned the Polish language in a primary school used Mickiewicz’s words to entitle her autobiography. In the fifth and sixth grades she also attended a Hebrew school (probably of the “Tarbut” or “Yavne” network) in the afternoon. At the same time she came across anti-Semitism. It was also the private Jewish school which she attended in the afternoon that indubitably helped shape her Zionist identity. What is characteristic is the context in which her Zionist views appear for the first time in her reminiscences:

“In the fifth and sixth grades I attended a Hebrew school in the afternoon and put my heart into the learning of the Hebrew language. I felt that this language linked me to Palestine, which was frequently referred to. I thought that by using this language we were restoring our glorious but dead past. At school children were inculcated with love of Poland, they were taught that Poland was worth living and dying for. A sort of envy would then arise in me. Why have not we, Jews, been given our own country? [...] My thought of Palestine was not inspired by scientific books, treatises or propaganda. Not at all. It was a reaction to the love of Poland, instilled at school.”

Another girl, also from a traditional small-town family with many children, became a tutor in a day nursery in adult life. As her friend relates (the author was killed during the Second World War) she was strongly influenced by the educational ideas of Janusz Korczak. This influence is clearly seen in her autobiography. What characterizes Zen-Ka’s autobiography is a strong criticism of relations in a traditional Jewish family, the fatal influence of poverty and strict norms of social life on the children who grew up in these conditions. She describes her dismal childhood,

42 Cała, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 381.
43 A strong social criticism, usually combined with a description of the situation in the family and the nearest environment is one of the most frequent subjects in the autobiographies. It seems that the form of this criticism depended mainly on the perspective from which the author, as an adult person, wrote his/her autobiography, to be more exact, on the environment or the political camp which the author joined in adult life and in the language of which he criticized his original environment. Irrespective of the deep differences in the world view, their reflections are usually linked by the authors’ radically modernistic, progressive perspective and by belief in the
suggestively painting a scene when her elder brother read aloud a poem by Juliusz
Slowacki (“The Father of the Plague-Stricken”):

“The voice of my brother No.8 soon reached me from the quarters in which the
younger members of the family lived: “The golden moon has changed thrice since I
pitched the tents in this sand. My wife had fed our baby. In addition to the baby, three
sons, three daughters …the whole family has been buried”.44

In another place she describes her nightly efforts to learn history. Like a large
part of her autobiography, this description, too, is satirical but, compared with many
descriptions written by other authors, it shows that Polish patriotic education was an
important and very significant experience for these young people.45 Žeń-ki’s
reflections on her friends’ quarrels in the backyard are also very meaningful:

“I am anxiously following Fryda’s slow steps. How strange it is! Even when
they are playing they quarrel over who will get more. Get more towns! Our mistress
told us yesterday how the Poles had fought against their enemies, How the foes had
divided Poland into three parts. Each took one part …(The Poles) gathered at night
and adopted the Constitution of May 3rd. The Constitution had laws which were very
good for the Poles. This is why we rejoice. We will go to the synagogue. There will be
a service there. But remember, be good. There will also be other schools from the
town in the synagogue. Don’t make me feel ashamed”.46

Ardent activist of the Zionist “Gordonia”, living the fully Jewish milieu, in her
diary (attached to the autobiography) describing dull daily life defined by boring and
hard work, again found Slowacki’s poem as the most suitable for describing her
sorrow: “Slowacki said the truth in his lament ‘Father of the poverty stricken’. When
ones heart is full of sorrow, when he feels the pain, it seems that the sun is not the sun,
and the word is different, ugly, stupid and cruel.’ Yes, I feel the same way.”47

Follower of Beitar committed large pieces of autobiography for his reflections of the
crisis of European culture and its great modernist ideologies, according to him

values of collectivism. In the authors’ view collectivism should be implemented by joint national or class activity
aimed at a radical reform of the condemnable reality. The young people’s modernistic collectivism does not
have much in common with traditional, conservative collectivism; it illustrates the radicalism of Jewish politics
in the 1930, so often emphasized by historians. What is worth pointing out is that the symbolic milieu from
which the young authors drew rhetorical figures, ways of thinking and points of reference for their discussions
was shaped not only by the world of politics and the press but also by universal education and popular books.
44 Cała, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 416.
45 “...The two armies fought with equal doggedness...The field was covered with corpses as far as the eye could
reach.. Finally, fate tipped the scales in favor of the Poles”, Cała, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 426.
46 Cała, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 428.
47 YIVO archives, RG/64, #3516, p. 55.
symbolized by the famous call of Mickiewicz: “Together young friends!” Later on, wonders if the same crisis will not happen to the Zionist dream: “And I don’t know if in future rebuilt Palestine the same [crisis- K.K.] will not happen as it is now in Europe. But on our way, in our fight for our rights I want to follow the Mickiewicz slogan.”

