

MONDAY OCTOBER 11, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00-15:30

The Image of Polish Jewry Between Two World Wars

by
Ephraim Kaye

GOALS OF THE UNIT

1. To describe the Jews in Poland in the interwar period and set forth their political, social, economic, and demographic stratification.
2. To apprise students of the existential problems that Polish Jews faced and the solutions that various factions offered.
3. To equip students to work out their own solutions on the basis of the source material provided.
4. To describe the sociopolitical circumstances of Polish Jewry before the Second World War (1939) and to analyze the students' solutions in view of the historical situation before the war.

PHASES OF THE UNIT

1. Introduction, including:
 - a. An introduction to Jewish demography in the interwar period, focusing on large Jewish populations in Eastern and Western Europe as compared with North Africa and the Americas (pp. 8-9). (Students are given maps of Europe and Poland and a sheet on Jewish demography in the 1930s) (pp. 7-9, 11).
 - b. A historical description of Polish Jewry, including its segmentation in the interwar period, and the attitude of the Polish national state toward the Jewish inhabitants of the country (for the teacher only; pp. 17-42).
2. Divide the class into four main groups; subdivide the Zionist group into four subgroups (a total of seven groups).
 - a. Zionists (General Zionists, Poalei Zion, Revisionists, Mizrachi)
 - b. Haredim ("Ultraorthodox")
 - c. Bund
 - d. Assimilationists

Each group is given several examples of source material that reflect its outlook in several respects, and a sheet of facilitating questions for the group members to answer (pp. 44, 47, 50, 54, 57, 63, and 67)

3. Elicit answers from the students on two main issues (see table below):

- a. How did the existential problem of Polish Jewry manifest itself?
- b. What solution does the source material offer for the problems of Polish Jewry?

	Existential Problem Of Polish Jewry	Proposed Solution
Zionists:		
General Zionists		
Poalei Zion		
Revisionists		
Mizrachi		
Haredim		
Bund		
Assimilationists		

A sample table with all details filled in appears in the unit (for the teacher—p. 70-74).

4. Once all the answers are gathered in the table, advance to the next phase -- discussion -- which focuses on the following question:

In view of the circumstances of Polish Jewry in the 1920s and 1930s, which of the attitudes analyzed seems the most practicable.

5. In the discussion phase, the teacher should present various possible reactions based on the historical realities of Polish and world Jewry at the time. Questions about all the various attitudes are provided as part of the unit (for the teacher, pp. 75-80). The teacher should play the devil's advocate in this regard, challenging whatever attitude the students espouse.
6. Conclusion of the unit: Summarize the foregoing discussion by describing the sociopolitical circumstances of Polish Jewry in 1939, just before World War II, as they really were, and point out the factors that made such a situation possible (pp. 81-85).

REMARKS FOR THE TEACHER

This unit is designed for the teacher only and provides material for three classroom lessons. Only parts of the unit are meant for the students.

1. Map 1: Interwar Europe (p. 7)
2. Table I: Jewish Demography in 1933 (p. 8-9)
3. Map 2: Interwar Poland (p. 11)
4. Table II : (Parts A and B): Jews in the Cities of Poland (p. 12)
5. Table III: Sources of Income of Polish Jews (p. 13)
6. Historical account of Jewish political parties in Poland between the two World Wars (pp. 23-41)
7. Source material on Jewish political parties in Poland between the two World Wars, including facilitating questions on the political parties (worksheet), pp. 43-69

It is recommended that this unit be spread over three class sessions.

I. First Lesson

- A. Introduction to general Jewish demography in the interwar period, focusing on Polish Jewry and its major communities in various Polish cities in comparison with other countries shown in the tables (20 minutes).
- B. Historical description of the circumstances of Polish Jewry in the interwar period, focusing on sociopolitical aspects (25 minutes).

Screening of the film *Image Before My Eyes* on interwar Polish Jewry. The 90-minute film, available from Yad Vashem, describes the diverse Jewish political parties in Poland, their political situation, and their response to anti-Semitism. Because the film is too long to show in a single class period, the teacher should select sections that will elucidate the theme of the discussion. Teachers who wish to show the entire film should devote another lesson to it.

An alternative 45-minute film on Polish Jewry from 1919 to 1943 describes the segmentation of Polish Jewry. It, too, is available from Yad Vashem.

