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Jewish Schols in Białystok in the Interwar Period

Białystok in th interwar period, was, by virtue of numbers, a Jewish city. The Jews, inhabiting the centre of the town, formed a separate community. While perceived by neighbours to be a homogenous community in reality it was riddled with internal divisions. It is important to be aware of these differences in order to understand the society and its schools.

RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES

The Orthodox Jew was clinging steadfastly to his fundamental religious faith and traditions. For him there was no separation between religious and daily secular life. His daily behaviour was regulated by the Halakha, the legal part of the sacred literature. The Orthodox Jew was opposed to secular innovations or experimentation with new ideas, be it cultural, social or political.

The Orthodox community was divided between fundamentalist and Orthodox-Zionist.

The fundamentalist believed that fate of his people is in God's hand. All a Jew should do is to obey the sacred laws, to do good deeds, to study the Torah and leave the rest to God. He was opposed to all forms of secularism, even opposed to Zionism.

The Orthodox Zionist, on the other hand, while being strict in his religious practices, also embraced the idea of Zionism. He saw Zionism as a synthesis of national and religious ideas. For him the idea of the return to the National Home in Israel, was in harmony with the religious Jew's idea of the return of God's chosen people to his holy land.

The Secular Jew separated his religious life from his daily life. He was essentially in rebellion against the norms imposed by orthodoxy. The interplay of cultural, social and political attitudes of an individual was determining the degree of his secularism.

The Secular Traditionalist, while faithful to basic religious precepts, had

a flexible approach to religious practices. For example; an Orthodox Jew attended the Synagogue daily, but the Secular Traditionalist would only go on the Sabbath and on holidays. A less observant one would reduce his attendance of religious services to major holidays only. The laws of the sanctity of the Sabbath, the dietary laws etc. were all approached with flexibility. These laws were often obeyed more for the sake of tradition, than due to piety.

At the extreme, the Secular Jew would totally rebel against Orthodoxy — leading to a complete rejection of religion, to agnosticism or even to atheism.

CULTURAL/LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES

Yidish

Until the rebirth of Poland in 1918, the vast majority of Jews in Bialystok spoke Yidish. In the interwar period the Yidish speaking Jew continued to develop a rich culture. There were numerous newspapers, periodicals, books, libraries, a theatre — all in Yidish — that were the envy of Jewish communities world over.

Polish

At the same time the Polonization of some segment of the community was progressing rapidly. One should not equate Polonization with assimilation — although Polonization at its extreme could lead to assimilation. By the 1930s assimilation as an idea was in disrepute — it failed in Germany and in independent Poland. Yet voluntary Polonization was growing. The new Polonized young Jew was rapidly adopting the Polish language and culture — but not at the expense of his Jewish identity. He was not, as the assimilationist was, „A Pole of Mosaic Faith” or „A Pole of Jewish Descent”. He was a National Jew — and more often than not a Zionist Jew.

Many were bridging the differences between the Yidish and Polish speaking, simply by being bi-lingual.

POLITICAL DIFFERENCES

The Socialist saw the solution to the problem of the oppression of the Jews in socialism. Anti-semitism, they said, is a politico-socio-economic problem. The victory of socialism will bring political and social equality, will end economic unquities, and anti-Semitism will be no more.

A significant part of socialist inclined Jews were anxious about the threat to their Jewish identity. They were the followers of Bund, the great Jewish socialist movement.

The Zionists, on the other hand, felt that the only solution to our problem is the return, after 2 000 years, to our own country and the restoration of the State of Israel. The growth of anti-semitism in Poland was ensuring the strengthening of the commitment of youth to Zionism. The Zionist movement was bitterly divided; from Zionist Socialist (Poale Zion), through general Zionist, to Zionists/Revisionists and finally Orthodox Zionists.

PROBLEM OF SURVIVAL

One may say; every society has divisions within. What is so different about the Jews?

There is a difference. The Jews instinctively knew that the differences were not academic. They knew that the issues were a matter of life and death, a matter of survival. Is it surprising that this morbid premonition existed? Let us look at snippets of Jewish history in Bialystok in the interwar period;