Polish symbols and ways of thinking, drawn on the predominant national historical narration, did not necessarily help create fully analogous interpretations of the “national history” and “national situation” of the Jews. But doubtless, Polish influence predominates in the interpretations of various personal and collective spheres of the authors’ lives. Patriotic education was a basic element in state schools at that time. Its elements were present, in various forms, in the private sector of Jewish education. As the example we should note the “Jewish History” teaching program of the Zionist “Tarbut” schools. It was taught in Hebrew, simultaneously with the “Polish History” (in Polish) that was demanded and controlled by the state authorities. “Tarbut” authorities were free in designing the “Jewish History” curriculum, nevertheless its construction suggests that it also had Polish civic meaning and one of its goal was to convince pupils about the strong ties between the Jews and progressive elements of the Polish State. While course was on the general Jewish history, not the Polish one, big part of it was devoted to Jewish life in Poland. Curriculum for the 7th class, starts with lessons on the Haskalah and European Enlightenment, finishes on Teodor Herzl, Hibad Zion movement and Jewish communities in the New World. Despite this broad time and geographical scope of XVIII and XIX century general Jewish history, authors of curriculum devoted separate lessons for the topics such as: “Jews in Poland. Situation of the Jews in the times of the partition and ‘Four Year Sejm’. Butrymowicz and Staszic reform plans [of reforming the social life patterns Jews- K.K.] Joselewicz and Kościuszko. Battle of Racławice. Third Partition. Jews in Congress Poland. Government attempts o the Jewish Reform. Warsaw Rabbinical Schools. Jews in November Uprising. Wielopolski Reforms. Jews in January Uprising.” These topics

48 YIVO archives, RG/64, #3505, p. 63.
49 YIVO archives, RG/64, #3505, p. 67.
50 In various entries on Jewish private schools in editions of Almanach Szkolnictwa Żydowskiego w Polsce [Almanach of the Jewish School System in Poland], representatives of different Jewish school institutions, underline importance of “polish educational” content in their school activities, see for example: Almanach Szkolnictwa Żydowskiego w Polsce, Pierwszy Zeszyt Okazowy, Warszawa 1936. , 11-14, 17; Almanach Szkolnictwa Żydowskiego w Polsce, Drugi Zeszyt Okazowy, Warszawa 1936, 10-11, 13; Almanach Szkolnictwa Żydowskiego w Polsce, Trzeci Zeszyt Okazowy, Warszawa 1937, 8, 68, 74, 103, 128, 148.
hold wider place than the whole problem of the European Haskalah. In the part of the curriculum referring to the second half of the XIX century and emergence of the Jewish national movements, it is important to note that the new wave of modern and traditional anti-Semitism, seen as important factor of the emergence of the new Jewish political movements, was discussed in reference to “Russia” and “Western Europe” and not “Polish lands” or “Kingdom of Poland”.  

This does not mean, however, that ardent, uncritical patriotism was always the final stage of Jewish children’s education. As we shall see later, anti-Semitism and various forms of Jewish religious and national identity helped create critical attitudes to the Polish state and nation. What is symptomatic is that criticism was characteristic mainly of young Jews’ attitude to the times in which they lived, for the basic Polish historical narration, Polish patriotic symbols, were rarely contested. They seem to have been adopted as real and truthful by a majority of young Jews. So this was not an uncritical adoption of Polish patriotism, this was not a case of national assimilation. It can rather be said that this was a situation in which the generation of Jews born and brought up in interwar Poland was in an unprecedented way and in a new context of social life exposed to the impact of Polish national symbolic culture. Elements of this culture became part of the Jews’ own social consciousness. They helped them to assess the value of the neighboring world and were an important context in the internalization of their own “Jewish” norms of thinking and acting, also in the political sphere.

What is striking in the autobiographies is the cult of a specifically conceived modernism which united persons who clung to the orthodox world view and life style with persons who were brought up in such an environment but broke with it radically, with representatives of Polonized groups, with Jewish artisans and workers from Zionist or socialist circles. The most frequent manifestation of this cult was the dogma-like belief in the superior value of modern, secular education. Irrespective of political views, of the young people’s ideas about the character of “the Jewish nation” or its future in the Diaspora, this education was conducted in Polish and was

entrenched in Polish culture.\textsuperscript{52} The Polish language was the language of the matriculation examination, of studies, and partly of self-education. As has been mentioned before, it was more and more often becoming the language of the Jewish press and political agitation. The national symbols conveyed by it had an impact on the political consciousness of various Jewish milieu’s. As we have seen in the memoirs of a future Jewish socialist, it is Slowacki’s poetry that best expressed her realization of poverty. This Zionist brought up in a traditional Jewish home sees Palestine through the prism of her patriotic Polish education.\textsuperscript{53} Such values as honor and pride, of key importance for all kinds of Jewish national ideologies, as well as patterns of national and political activity had, in some immeasurable part, the form of analogous Polish national values. In keeping with the ideological interests of the Jewish national movements, that fought with any sings of ‘assimilation’, these linguistic borrowings were rarely revealed and they were probably even more rarely realized by the last prewar generation of Polish Jews. In the YIVO autobiographies they functioned rather in the sphere of “practical consciousness”. This unnamed symbolic assimilation\textsuperscript{54} of which the Jewish youth was unaware exerted a great influence on its attitudes.

\textsuperscript{52} See the autobiographies of persons from families entrenched in the traditional Jewish world, persons who either themselves or their parents took care not only of religious education but also of knowledge of the Polish language as it was taught in primary schools, for they regarded this knowledge as a basic qualification of priceless value in adult life, Cała, Ostatnie Pokolenie, [autobiography of Ester], 166, 167, [autobiography of Jafet], 188, also Jeffrey Shandler (ed.), Awakening Lives: autobiographies of Jewish youth in Poland before the Holocaust, New Haven 2002, [autobiography of G.W], 306, 309., YIVO archives, RG/64, #3673 [autobiography of “Margalith”], p. 42, 42, 47, 51, YIVO archives, RG/64, #3525 p. 13 [anonymous author].