II. Second Lesson

- A. The source material on each political party, along with the sheet of facilitating questions pertaining to each source, is handed to students in each of the seven groups.
- B. The historical background material on every party is given to each of the groups. The source material, question sheets, and background material on the parties should be handed out some time before this lesson, in order to give the students time to answer the facilitating questions.

During the lesson, the students report on the existential problem of Polish Jewry as portrayed by the source material, and describe the solution that each political party proposed. The teacher summarizes the students' answers in a table on the chalkboard.

III. Third Lesson

The entire lesson is devoted to discussion of the central question of the unit:

In view of the plight of Polish Jewry in the 1920s and 1930s, which of the attitudes analyzed seems the most practicable to you ?

At this stage, the teacher should play the devil's advocate. Relevant questions appear in Phase V of this unit (pp. 75-80). Set aside at least ten minutes at the end of the lesson for a general summary.

PREFACE

Why is it necessary to offer a curriculum unit on Polish Jewry in the period between the two World Wars? After all, existing curricula on the Holocaust have a general chapter on European Jewry in the interwar era. What, then, is the historical and educational importance of examining the life of the Polish Jewry in particular?

Historically speaking, Polish Jewry became a major Jewish demographic and cultural center in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and remained so until 1939. It is true that United States Jewry between the two world wars was larger (Jewish population of 4,771,000), but Jews were a negligible minority (3.6%) of the general population of the United States. The very size of interwar Polish Jewry evidently answers this question, at least in part.

Polish Jewry, 3,400,000 strong in 1939, was the largest Jewish community in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Only American Jewry was larger. More significantly, Polish Jews accounted for almost ten percent of the total population of the country. Only the "Yishuv," the modern Jewish community in pre-1948 Palestine, surpassed this share; its 475,000 Jews in 1939 constituted 32% of the population of the Land of Israel. Another exceptional phenomenon was the percentage of Jews in various Polish cities. The tables below show that this proportion ranged from 20% to 60% percent of the cities' population. Two additional pieces of information should be added:

1. The roots of Polish Jewry were seven hundred years old. (Jews cached Poland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.)
2. Of the six million Jews who died in the Holocaust at least three million were of Polish origin. In other words, half of all Jewish victims of the Holocaust were Polish Jews!

Thus, on the eve of the Second World War, Polish Jewry lived under circumstances that were unparalleled in any other country.

From the teaching perspective, I believe a curriculum unit focusing on Polish Jewry in the interwar period may bring today's political realities in Israel into focus by presenting source material on the diverse political parties that Polish Jewry created. Many political ideologies that abound in contemporary Israel are traceable to Polish Jewry in the interwar period. It is astounding to witness the amazing similarity between today's political rivals and those who strived for primacy in Poland, chiefly among the Zionist parties but also within Agudath Israel. The Holocaust annihilated two of the political groupings that were active in prewar Poland: the Bund and the assimilationists. For all the other political blocs, the unit presented here allows us to study the similarities and differences between past and present. By studying these parties, their disputes, and the solutions that each proposed for the problems of Jewish existence, we discover the dynamism of Jewish life in Poland and observe some of the origins of today's ideological controversies. This unit also helps us understand the responses of Polish Jewry during the Holocaust period. Finally, it may shed light on processes and phenomena that Polish Jews experienced in the ghettos, the youth movements, and the revolts that took place in the Holocaust period.

However, this unit focuses only on ideological controversies among the Jewish parties in

Poland and disregards other aspects of life there -- culture, journalism, social welfare, and youth movements. It is extremely important to study these, too, in order to form a more complete and accurate picture of the lives of Polish Jews between the two world wars. We hope this unit will open the door to further and more extensive study of this important topic.

SUMMARY TABLE ON PARTY ATTITUDES
The Jewish Existential Problem in Poland / Proposed Solutions

