

FEATURES

The Road to September 1939

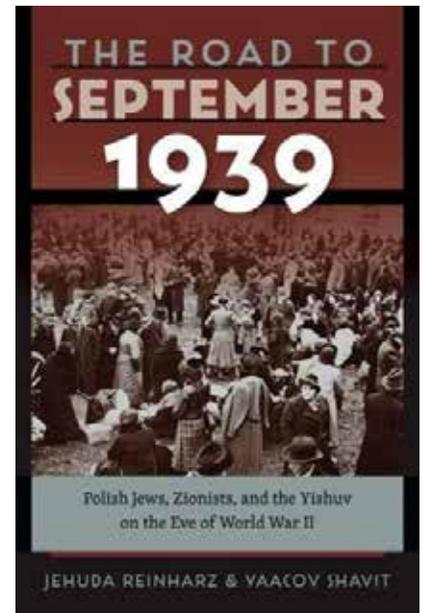
We are pleased to present in this issue of *Gazeta* an essay adapted from the introduction of *The Road to September 1939: Polish Jews, Zionists, and the Yishuv on the Eve of World War II* by Jehuda Reinharz and Yaacov Shavit. Originally published in Hebrew by Am Oved Publishers in 2013, this translation, published by Brandeis University Press in the Tauber Institute Series for the Study of European Jewry, introduces English-speaking audiences to the important scholarship of Professors Reinharz and Shavit. *The Road to September 1939* shows, through letters and memoirs, that contrary to popular belief, Zionists in the Yishuv worked tirelessly to attempt to save European Jews from Hitler in the years before World War II. As we approach the eightieth anniversary of Germany's invasion of Poland, this book offers an opportunity for critical reflection on what was, and was not, possible before the storm clouds of the war fell on Europe.

—*Gazeta* Editorial Team

This book serves as a sort of collective diary of statesmen, social and political activists, and ordinary people whose first-person eyewitness accounts were recorded in personal diary entries, letters, and memoirs, along with daily newspaper accounts. These accounts are a record of what they knew, thought, and felt in “real time.” In their focus on the vicissitudes of

We do not intend to describe the events by reading history backward. We have tried not to read the story from its endpoint but rather as much as possible in the “present.”

Jehuda Reinharz and
Yaacov Shavit



Jacket image for *The Road to September 1939: Polish Jews, Zionists, and the Yishuv on the Eve of World War II* by Jehuda Reinharz and Yaacov Shavit.

everyday life, rather than on the big questions of the hour, they bring to life this crucial moment in Jewish history and illuminate more effectively than some traditional histories the events that led up to World War II and the Holocaust.

We do not intend to describe the events by reading history backward. We have tried not to read the story from its endpoint

but rather as much as possible in the “present.” Before August 1939, as well as during that month, no one really knew what was in store. It is only a retrospective reading that determines that the events moved inexorably toward an unequalled calamity and that it was impossible to halt their course. A fog of uncertainty and lack of knowledge shrouded that month. And in any case, even if everyone had known where history was heading, they would have been helpless to divert the ship toward a safe haven. The processes that preceded the breakout of the Second World War have been reconstructed and analyzed in numerous books, some of them recording and reconstructing the behind-the-scenes occurrences that were unknown to people at the time. The history of the Jewish people, the Zionist movement, and the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, in the 1930s have been the subjects of an extensive body of literature. This book could not have been written without consulting it.

The countries of the free world had no interest in resolving Poland’s internal problems by opening their gates to a large Jewish immigration.

The reader of this book will find almost no German Jews in it. Likewise, it will not discuss the fate of the Jews of Romania, Hungary, or France, for example. The choice to focus on Polish Jews seems obvious to us. Poland was home to the largest Jewish population in the world—around 3.5 million Jews in 1939—and after 1924, it was the main source of Jewish emigration across the Atlantic and to Palestine. From 1929 to 1938, more than 400,000 Jews left Poland. Initially, most of them went to the United States, but from 1924 onward the rate of those immigrating to Palestine increased. Between 1929 and 1935, Palestine absorbed around 43.7 percent of the total Jewish emigration, whereas the United States absorbed 10.9 percent.

If in 1929 Palestine took in less than a tenth of Jewish emigration from Poland, then in the years prior to the Second World War it became the principal destination for that emigration. In 1935, Palestine absorbed around 80.6 percent of the emigrants, and in 1937, 32.2 percent. Between 1919 and 1939, around 140,000 people emigrated from Poland to Palestine—around 35 percent of the mandate’s total Jewish population. During the mandate period, Poland was thus the largest source of immigration to Palestine and the main source of the Yishuv’s demographic growth. In addition, a large part of the private capital that was imported to Palestine belonged to Polish Jews, who made a considerable contribution to the national funds.