\textsuperscript{53} The autobiographies of persons from traditional environments, who in adult life, usually after going through some crises, kept he Jewish faith and the Jewish way of life, are different. As far as political consciousness is concerned, they differ from the more secularized authors above all by a weaker political commitment and less-intensified radicalism. As a rule, they do not reflect on the possibility of radical solutions of the Jewish problem (or the problem of the working classes); they do not think the construction of a new socialist society in Palestine, the liberation of their fatherland arms in hand (as was the case with the Revisionists) or a socialist revolution in Poland can solve the problem. Their autobiographies reflect their belief in the necessity of living in the modern world. In addition to the temptations put by modernity in the way of religious life, modernity also has its virtues. Foremost among these virtues in YIVO autobiographies is secular education., the frequently unattainable symbols of which are secondary school, matriculation examination, university studies. Closely connected with these virtues are other modern forms of collective life, such as work in industry, administration, state schools and the conviction that it is necessary to re-organize the traditional Jewish world around state institutions, modern organizations and societies. See, for instance, the autobiographies “Jafet”, Cała, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 187-207, “EM-TEPA”, Ibid, 207, “Etonis”, Shandler, Awakening Lives, 3-19, “Hanekh”, Ibid, 113-122, “Forget-me-not” Ibid, 123-140. The context in which this consciousness arises and in which Jewish citizens marked by this consciousness spend their adult life is again the Polish cultural reality.

\textsuperscript{54} This term was created following the conception of Pierre Bourdieu, of “symbolic violence” of the modern school system and the “habitus” that is created as the effect of this violence. Habitus, can be most easily defined as specific complex of intellectual and behavioral dispositions of the social actor, internalized through his social life trajectory, which cannot be fully identified and measured by the social actor himself. By “symbolic assimilation” we understand the collective process of internalization of specific Polish cultural and symbolic habitus by the generation of Jewish youth, who was exposed to an influence of the new channels of socialization.
The rapid rise in the popularity of radical political parties is reflected in the YIVO autobiographies. Historians who have examined them draw attention to the unprecedented politicization of the Jewish youth.\textsuperscript{55} An overwhelming majority of the essays sent in for the competition were written by persons from homes in which politics and general questions concerning such matters as “social justice”, “class antagonism”, “the Jewish problem, “emancipation of the Jewish nation” were not raised at all or were of marginal importance. Having lived through experiences specific to that generation, the same persons became ardent supporters of one of the radical political options, whether Jewish or internationalist, when they were writing their life stories. Communist internationalism found fewer adherents. The most frequent was a mixture of two nationalist and internationalist ideological canons in the form of one of the versions of Jewish socialism. Basic questions about the condition of society were the most frequent subject of the discussions and reflections of the Jewish youth. Irrespective of the authors’ convictions (also when they were traditional or orthodox and were strongly attacked by secular Jewish parties because of their reactionary and conservative character) young Jews strongly criticized in their reflections the social relations prevailing at that time. Access to one of the radical ideologies and, what is more important, the possibility of political activity, whether in hahszara, an illegal publishing and trade union work, or in a paramilitary organization made the young people feel they were wrenching themselves free from a hopeless situation. The authors say that participation in politics opened “a new world” to them.

Very often “the old world” means the immediate surroundings, frequently the family. The autobiography of “Mars” is a typical example of the life course of that generation. The author came from an orthodox family which was aware of the threat posed by secularization and did its best to defend itself from its influence.\textsuperscript{56} He broke off with his parents’ patterns, radically criticizing the environment in which he grew up. This is one of the most frequent themes in the autobiographies of persons who came from a traditional milieu but broke with it in adult life.


\textsuperscript{56} See, for instance, parents’ ban on children participating in activities which form part of the “Goys’ rights”, hukei haGoy. Cała, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 309f.
“There existed “a law of the stronger” in our family, by virtue of which my two elder sisters exerted an influence on the parents, ruled over the younger siblings and were their judges... This lack of freedom, lack of homeliness, kind-heartedness, of tenderness which I had never experienced shaped my psyche in a specific way, decreasing its power of resistance. ... When I learned the injustice of the family system, I wanted to change it, and this miniature “social reform” became my first clearly defined postulate”.  

The YIVO autobiographies present unfettered participation in politics as a possibility for a partial individual and collective emancipation of the Jews. This participation is perceived as an instrumental value which can contribute to a profound social transformation of the Jewish nation, either through emigration to Palestine or through a revolutionary change here “on the spot”. According to “Mars”, the tragedy of the Jewish nation was that its political activism was restrained.