	Existential Problem	Proposed Solution
General Zionists	1. Antisemitism – economic boycott; attacks on and murder of Jews in Lvov (pogrom, 1918) 2. Quotas on Jewish enrollment in high schools 3. antisemitic speeches by members of the National-Democratic Party (the Endecja) 4. Influence of Austrian and German antisemitism on Polish antisemitism 5. Restriction of Jewish influence in local elections by redrawing boundaries of cities and towns	1. Settlement of Palestine by farmers, artisans, and blue collar workers 2. A Jewish majority in Palestine 3. Aspiration to unite all groups and classes behind Zionist goals 4. The World Zionist Organization -- broadly democratic, seeks to supervise all operations
Revisionist Zionists	1. Antisemitism is a constant; it has ebbed but is about to re-erupt. 2. The Polish Jewish masses – equanimity, resignation, despair 3. Jews are likened to a group of people seated in a cart without reins careening toward a chasm. 4. The situation of European Jews – “a catastrophe of historic magnitude” 5. We are a minority everywhere; antisemitism = xenophobia.	1. Jewish majority in Palestine – the minimum aspiration, not the maximum 2. Another million Jews would create a Jewish majority in Palestine. 3. Three to four million Jews in Eastern Europe are knocking on the gate – entry visas

	Existential Problem	Proposed Solution
Poalei Zion – Hitahdut	Two types of national recognition: “Bourgeois” nationalism observes the contrast between itself and other nations. Militant nationalism (Revisionism). - Socialist nationalism – separatism – stronger emphasis on the negative aspects of other strata in Polish Jewry (the Bund)	- Our nationalism – aspiration to build the country on foundations that correspond to our national sensitivities, efforts to become an integral part of the Socialist movement - Struggle for unrestricted, unlimited aliya - Aspiration to create a Jewish socialist proletarian society in Palestine, entrenched in all sectors of agriculture and industry
Mizrachi	- Hatred of the “eternal people” is eternal hatred.” - Why do they hate us? Because we are different from all other nations and tongues. - We are weaker than any other nation and tongue; we are foreigners in every nation and tongue; we lack the territorial base that other nations have. - Agudath Israel opposes Zionism – The Council of Torah Sages ruled that it is not yet time to advocate settlement of Eretz Israel. - Agudath Israel condemns the Zionists’ efforts in Eretz Israel but lauds the Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel.	- The nations will eventually recognize the Jews as a living nation and grant them national rights. - Mizrachi construes Jewish Palestine as being Jewish in religion and language. - Mizrachi’s role is to raise its banner, the national-religious banner. - To encourage as many national-religious Jews as possible to make aliya

	Existential Problem	Proposed Solution
The Haredim ("Ultraorthodox") -- Agudath Israel	1. Our people, our Torah, and our religion are in a sorrowful, miserable state. 2. The study halls and yeshivot have emptied, the Torah is cast aside, and our sons and daughters have abandoned us. 3. The flames of heresy and desecration have made inroads among our people. The Zionists' goal is to secularize Jewish community life and to resemble all other nations. 4. The founder of Jewish nationalism opposed Orthodoxy all his life. Nationalism has become a substitute for Torah. 5. Nationalism: a new deity, tantamount to idolatry 6. The national-religious renounce one of the basic tenets of the Jewish faith. Nationalism = idolatry. The national-religious are collaborators in idolatry	1. The only reliable remedy: unity and organization. 2. The formation of Agudath Shelomey Emuney Yisrael (Agudath Israel) to supervise all matters of religion and faith and observance of the holy Torah. 3. Settlement of Eretz Israel is a commandment that stands alone. We have neither perished nor expired without Eretz Israel. 4. Without the Torah, Israel cannot survive for even one century . 5. Our overriding concern must be Jews, followed by Eretz Israel. 6. Settlement of Eretz Israel is a commandment, but settling groups of provocative apostates is the exact opposite: a massive transgression. It is the way not to build Eretz Israel but to destroy it.

	Existential Problem	Proposed Solution
The Bund	1. Antisemitism and attacks on Jews in various Polish towns (March 9, 1936) 2. Boycotting of Jewish workers -- policy of starving the Jewish masses 3. Attempt to create a Jewish ghetto in the universities 4. Polish nationalists declare that Poland is simply a way station for Jews. 5. A national home in Palestine would not eradicate the Diaspora; to state otherwise is to repudiate the Diaspora and its spiritual value. 6. Perhaps one-tenth of world Jewry can settle in Palestine . 7. The Diaspora will continue to exist; only faith in a better future for the Jewish masses in the Diaspora would die!	1. Our homeland is Poland; we are not foreigners here. 2. Our fatherland is the land where we live. 3. The Jews regard themselves as citizens with equal rights. 4. Each nation's proletariat should have its own organization. 5. Poles and Jews have a common destiny. 6. The Bund continues to urge Jews to consider themselves Polish citizens entitled to equal rights . 7. The possibility of building a new socialist society 8. We shall fight fascism together with the Poles; we shall spare no sacrifice on behalf of this country. 9. Cultural autonomy in Poland -- a Yiddish-language school system