In the middle of the 1930s, as the pressure to leave Poland grew and Palestine became the almost exclusive destination, the British government imposed new restrictions on Jewish immigration. As a result, the country’s gates were shut to many who wanted to immigrate to it. The Zionist movement and

its institutions had to lay the bridge on which at least some Polish Jews would cross over to Palestine. The Yishuv's political future and its power were now intertwined with the fate of Polish Jews. The fate of Polish Jews, however, as opposed to the fate of German Jews and later that of Jews under the Third Reich, was not on the public and international agenda. It did not occupy any place in British or international policy considerations, because Polish Jews had not been expelled and therefore did not become asylum-seeking refugees. The countries of the free world had no interest in resolving Poland's internal problems by opening their gates to a large Jewish immigration.

The Zionist movement found itself in a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, putting the need for Jewish emigration from Poland on the international agenda was welcomed. On the other hand, directing this emigration to different countries in Africa or South America meant that Zionism would become irrelevant. In October 1936, for example, Chaim Weizmann

Polish Jews had a rich and multifaceted existence as an integral part of Polish life and under its influence. The shadow of a possible war weighed on them without being necessarily tied to the future of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine, and even in isolation from it.

wrote to Moshe Shertok (Sharett), director of the Jewish Agency's political department, that Poland had put the question of Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe on the international agenda: "The recent pronouncements of the Poles have made a very great impression. The Polish problem transcends the ordinary boundaries and makes it patent to everybody that our misfortunes will soon grow to a first-rate international calamity for which we cannot take responsibility and which may affect vitally the state of affairs in the East and South East Europe."

This led to the conclusion that it would be possible to spur the governments and the world's conscience to see finding a solution for the Jews' plight as a lofty conscientious duty. This was also accompanied by a belief that the power of the Jewish world could not be reduced to its plight. Weizmann, however, did not mean that putting the subject of Jewish emigration on the international agenda would include alternatives to Palestine. He—and others—believed that when it would become clear that there were no such alternatives, Palestine's status as the only destination would be reinforced.

However, it would be a mistake to describe the history of Polish Jews between the two world wars only from a Zionist or a Palestinian perspective. Most of the Jews in Poland were not Zionists, and many of them opposed Zionism or were indifferent to it. Nor did many Zionists show an urgency or eagerness to immigrate to Palestine. Polish Jews had a rich and multifaceted existence as an integral part of Polish life and under its influence.

The shadow of a possible war weighed on them without being necessarily tied to the future of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine, and even in isolation from it.

At the end of a dinner held on February 22, 1938, at the house of Leopold Amery, the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs from 1924 to 1929, Ben-Gurion told Sir Harold MacMichael, who was appointed High Commissioner for Palestine in 1938 (and held the position until 1944), that the Zionist movement wanted “to save the young generation of Eastern and Central European Jewry—and it’s possible. It’s a question of two million Jews.” MacMichael replied that the Jews were “rushing things.” Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary: “And again I saw that we are hitting a wall. The Englishman doesn’t know what time means for us.”

What was the Zionist “dimension of time” in the 1930s? Can we distinguish between rhetoric and plans of action, wishes and means? The research literature, and even more so the political and public debate, have been suffused for over fifty years with a

The research literature, and even more so the political and public debate, have been suffused for over fifty years with a bitter disagreement around the question to what extent Jews in general, and the political leadership of the Zionist movement in particular, were aware that time was pressing.

bitter disagreement around the question to what extent Jews in general, and the political leadership of the Zionist movement in particular, were aware that time was pressing. Did the “awareness of time” change between 1935 and 1939? What was done under the pressure of time in order to break through the “wall,” and did the Jews of Poland and of the Yishuv share the same “concept of time”?

Various plans and solutions were mooted and discussed

publicly and behind closed doors, stirring up the debate and creating polarization. Plans can testify to the sense of time and to a will to act. But they do not indicate that those who thought up the plans had the power and the means to carry them out. As will become apparent in the narrative that follows, individuals and organizations within the Zionist movement feared for the fate of the Jews of Europe and did what they could within the fog of uncertainty and with limited resources. Once the war broke out, however, the fate of European Jewry was virtually sealed. ■

Jehuda Reinharz is Richard Koret Professor of Modern Jewish History, director of the Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry at Brandeis University, and president of the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Foundation.

Yaacov Shavit is Professor Emeritus at Tel Aviv University.