“It was then that the terrible sight of the Jews’ eternal misery struck my eyes! One day, when I was passing through the reading room, I heard the “Riflemen’s” choir. I felt a longing for such a song, but to whom should it be sung? The “Riflemen” have their motherland, they sing their love for it, I have no motherland; I burst into tears…”

What is striking in the young Jews’ autobiographies is their sensitivity to the poverty surrounding them and to the class and social strata problems. The experience of various deep social gaps and their consequences appear in fragments devoted to the family, the immediate surrounding, social contacts, questions connected with education and professional life. It is interesting that sensitivity to poverty and social injustice, and frequently also a socialist way of thinking (which does not signify support for any of its ideologies) characterize both the persons who remained in a deeply religious environment and urban youth from rich bourgeois homes. As regards the latter, one gets the impression that by emphasizing their sensitivity to the living conditions of the masses, they want to pay tribute to the trends which predominated in

---

57 Ibid, 312.
58 Polish “Strzelecki”- A paramilitary youth organization associated with the Sanacja ruling regime.
59 Cała, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 329f. This confession is followed by the author’s poem reflecting his state of mind. Here are a few fragments: “Give me wings, golden wings- Like a streak of lightning I’ll fly high. – I will glide in the sky and forget all grayness, ...Our past is tragic and dreadful, -- It is written in blood, not in black paint, ...Get rid of your despair, my Nation, Your sun is rising in the east and brightens up the darkness of your ghetto. --Our steps show a glorious future to us who have been born in the east. – So let us unite and unite our forces in order proudly to fight for our common future, - And then we will bravely and courageously repulse – every blow aimed against us.”
the disputes of those times. In the YIVO descriptions poverty is invariably accompanied by torpor, hopelessness, backwardness and dirt. In many accounts, dirt is the strongest metaphor by which the authors depict their situation and their surroundings. Very frequently, also in the case of religious persons, the Jewish heder symbolizes unhygienic, backward, enslaving conditions of life. In the autobiographies, which are far from showing enthusiasm for assimilation, for unconditional Polishness and state institutions, the modern Polish school is frequently presented as the reverse of the backward heder: “The new school building was very comfortable and had every convenience, including splendid gym for physical education during winter. Our classroom was flight up, on the side facing highway.”

Such values as cleanliness/hygiene, harmonious, equitable relations, in brief, healthy conditions of social life, always appear in a modernistic context. They are expected to be achieved in the future, to be more precise, by sacrifice in the struggle for it. Only truly modern institutions run by educated, socially enlightened people could overcome the chaos of the traditional world. Among such institutions were the school and all other state institutions. In the 1930s only radical collectively organized institutions could implement these tasks. There were enormous ideological differences between them but what united them was radicalism, étatisme and the collective way by which they proposed to solve the social question and the specific Jewish problem. Chana Szwarc’s autobiography, one of the least political essays sent in to YIVO, is an excellent example of this specific modernism of the Jewish youth. Wandering with her homeless mother in Poland and Lithuania, the author was completely marginalized socially in her childhood. It was only when she was 14 that she began to learn to read and write. Her autobiography depicts more strongly than other essays the experience of fear caused by the chaos and brutality of everyday life. The factory in which she worked, the order that reigned in it, and the workers’ Trade Union gave her what she needed most: a sense of reality, of control over the surrounding world and a chance to restrain chaos.

“The factory in which I worked belonged to a trade union. Together with our workers, I attended the meetings. … One day a strike broke out in my line of business. I took an active part in it. I was drawn into the party. …After the first lesson I felt that a new world was opening up. …I learned that humanity was divided into two

---

60 Shandler, Awakening Lives, 309.
classes, the hungry ones and the well-fed one, into those who have to drudge and those who do not work. At the beginning I could hardly grasp this. It was not easy for me to understand this, but having been experienced by fate I felt in my heart the sense and content of the lesson.”

With the time, trade organization is taking predominant place in the author’s life:

“The organization was the most sacred thing for me. ...It made me forget about everything that was going around me. I devoted three-quarters of my time to ideological work for the party and this is why hard physical work seemed to be lighter. The days flowed past rapidly.”

There is not enough space here to quote similar motives from the publications of Jewish political organizations, especially those which grew in strength in the 1930s. A complex of symbols, a specific “modernistic collectivism” of a military or syndicalist character, or inspired by étatisme, united parties which were so distant from each other as the Socialist-Zionists, the Revisionists, members of the Bund and the Jewish members of the Communist Party of Poland.” As we have said, similar values became popular in “Aguda” and “Mizrachi”, parties which were attacked by the “progressive” Jewish parties because of their conservatism. The young Jews’ autobiographies reflect the spirit of the times in Europe in the 1930s, the decline of liberalism not only in the economic field but also in the organization of social life. This is connected with another question which cannot be discussed here in detail for lack of space.- The socialization of Jewish youth was conducive to a stronger “internalization of the Jewish problem”-. The view that peaceful coexistence between Poles and Jews was impossible was gaining ground in Polish society. The Jewish question was a “structural”, “objective” problem, a zero to one game. The most of the Polish political spectrum believed that problem has very deep roots and cannot be solved easily, with the liberal means. It cannot be solved in the way satisfying the needs of both groups, Poles and the Jews. One side had to lose in this struggle. A full national emancipation of the Poles (“Polish” shops, “Polish” lawyers, etc) could only be achieved through the emigration of Jews. This does not mean that the radical

---

61 Cała, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 278.
63 There is a vast literature concerning attitudes of the Polish political parties to the so called “Jewish Problem”, beside mentioned here works on Jewish history, see for example; Małgorzata Domagalska, Anti-Semitic discourse in Polish nationalist weeklies between 1918 and 1939”, in: East European Jewish Affairs 36 (2006),
Jewish political parties consciously took over or unconsciously internalized the anti-Semitic ways of thinking represented by the “Piast” Polish Peasant Party, the National Party and the right-wing of the “Sanacja”. Besides, this accusation (of internalizing the anti-Semitic views) was the basic argument which the Jewish parties used in fighting each other. We simply want to say that the Polish and radical Jewish political parties shared the view that the Jewish problem could not be solved in the existing conditions without a radical social change. Nothing came out of the Zionist and folkist autonomy project. Then proposal put forward by the Bund could be realized only through a socialist revolution. The majority of the Poles and Jews held the view that the Jewish problem could be solved only by radical means, by the emigration of Jews to Palestine or a revolutionary change of the social order in Poland. None of the two sides’ major political forces thought that reforms in a liberal state and a liberal society could solve the problem. This kind of rhetoric, used by both Polish and Jewish political movements, was the background of the socialization of the youngest Jewish generation.