	Existential Problem	Proposed Solution
Assimilationists	1. Antisemitism exists everywhere . 2. The Zionist solution is good only for a few hundred thousand Jews. Even a liberal regime would not accept the state-within-a-state solution (the Bund program). 3. The Jewish masses will continue living here in Poland, but in what way? 4. Recent incidents perpetrated by gangs of youths – humiliating riots 5. The Jewish problem is a blatant example of how the law of resemblance works: the need to resemble the other, countered by factors that prevent this. The process ends with assimilation. 6. Zionism aims to achieve a Jewish national renaissance are the result of every individual's congenital wish to assimilate to his or her surroundings. 7. There are two problems with Socialism (the Bund): a. It has no justification in the social structure of Polish Jewry. b. It is by definition a cosmopolitan movement. The Jewish Socialists Must emphasize their Jewish distinctiveness.	1. Anyone with a cultural affinity for contemporary Europe is already standing on assimilationist soil. 2. The Ihud prescribes assimilation of the masses as the only solution. 3. The circle of non-Jewish sympathizers is growing steadily. 4. SAMA – its board includes Polish Catholics and members Of Polish academic youth organizations . 5. Recent incidents have confirmed our argument. Should the entire society be blamed? Many have protested! 6. We should build a bridge by which adherents of different religions dwelling in the same country can achieve a rapprochement. 7. Assimilation is the solution to the Jewish problem according to the Western European model . 8. All segments of Polish Jewry are essentially assimilationist; we are merely the noblest manifestation of assimilation's many facets.

PHASE V – DISCUSSION

After the students in their groups report on their solutions to the existential problem of Polish Jewry, the teacher explains the relative strength of each segment of Polish Jewry.

In Jewish community elections (313 *kehillot*, community organization) between 1924 and 1927, the votes were apportioned as follows:

- a. Orthodox lists: 43.9%.
- b. Zionist lists (including Mizrachi): 26.8%

(The Bund did not take part in *kehilla* elections in the 1920s.)

When we compare these results with those of the Sejm elections, we obtain the following picture of the relative strength of various Jewish parties in the 1920s:

Agudath Israel	11%
Non-Partisan Orthodox	22%
Zionists	
General	18%
Mizrachi	9%
Poalei Zion Right	4%
Poalei Zion Left	3%
Bund	13%
Folkists	6%
Other	14%

This pattern hardly changed in the 1930s. The results of Jewish community elections in 97 towns excluding Warsaw show the following breakdown of Polish Jewry:

**General Summary of Jewish Election Results in 1936
(Percentages)**

Agudath Israel	21.0	
Non-Partisan Orthodox	15.5	36.5
Bund	8.8	8.8
Zionists		
General	17.0	
Mizrachi	6.2	
Poalei Zion Right	5.5	
Revisionists	2.7	31.4
Other		
Non-Partisan	9.5	
Artisans	9.4	
Poalei Zion Left	1.8	
Merchants	1.0	
Folkists	1.0	22.7

Note that in Warsaw(1936) the Bund won 15 of the 50 seats and became the city's largest Jewish party. Agudath Israel earned ten seats, the National Bloc nine, Mizrachi three, Poalei Zion Right two, Poalei Zion Left one, and the Folkists one. This ratio changed in the 1939 municipal-council elections as shown below.

Marcus examined another 26 municipal jurisdictions with Jewish populations of under 10,000, comprising 6.5% of urban Jews in Poland, and found that the Zionists received 45% of all votes cast, the Bund 20%, and others (mostly Agudath Israel) 35%

Marcus's data elicit the following picture of the breakdown of power on the Jewish street in the 1930s.

Bund	38%
Zionists	36%
Others, chiefly Agudath Israel	23%
Poalei Zion Left	3%

According to Daniel Blatman's thesis, the Bund received only 21.8% of an Jewish mandates to municipal councils in the 1938-1939 elections.

Although the true strength of the Bund in 1939 is hard to estimate with precision (21.8% according to Blatman, 38% according to Marcus), the Bund's power undoubtedly grew at this time. Of the three major forces in Polish Jewry -- the Bund, the Zionists, and Agudath Israel -- the Bund was particularly successful in the *kehilla* elections of 1936 and the municipal-council elections of 1939.