It may sound like a paradox but Polish education might have induced Jewish youth to join radical Jewish political movements. The autobiographies show that certain Jewish political ideologies did exert an enormous influence on the Jewish youth. The most widespread European influence was the popularity of the categories used by Marx to describe the social world (though not Marxist ideology). They appear even in the autobiographies of the supporters of monism proclaimed by Vladimir Jabotinsky, a determined adversary of socialism which he regarded as a trap that lured the Jewish youth away from the only essential question: national liberation.\(^\text{64}\) What is important for our reflections is that Marxist ideas appear side by side with Polish national symbols internalized in the new contexts of social life by the youth’s knowledge of the institutions of a modern nation state. It is the Polish socio-political reality which the authors observe and which they adorn with symbols drawn from public disputes. What constituted one of the basis contradictions of this reality was the


\(^{64}\) Jabotinsky himself was under the influence of the social categories of Marxism, even if he denied the contemporary political left interpretations of the Marxist thought. See, Michael Stanislawski, Zionism and Fin de Siecle, Berkeley/Los Angeles 2001, 210-216. The same is the case of various revisionist publications in Interwar Poland, see for example, Włodzimierz Zabotyński, Ideologia Beitaru [Beitars Ideology], Lwów 1935, 12-17, 39-43; Józef Margolin, Idea Syjonizmu [Idea of the Zionism], Warszawa/Lódź 1937, 62-89, 110-130.
fact that, as we have seen, it created, on the one side, a chance for education, for a broader modernistic emancipation, while on the other, the restrictions on the presence of Jews in big industry, higher education and state institutions, explained by modernistic radical political ideologies, were a barrier to emancipation. The realization that this barrier existed and the experience of a new wave of anti-Semitism led to the internalization of the paradigm of a radical social change.

It was the assimilated circles or circles under a strong influence of acculturation that felt anti-Semitism the most painfully. This social fact, rich in consequences, is reflected in the autobiographies. We will start with the autobiography of Abraham Rotfarb, a Jew from a poor craftsman’s family. His uneducated (also religiously) family was a typical traditional family, faithful to the basic social commands of the Mosaic religion, a family which in their daily life moved only among Jews. The primary school (which for financial reasons Abraham had to leave before completing the full course) aroused his educational ambitions and acquainted him with Polish culture. His experience with the communist “Pioneer” youth organization and his participation in the activity of the Communist Youth Union were important stages in his life. Finally, he became a Zionist (before the war). He spent the Second World War in the Soviet Union and when he returned to Poland together with the first postwar wave of returning Jewish emigrants, he decided in 1948 to go illegally to Palestine. He sent his autobiography to YIVO in 1939; on the last few pages he suggestively described his struggles with Poland and Polishness:

"I am a poor assimilated soul! I am a Jew and a Pole, or rather I was a Jew, but, evolutionally, under the influence of my surroundings …under the influence of the language, culture and literature, I also became a Pole. I love Poland. Her language, culture and especially her liberation and the heroism of her struggles for independence lure my heart, feelings and enthusiasm. But I do not love the Poland which for no reason at all hates me, tears my soul and heart apart, and pushes me into apathy, melancholy and dark aimlessness. I hate that Poland which not only does not want me as a Poole and sees me only as a Jew but which also wants to drive me out of Poland,

---

65 Let us remember that only the minority of a traditional Jewish community was on a high level of religious education; religious education was an important stratification element which assigned individuals conversant with the Talmud to the elite of society. It was the religiously educated traditional elites that created the orthodox movement defined in this article as a modern phenomenon, a social movement of protest against the menace of modernity. See, Saul Stampfer Hasidic Yeshivot in Inter-War Poland, in: Polin 11 (1998), 3-24; Shaul Stampfer, ‘Heder’ study, knowledge of Torah, and the maintenance of social stratification in traditional East European Jewish society, in: Studies in Jewish Education 3 (1988), 271-289.
the country in which I was born and which brought me up. I hate this Poland, I hate anti-Semitism. You, anti-Semites, it is your fault that I have an inferiority complex, that I do not know whether I am a Jew or a Pole!".  

Abraham Rotfarb wrote his autobiography in the Zionist period of his life. His words are an ideal example of “acculturation without assimilation”, of an internalization of Polish cultural patterns accompanied by the realization of ethnic distinctness, an example of a politicized ethnic consciousness which in his case meant support for Zionism. The quotation mentioned above also reflects another important phenomenon: the fact that Polish national symbols functioned in the social consciousness of the last prewar generation of Polish Jews. The memory of these symbols was obliterated by the events of the Second World War and the socio-political situation which it generated. It is quite possible that Rotfarb would not write this fragment today. Having written it before the war, he expressed the essential perplexities of his generation.

Another essential problem is the new way in which anti-Semitism affected large circles of Jewish youth. What was new about it was that the young Jews felt that it undermined the foundations of their identity. This can be seen in the quotation mentioned above. What before the First World War had been experienced by relatively narrow groups of “assimilated Jews”, after the war was felt by a generation which was going through a rapid process of linguistic acculturation and symbolic assimilation owing to the new contexts of social life, such as state education.

---

66 Cala, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 119.
67 The influence of the post-1939 events on the recollections of Jews who grew up in Poland is very well depicted in the letter which Abraham Rotfarb sent to Alina Cala in 1997: “We came to Poland and looked for traces of our families, to no avail: we did not find anything, not even a grave. …There was nothing that might have brought back the feeling of affiliation to a country which I once loved so much. Moreover, the manifestations of a growing anti-Semitism, which climaxed with the Kielce pogrom, strengthened my decision: “Go to Palestine, Jew!”(the next fragment concerns the illegal emigration to Israel under the “Brich” scheme). “On January 1,1948, after a New Year’s Eve revel, when the English guards, completely drunk, were sleeping, we reached the outskirts of the town of Naharyia, where all inhabitants were awaiting us and helped to hide us in the neighboring kibbutzim. I am always deeply moved when I recall this heroic period of our nation. ) Rotfarb ends his letter with the words: “The rabid Nazi beast did not manage to eradicate my family. What was destroyed in the Diaspora has come back to life in our fatherland, which is thriving again. For its sons have come back to live within its frontiers, and there is only one wish in our hearts: Let them live!”, Cala, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 125f.
68 It is worth quoting yet another fragment of Rotfarb’s autobiography, his interpretation of the significance which these processes had for him: “Today, whenever I recall it, I am furious at what is known as Aufklärung. I would give much to be able once more to experience this festive feeling, this atmosphere, this serenity. Education opened my eyes, roused me from a religious sleep, the nation’s wonderful eternal poetry and converted me to realism. I had a beautiful dream, a Jewish dream. I was lulled to sleep by Hersz-Judel (the first teacher in the heder – K.K.) and was woken up by the “Pionier”. But the dream was more beautiful than the reality.” Cala, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 95.
Anti-Semitism was felt the most painfully by Jewish students. Although their percentage gradually decreased and they constituted but a small proportion of Jewish youth, the experiences they went through at the end of the 1930s had wide reverberations. For reasons of prestige and ideology, nearly all Jewish political parties defended the Jewish youth’s rights to higher education. The anti-Semitic excesses at universities reverberated in the press, resolutions, strikes and meetings organized by Jewish institutions. The following is an account by a Jewish student:

“I continued my law studies in Lwów. For a long time I was not interested in university life, all the more so as conflicts with members of the National Party started almost at once. This infuriated me. I despised those green-brained chaps but at the same time I was afraid of them for I had to take their lunacy into account. The bestiality of those ruffians filled me with disgust. I felt superior to them, but what worried and annoyed me was that despite my actual superiority, or because of it, they beat us or wanted to beat us (or perhaps get rid of us culturally) Two feelings were united in my soul: the realization that I was superior intellectually and contempt for the Jew-baiters who wanted to stigmatize us as second class citizens or pariahs”.69

Another fragment of the same person’s autobiography concerns the attitude of the authorities to anti-Jewish excesses:

“There were cases (of Jews) being scarred by blades. This was the first time that this weapon had been used. …The papers were full of blank spaces and ‘Kurier Lwowski’ wrote about ‘small incidents’ …The city looked as if it was besieged. Lots of helmeted police patrols and broken windows. People walked about, it seemed that they did not dare to look each other in the face. Conversations were in a subdued tone. Things calmed down on the fourth day of the excesses. I was walking with my friends. By chance we stopped in front of a gate a policeman came up and asked us not to form groups. We were four. When I asked him why he was not breaking up groups of members of students’ associations who in large numbers were flocking together nearby, he said it was not his sector after a while I noticed eight fellows walking up towards us (I was with Celek). We did not worry for they had no sticks. Suddenly, one of the men in the front line took out a cudgel from under his coat. I did not hesitate a minute and gave him a punch in the stomach, pushed the other chaps aside and moved away, pulling Celek with me. In this way we escaped the blows. But it seems that we

69 Cała, Ostatnie Pokolenie, 369f.
were not his target for I soon heard blows and saw the ruffian beat an elderly man, The guardian of order and public security seemed to be deaf and blind.”

Although it is persons deeply connected with things Polish that devote most space to anti-Semitism, accounts of anti-Semitic excesses can also be found in the reminiscences of persons for whom university, the social position and life style connected with university studies was but a dream.

“From my school years I also recall a whole gallery of teachers of various types. One teacher, Mr. Fachalczyk, sticks in my memory. He caused me a great deal of trouble and used to make fun of my peyes and my long coat. He taught history and Polish. Today he is the leader of the Endek Party in our area and is known to be very anti-Semitic. I was very fond of the director of the school, Mr. Kowalski, who in his time had gained a reputation as a great humanist. I had wonderful conversations with him (in the seventh grade) about the Bible and Talmud, which pleased him quite a bit. On the whole, I remember him a very refined person with great pedagogical abilities. However, he, too, has now moved over to the anti-Semitic camp, although he still holds the same post.”

Very similar account on the role of Endek teachers in creating national resentment is given by the other person coming from traditional Jewish milieu, but who in opposition to his predecessor, will continue his formal education after the few classes of primary school.