Several factors explain the Bund's ascent:

1. Organizational structure: The Bund had a central leadership which avoided the schisms that bedeviled the other parties, especially the Zionists. Similarly, the Bund had only one youth movement, unlike its competitors (the Revisionists alone had no fewer than twenty youth movements!).
2. The Bund mounted an organized struggle against the antisemitism and anti-Jewish assaults that occurred, to a growing extent, in the 1930s. Initially, the Bundists directed their protests at the Polish government; subsequently they organized protest strikes by the entire Jewish population, such as the famous walkout of March, 1936.
3. In the 1930s, the economic circumstances of Polish Jewry worsened considerably because of economic sanctions (boycotts and an embargo on opening businesses on Sunday) and assaults by Poles. According to various estimates, about one-third of Polish Jewry subsisted on relief by the late 1930s. The Bund spearheaded the struggle on this front, too.
4. Diminishing emigration options in the late 1930s: Polish Jews realized by this time that there were fewer and fewer possibilities of leaving Poland. Even emigration to Palestine was restricted. Tens of thousands of young people waited on the Zionist training farms for certificates entitling them to immigrate to the Holy Land. This problem worsened after the Evian Confer-

ence in July, 1938, when it transpired that no country on earth was willing to admit Jewish emigrants.

The assimilationists are not enumerated among these Jewish groups because, regarding themselves as full-fledged Poles, they did not vote for Jewish parties. We know of a small proportion of Jews who aligned themselves with several assimilationist organizations:

The Association of Poles of the Mosaic Faith
The Jewish Statehood Organization (*)
The Ihud

(*) The reference being to Polish, not Jewish, statehood.

After this explanation of the balance of power among the currents within Polish Jewry, the teacher should ask the following question:

Given the situation of Polish Jewry in the 1920s and 1930s, as illuminated by the sources available to you, which of the attitudes we have analyzed seems to be the most realistic and practical for Polish Jewry in the late 1930s?

The teacher's role at this stage of the discussion is to elicit responses based on the historical realities of Polish and world Jewry at the time.

For example:

1. If a student chooses to identify with the Zionist stance, the teacher may ask the following questions:
 - a. Why didn't the masses of Polish Jewry emigrate to Palestine after the Balfour Declaration of November, 1917? Why didn't Polish Jews answer Chaim Weizmann's call (1920): "People of Israel, where art thou?" A good source to rely on here is Part 3 of the film "Pillar of Fire," which discusses this issue.
 - b. How many Jews emigrated to Palestine in the Third Aliya? in the Fourth Aliya? Where did they come from? What did they do in Palestine? In 1925-1926, more Jews left Palestine than arrived. Why did they leave?
 - c. The problem of the Arab population in Palestine -- the riots of 1920 (Jaffa), 1921 (Jerusalem), and 1929: How did these events affect Jews who wished to emigrate in these years, when it became apparent that anti-Semitism existed not only in the Diaspora -- in Poland -- but also in Palestine?
 - d. How did the Arab disturbances of 1936-1939, in which more than 400 Palestinian Jews lost their lives, affect Diaspora Jewry? Does aliya solve the Jews' problem of survival in the Diaspora?
 - e. What effect did the Peel Commission and partition plan of 1937 have on the Jews' decision to make aliya or remain in the Diaspora? How did the Yishuv respond to the Peel Commission and its recommendations?