“I was accepted [on the basis of external entry exam-K.K.] to the 6th class of gymnasium. We were taught among the others by three Endek teachers. It was obvious that they will prosecute us Jews at any moment that is possible. (…) Professors were looking for different pretexts only to ‘dispatch’ us. For example, Polish language professor Mr. G., on Monday (I remember exact day, 9 of February 1931) called to the answer only the Jews, ‘because on Sunday they have whole day only to study’.”

Memoir of the pupil of Hebrew gymnasium and lyceum, from her time in Polish primary school is passionate account on the love and hate sentiments socialized by the generation under often contradicting influences of Polish State and private Jewish activities.

---

70 Ibid, 370f.
71 Shandler, Awakening Lives, 236.
72 See YIVO archives, RG/64, #3732 p. 16-17. Author later on concludes that situation changed in 1932 after Jędrzejewicz school reform, when Endek teachers were forced to go on early retirement.
“In the 5th class our class was passed under control of older person, as it
seemed, teacher who understood us. I’d started to love her from the begining. I saw
her as the ideal of teacher and I promised my self to become a teacher and to follow
her in everything. But with time my admiration started to vanish. The reason was her
attitude to the ethnic relations among the school pupils. (…) Often I heard the
whispers, when I stood up on the call of the teacher, to present the lesson. And instead
of presenting it with the same fervor that was poured to my mind by the teacher, only
hard words, bare facts felt from my lips, with no feelings. They were killed by the
whispers of my Polish class mates.”

Coming to the Hebrew school author underlines the fact that new school is free
of so hated “Poles”. In the same part, giving account on the importance of the polish
poetry in the Hebrew gymnasium curriculum.

It was not only “assimilated” and politically committed young Jews that
realized that the nationalistic camp sought to exclude them from all activity The
memoirs quoted above show that the young Jews were alienated from the state for it
did not defend them, though they were its citizens. Paradox was that the state itself
was the institution strongest responsible for socializing in young Jews strong civic
feelings. Owing to the young Jews’ place in the Polish and Jewish political discourse
in the 1930s, their experience became a universal experience going across class, social
and cultural divisions. Alienation is stronger if it concerns persons subjected to a new
internal anti-Semitism. This is an important paradox. The modern institutions of the
Polish state exerted a strong influence on the youngest generation of Jewish citizens.
They instilled ambitions in them, individual (higher education, work in a respected
profession) as well as collective (national emancipation in the Polish fashion) but on
the other hand they were responsible for the fact that the Jewish youth felt more
humiliated and excluded from public life than the previous generations. This specific
context of generational socialization experience, mixture of: unprecedented high
educational and occupational ambitions, highly valued ‘heroic’ historical narrative,
together with the feeling of being excluded from this ethnic narrative, with new kind
of experienced anti-Semitism, of school colleagues and teachers, created commonly
shared feeling of relative deprivation. Young Jews as probably any previous

73 See YIVO archives, RG/64, #3725 p. 13-15.
74 Ibidem., p. 26, 27.
generation was assured of its individual and collective rights. Big role here was played by the educational activities of the modern Polish state. From the other hand, this generation much stronger felt any activities or political projects aimed against the Jews. Paradoxically in the specific political and cultural circumstance of Interwar period, with its anti-Semitism and dominant ethnic nationalist discourse, ‘integration’ policies of the state had opposite effect, only radicalizing the considerable part of the Jewish youth. This process was an important factor in the development of Jewish political radicalism in Poland in the 1930s.

**Conclusion. Assimilation, Acculturation and Nationalism**

How to name the process described above? Contemporary Jewish historiography points out that the terms which it had frequently thoughtlessly used were not clear enough and were often confusing from the ideological point of view. One of these terms is “assimilation”. The way this term is explained by Tod Endelman in the innovative “The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe” best shows this entanglement. Endelman does not give a concise definition but says:

“Consequently, it can encompass - and is often confused and conflated with – four analytically distinct changes in Jewish behavior and status in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: acculturation (the acquisition of the cultural and social habits of the dominant non-Jewish group), integration (the entry of Jews into non-Jewish circles and spheres of activity), emancipation (the acquisition of rights and privileges enjoyed by non-Jewish citizens/subjects of similar socioeconomic rank), and secularization (the rejection of religious beliefs and the obligations and practices that flow from these beliefs).”

The author also points out that some researchers frequently use the same term to describe two different processes: political programs and social reforms intended to amalgamate/integrate the Jews with their environment and on the other side an unplanned, spontaneous adoption by the minority of the values, symbols and life patterns of the non-Jewish environment. Agnieszka Jagodzińska has called into question the use of the term “assimilation”. In her inspiring article she points out how ambiguous and ideologically encumbered the term is. Among the encumbrances she

---

mentions the organicistic connotations of the term which began to be widely used in the 19th century. Generally speaking the “assimilation” of one group by another means that the minority is “digested”, swallowed by the majority group. The frequently observed inability of Jews to melt into the majority, the fact that even those who have lost all their distinct cultural features are regarded as “aliens” by their environment seem to deny that this is the direction of the process. What is more- many studies on Jewish assimilation show that the milieu which take over the life style of the dominant nation and identify themselves as Germans or Poles have not melted into the majority but formed distinct social strata. Moreover, as Jagodzińska points out, in the time of modern Jewish policy “assimilation” has become a useful ideological concept which serves to discredit the legal validity of internal Jewish political opponents’ actions. As the author says, since the direction and course of the “assimilation” process is not clear, and since the term has often had changing, negative, ideologically entangled implications, it has ceased to be a useful instrument for analyses. The assimilation problem can be solved by the use of more precise concepts, mentioned above by Edelman.