- f. MacDonald's White Paper (May, 1939) and the closure of the gates of Palestine: How did the White Paper affect Diaspora Jews? What emigration possibilities were left to them?
2. If a student chooses to identify with the *haredi* position, the teacher may ask him or her the following questions:
 - a. Was it still possible to maintain a life of Torah and observance of religious commandments in Poland? What was the Polish authorities' attitude toward the haredi community in the 1920s and 1930s?
 - b. Why did representatives of the haredi public strive for election to the Polish parliament (the Sejm)? What did they hope to accomplish?
 - c. Did the haredi attitude of supporting the authorities despite their anti-Semitism prove correct? How did this approach change in the late 1930s?
 - d. How did the haredi community respond to the 1936 legislation banning Jewish ritual slaughter in Poland? What conclusions did they draw as a result of the legislation?
 - e. Why did the haredi community not develop a pro-aliya trend?
 3. If a student chooses to identify with the position of the Bund, the following questions may be asked:
 - a. Did the Bund succeed in safeguarding the minority rights of Polish Jews?
 - b. Did the Poles agree to the Bund's request to grant "cultural autonomy" to Polish Jews? How did this "cultural autonomy" express itself?
 - c. How can one explain why the Bund failed to send even one delegate to the Polish parliament in the 1920s and 1930s?
 - d. Did the Bund's approach inspire Polish Jews to hope for a better future in Poland? Why/why not?
 4. If a student chooses to identify with the approach of the assimilationists, the following questions may be asked:
 - a. Did assimilationist Jews find acceptance in Polish society?
 - b. What was the policy of the Polish authorities toward Jewish students in high schools and universities?
 - c. Why did so few Polish Jews join the assimilationist ranks?

The purpose of the discussion is to help students become aware of the historical realities in Poland by studying and considering various attitudes that prevailed there. It is only natural

that the students tend to support the Zionist view first, but after appreciating the realities in Palestine of the 1920s and 1930s, they tend to switch to the Bund. This process is amazingly similar to that which took place in Poland in the late 1930s. As stated in the introduction to this part of the unit, the Bund did indeed become stronger, chiefly at the expense of the Zionists, in the *kehilla* elections of 1936 and, with greater momentum, in the municipal elections of 1938-1939. The Bund's tenacious war on antisemitism is expressed in their call for a general strike, which took place on March 17, 1936, and caused Polish Jews to regard the Bund with greater esteem than before. The organizational skills of the Bund activists and the cohesion in its ranks -- so different from the fractious Zionist parties -- enabled this organization to present a united front in its struggle against anti-Semitism and for equal rights for Polish Jews. The elections in the late 1930s reflected these facts.

SUMMARY OF THE UNIT

This unit depicts the historical reality of interwar Polish Jewry, elucidates its main existential problems, and describes the solutions offered by various Jewish political parties.

Not all Polish Jews aligned themselves with parties; many belonged to none. Not all haredim, for example, joined Agudath Israel, the only haredi party in Poland; in fact, many haredim opposed Agudath Israel especially among the Belt and Alexander Hasidim. (Mizrachi supporters joined the Zionist movement, of course.) Be this as it may, studying these parties, which represented a large majority of Polish Jewry, helps us examine the development of solutions to various problems that Polish Jewry faced at the time.

Did these parties succeed in attaining their goals? Did they improve the lot of Polish Jewry in the period reviewed? How did they contribute to the development of Jewish life in Poland? Let us attempt to answer these questions by examining the successes and failures of each of the main blocs -- the Zionists, Agudath Israel, and the Bund.

The Zionists

Successes

1. The Zionists, under the leadership of Yizhak Gruenbaum (General Zionists), waged a stubborn parliamentary struggle to force the Polish authorities to honor their commitments under the Minorities Treaty. In the course of these efforts, Gruenbaum founded the Minorities Bloc before the 1922 parliamentary elections. This bloc managed to send 17 Jewish deputies to the Sejm, nearly half of the 35 representatives that all the Jewish parties returned in 1922. The bloc then pressured the authorities vigorously to honor their commitments to all ethnic minorities in Poland.
2. The Zionists founded and developed a network of schools that used Hebrew and Yiddish as their languages of instruction, including the Tarbut system (General Zionists), Yavneh (Mizrachi), and Schul-kult (Poalei Zion Right). Total enrollment in these schools peaked at 60,000, making them the second-largest private Jewish education system in Poland, exceeded only by that of Agudath Israel.
3. The Zionists succeeded in creating a mass movement in Poland under the World Zionist Organization, a movement unparalleled in any other country in the interwar period. The Zionists inspired Polish Jews to hope that their problems might one day be solved.

The Hehalutz movement, which trained young people for agricultural work in Palestine, attained an impressive magnitude in the 1930s. In 1933, Hehalutz boasted 41,000 members in Congress Poland and another 17,800 in Galicia. In the summer of 1935, 18,958 Hehalutz members languished in training farms awaiting Palestine immigration certificates.

4. The Zionists had contacts with the Polish government to promote the cause of aliya. The Zionists hoped that the government would pressure the British to open Palestine's gates to the Polish Jewish masses. Ze'ev Jabotinsky negotiated with the authorities for the evacuation of Polish Jews (the Evacuation Plan). In all, 139,756

Jews left Poland for Palestine in the years 1919-1942 -- about four percent of the Community.

Failures

1. The Minorities Bloc, which succeeded in sending quite a few Jewish deputies to the Sejm, also managed to incite Polish society against all national minorities in Poland especially the Jews. Not only did it fail to change government policy on the national minorities, it hardened the government's attitude toward them. In the late 1920s, cooperation between the Jews and the other minority groups disintegrated because of lack of common goals, the antisemitism that pervaded most of the national minorities, and their absolute failure to bring about any change in government policy.
2. The Polish Zionists failed to mobilize Polish Jews for large-scale aliya. It is true that 139,756 Polish Jews emigrated to Palestine in 1919-1942, but the number of emigrants dropped to several thousand in the late 1930s, chiefly because British policy in Palestine barred the entry of larger numbers and, following the publication of the 1939 White Paper, left the Holy Land virtually impermeable.
3. Turbulent fractiousness in the Zionist ranks made it difficult to formulate a united position toward the authorities throughout this period. The General Zionists were wracked by serious disagreements, as evinced by their structure of three federations that did not always interrelate. Even the Revisionists and Poalei Zion did not cooperate, instead struggling openly for the Jewish vote. These quarrels and schisms did much to mitigate the political strength of Polish Jewry in the late 1930s, as manifested in the elections that took place at that time.

Agudath Israel

Successes

1. Agudath Israel's salient success was the very fact of organizing the haredi population into a political party, causing a mammoth transformation of the haredi scene in interwar Poland. The haredim, as we know, regarded political activity as a manifestation of the two menaces of secularization and assimilation. Nevertheless, Agudath Israel persuaded much of the haredi public in Poland to join its ranks. R. Avraham Mordechai Alter, head of the Gerrer (Gur) hasidic court, the largest such court in Poland (estimated at several hundred thousand during the interwar period) became the most important leader of Agudath Israel at this time. Under his influence and in concert with famous Lithuanian rabbis such as Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, Agudath Israel conquered the haredi street.
2. Agudath Israel's deputies to the Sejm earned the respect and admiration of Poles and Jews alike. A. Hartglas of the General Zionists had the following to say about one of Agudath Israel's deputies, A. Kirschbaum:

Kirschbaum conducted himself among the Polish ministers with grandeur and solemnity, and addressed them with a courage I would not have expected from a member of Agudath Israel. . Regrettably, not all the Jewish representatives were capable of conducting their business with non-Jews with similar courage.

This showed the adherents of Agudath Israel that it was indeed possible to continue observing Jewish tradition while dwelling in the new world successfully. Agudath Israel stalwarts believed that this intrepidity in their interaction with the authorities prevented even more serious manifestations of anti-Semitism in Poland.

3. Agudath Israel's greatest success was in education. Its accomplishments in the schooling of girls wrought a veritable revolution on the haredi scene. Until the Beth Jacob school system came into being, haredi girls who wished to study had no choice but to attend Polish state schools. The first school of this type, founded by Sera Shenirer in Cracow in 1917, was immediately adopted by Agudath Israel and given its backing. For boys' education, Agudath Israel succeeded in securing government recognition of its schools in 1922, an accomplishment that it regarded as part of the "remuneration" that the government owed it for its cooperation. Agudath Israel continued to cooperate with the authorities in the hope that the latter, in return, would allow it to conduct its affairs as it saw fit. Importantly, too, Agudath Israel asked the authorities for religious autonomy only, not concerning itself with national recognition or autonomy. The Poles were able to meet this demand, as they could not for the Zionists and the Fund, who sought national autonomy, because they believed the national demands could endanger the Polish national state.

The Agudath Israel education system (talmudey torah and yeshivot for boys, Beth Jacob for girls) had a total enrollment in excess of 100,000 and, as such, was the largest private Jewish education system in interwar Poland.