These objections are right, in my opinion, only if assimilation is viewed as a political program. As Jagodzińska and the authors referred to by her, Mendelsohn and Wodziński, say, the political circles rallied round the Warsaw periodical “Izraelita” in the second half of the 19th century, or round the Union of Poles of the Mosaic Faith, set up in 1919, should, in defiance of their Zionist adversaries, be rather called “integrationists”. It would be difficult to find a political organization calling itself Jewish whose program envisaged the obliteration of Jewish features. But the term “assimilation” is not always useless in an analysis of spontaneous processes used by Jews in order to become similar to their environment. The functioning of 19th and 20th century subcultures of Germans, Hungarians and Poles of the Mosaic faith (or of “Jewish origin”) and the existence of ideas negating the possibility of Jewish

---

76 As far as this historical period is concerned see, Landau-Czajka, Syn Będzie Lech, 336f. An excellent illustration of this process is book of Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, Rodzina Toeplitzów. Książka mojego ojca [Toeplitz Family. My fathers book], Warszawa 2004, which is not an orthodox historical work but rather a book of recollections. See also classical work which describes changes in the Jewish German community, David Sorkin, The Transformation of the German Jewry. 1780-1840, Oxford 1987.


assimilation (e.g. modern racialist anti-Semitism) do not yet mean that Jewish communities have never melted into the majority group, that their assimilation has never taken place. The emergence of those subcultures, which in fact excluded the possibility of a one-way transfer of the patterns of one cultural group to the consciousness and life style of the second group, cannot be used to negate asymmetry, the cultural and symbolic domination of one national group over the other, as was the case with the 19th and 20th century Germans and Poles and their domination over their Jewish neighbors.

Anna Landau Czajka’s work which has already been quoted here is very interesting. It concentrates on the spontaneous assimilation of Polish Jews during the interwar period. Based on biographical sources, it perfectly depicts how this process could develop despite growing anti-Semitism and the social exclusion of, and even aggression against all Jewish groups. Unfortunately, the author has confined her research to one specific group, Jews who felt Polish, wanted to be Poles or had problems with their Jewish identity. Only marginally does she refer to much more numerous groups of orthodox and Zionist youths or young members of Bund. She writes about their linguistic acculturation and draws attention to the growing dissimilarity of these groups, a result of anti-Semitism and of the activity of Jewish organizations. Thus, her research, too, confirms that the majority of young Polish Jews experienced “acculturation without assimilation.”- In her view, the YIVO autobiographies are of little use for research on Jewish assimilation during the interwar period. The following are the reasons for her conviction:

“Moreover, even though they (the YIVO autobiographies – K.K.) should be more valuable for research on assimilation, they are not. For the diarists have rarely examined their situation in a broader social context or reflected on their identity, they have rather described their daily life, financial problems, first love, troubles with the upbringing of children., This is clearly apparent in case of the “commissioned” diaries written for the competition. The young people, who responded to the questionnaire, even if they were assimilated, wrote about themselves as Jews (otherwise their participation in the competition would have had no sense)”.

---

79 Landau-Czajka, Syn Będzie Lech, 433-441. The author confirms the conclusions of other historians who say that assimilation has declined as a political program, but emphasize the growing spontaneous assimilation of some intellectual and urban Jewish milieux.
81 Landau-Czajka, 17.
Landau-Czajka draws attention to two questions. One, in her view, is that the person subjected to “assimilation” should be aware of this process. The other, connected with the first one, is the fact that assimilation processes can be followed only on the basis of profound reflections on one’s own identity, national status, etc. In the view of the author, these processes cannot be followed by an analysis of descriptions of such prosaic questions as everyday life, the family, the school.

In this article I have tried to refute this theory. As the quotations from YIVO autobiographies have shown, everyday life brings to light the specific penetration of essential cultural and political symbols. Everyday life shows that the Polish reality had a forceful symbolic impact, not yet described, on the Jewish minority. As I have tried to show, this process took place in defiance of strong ideological declarations issued by Jewish political parties which, having different political interests, condemned “assimilation”. Even the authors of the autobiographies were frequently unaware of this process. It is not only that the cultural and social habits of the two groups converged; but at the same time the young Jews fought to gain access to universal,

Polish in practice, spheres of activity and were taking over the patterns of thinking and of political activity of the dominant majority. To go back to Endelman’s definition, the process described here is a combination of “acculturation” and “integration”. The former is too often narrowed down to the linguistic sphere. This interpretation has resulted in the fact that the processes of Jewish political participation in the Second Republic have been represented as belonging to the exclusive sphere of “Jewish politics”. Even a broad interpretation of these processes as an adoption of all cultural ideas does not exhaust the problem. In addition to these ideas, there was also an objective, structural change in the models of life, professional career, the way of thinking and acting in the existing social and political reality. They converged, melted with Polish patterns, unconsciously contributing to the integration of the two communities.

These two processes can be presented as one process of “symbolic assimilation”. Its fruit was the new political consciousness of young Jews who grew up in the conditions existing in the Second Republic, a consciousness which was an effect of a specific convergence of Jewish ethnic traits, universal modern ideologies, Polish national symbols and of anti-Semitism, experienced in a new way. This trend seems to have accelerated in the 1930s but was suddenly stopped by the Second World War.