Failures

1. Agudath Israel's unwillingness to cooperate with other Jewish groups in Poland such as the Zionists -- with the exception of its participation in the Minorities Bloc in 1922 -- did much to weaken its position vis-a-vis the authorities. In the end, it, like the others, was unable to extract concessions from the authorities despite its support for them. The chief grievance of the Agudath Israel deputies concerned the deterioration of its education system under crushing debts in the 1930s, for lack of state funds.
2. Despite all manifestations of cooperation and support for the government, Agudath Israel never succeeded in stanching the antisemitic tide that swept Poland in the late 1930s. In 1936, when ritual slaughter was declared illegal, the Agudath Israel policy of cooperation with the authorities was revealed as sterile. After crossing this watershed, Agudath Israel in the late 1930s began to cooperate with the Zionists and, to a certain extent with the Bund (as in the March, 1936, strike).

The Bund

Successes

1. Although the Bund failed to elect any of its candidates to the Sejm during the years in question, it made impressive headway in labor councils. In fact, the Fund was the strongest party in these councils and among Jewish workers themselves in the late 1930s.
2. The Bund maintained a very well coordinated and efficient central organization that

avoided the schisms that rent the various Zionist factions. This permitted the Bund to present a united front against manifestations of oppression and antisemitism. The Bund was especially active in anything connected with Jewish self-defense, fielding active and very effective defense groups as early as 1921. Their tactics against anti-semites – preventive, defensive, and offensive – were greatly encouraged to the Jewish population, which felt helpless against antisemitic assaults.

The pinnacle of the Bund's operations against antisemitism was the general strike that it orchestrated in March 1936, following antisemitic riots in the town of Przytyk. All Jewish factions including the Zionists and Agudath Israel, took part.

3. As a result of these actions, the Bund made substantial inroads in the *kehilla* and municipal elections of the late 1930s. Polish Jewry began to understand that only by adopting the Bund's prescription of tenacious struggle against antisemitism and for equal rights could they improve their lot. Moreover, only the Bund, of all the Jewish groupings, succeeded in the late 1930s in establishing a real relationship and a modality of cooperation with a Polish political party, the Polish Socialist Party (the PPS). This bolstered Jews' belief in the possibility of influencing the course of events.
4. The establishment of a Jewish education system by the Bund, CYSHO, with Yiddish as its principal language of instruction, was an audacious attempt to integrate revolutionary ideology into a unique curriculum. Although CYSHO was not particularly large (its enrollment did not exceed 15,000), it was a great achievement.

Failures

Unlike the Zionists and Agudath Israel, the Bund was oblivious to the frustration and sense of impasse that beset Polish Jewry in the late 1930s. Indeed, its electoral success in the late 1930s induced the Bund to consider itself the representative of all of Polish Jewry by virtue of its being the largest party. It is true that in internal Polish affairs, such as the rise of fascism in Poland, Bund members – like their counterparts in the other Socialist parties—felt unable to stem the tide. In internal Jewish affairs, however, the years of building and action, struggle against anti-Semitism and class oppression, the Bund viewed its electoral triumphs as confirmation of the justice of its struggle and the correctness of its path. This was somewhat illusory, because it was clear that many Jews supported the Bund not for its ideology but mainly for lack of choice or in protest against other parties and remedies.

Generally speaking, Polish Jewry's greatest blunder in the interwar period was the disunity that prevailed within and among its political camps. The community was large enough to wield much political and social potential, but its leadership never succeeded in forming a united bloc that would be able to force the authorities to change their attitude toward the Jewish minority. Despite all their economic and political problems, and amid growing antisemitism, Polish Jewry never managed to unite.

In 1937, several Zionist leaders called for an emergency conference of all factions of Polish Jewry. The Bund, however, opposed such a conference vehemently, arguing that its sponsors ("the six Zionists") would distract the masses from their true struggle, the war on antisemitism, in favor of the Zionist goal, emigration from Poland.

The emigration question elicited many disputes between the Zionists and the Bund, particularly in the late 1930s. When Jabotinsky proposed the evacuation of 1,500,000 Jews (including 750,000 from Poland) within ten years, the Bund assailed the Zionists vigorously and uncompromisingly for fomenting dangerous illusions. First, said the Bund, let us take care of daily Jewish life on Polish soil.

This crisis within the Jewish leadership redounded to the detriment of all of Polish Jewry, driving many Polish Jews to a sense of impasse, hopelessness, and despair on the eve of World War II. A Jewish teenager expressed these feelings in the following way:

*If someone asked me to describe the period in which I am living, I
would reply: a generation without hope.*

When the war broke out on September 1, 1939, Polish Jewry found itself totally unprepared for subsequent events, and the impact of its factional disunity made itself felt during the war.