- 1920 Jewish volunteers to the Polish Army, as well as Jewish soldiers and officers of the regular army are detained in Jablonna — treated as potential traitors.
- 1920 Terrorism against Jews rampant on trains and railway stations. A favourite sport of some Polish soldiers was to catch Jews and forcibly cut their beards.
- 1919—30 The rise of „Endecja” — The chief bastion of Political anti-semitism.
- 1936—39 Boycott of Jewish shops ok'd by Premier Sławoj-Składowski (Owszem)
 Picketing of Jewish shops.
 Exclusion of Jews from civil service.
 Debates in Sejm on outlawing of Kosher slaughtering (Mrs Prystor).
 Call by Catholic Church to separate Jewish children in schools and prohibiting Jews from teaching Christian children.
 „Catholic Action” organization adopts a program of anti-Semitism.
 Catholic Press persistently pours out anti-Jewish venom.
 Catholic priests, like Stanisław Trzeciak, spread the gospel of hate in sermons and writing.
 Spread of anti-Jewish terror by young Endek's.
 „Beat a Jew” (Bij Żyda) becomes a popular slogan.
- 1936 in Bialystok region — 21 pogroms and 348 anti-Jewish outbreaks (as reported by premier Sławoj — Składkowski in Sejm).

Anti-Jewish campaign at universities.

Introduction of quotas at universities (numerus clausus).

Introduction of Ghetto benches at universities.

Proclamation of „Jewless day” at some universities.

Proclamation of „Jewless week” at some universities.

Anti-Jewish terror and even murder at some universities.

These were some of the issues that absorbed our life in Bialystok. How to cope with these issues was for us a matter of survival. Each religious, political and cultural group had their own solution. To save the future of their children, each group built schools in accordance with their exclusive solution to the problem of survival.

The Heder, the Orthodox fundamentalist was clinging to the Heder, which has not changed for centuries. The Melamed's (teacher) methods did not change either. He was making children memorise the holy books, page after page — with the help of a rod from time to time. The Heder was often a room of the Melamed's home, crowded and unhygienic. But despite these shortcomings, very few, if any children with reading problems seem to have come out of the Heder. This is specially noteworthy, because they were learning to read in Hebrew, a language they did not understand. Their mother tongue was Yidish. Only after the child mastered reading, he was ready to commence the study of the Torah and its meaning. Thanks to the Heder, there were no illiterate Jews for many centuries. It was the oldest system of compulsory and universal education. Not a bad record for a deficient school system.

Khorev Heder, the Orthodox-Zionist, through its educational arm Khorev, developed a new type of Heder. This modernised Heder incorporated some secular subjects into its curriculum and utilised selected modern pedagogical methods.

For girls Khorev was running the Beth Jacob School. On the secondary level the Orthodox Zionists had a gymnasium for girls, „Chava Tzelet”. *CYSHO Schools*, the Bundists (Jewish Socialists) or Yidishists (secular anti-zionists) were running the Cyscho (Central Yidish School Organization). They were manifestly secular, anti-orthodox, anti-zionist, socialist in political orientation.

The language of instruction was Yidish — no Hebrew taught. To this group belonged the following schools;

Perec, Yougend Farejn, Grosser Shule, Mendele Coop, Chmurner.

The Yidish Gymnasium provided education up to matriculation standard. It nurtured the Yidish culture through love of the language, literature and theatre.

Hebrew Gymnasium. The Zionists had, of course, school of their own. Their Tarbut was taking care of education at elementary level. But the

pride of place belongs to the Hebrew Gymnasium (Gimnazjum Hebrajskie). This was an unashamedly Zionist school of the highest standard.

The prime language of this gymnasium was Hebrew. This in itself was an achievement. Hebrew was not used colloquially for 2 000 years. Its only use was as a sacred language of the Bible, Holy books and for prayer. For every day use the language was Yidish. But the idealistic Zionists were going to change that. The Jewish destiny, they said, is the rebirth of the Jewish Nation in the Jewish State of Israel. This rebirth requires shedding of all ties with the diaspora, including the diaspora language — Yidish. Hebrew will become the language of the Free, National Jew. New words, that did not exist 2 000 years ago, had to be invented.

At the Hebrew Gymnasium all subjects were taught in Hebrew. Regarding foreign languages, all Gimnazja were presenting a choice of French or German. Hebrew Gimnazjum gave no choice — English language was a compulsory subject. With Palestine being under British administration and the Hebrew Gimnazjum encouraging migration to Palestine — the compulsion of English as a foreign language was a pragmatic decision. It is interesting to note that between 1921—1937 50% of all matriculants (350—370) emigrated to Palestine. They contributed greatly to the building of the State of Israel.

Polonising Gimnazja. The entry to the coveted class of „inteligentsia” was through the gymnasium. Białystok had three public Gimnazja: Zygmunta Augusta — for boys, Józefa Piłsudskiego — for boys, Sapiehy Jabłonowskiej — for girls.

Unfortunately, entry to these schools for Jews was restricted and only a small number gained admittance. The majority of Jewish children, that wanted a Polonised education and whose parents could afford the fees, had to attend one of the following private Gimnazja: Zeligmana, Druski, Gutmana, Społeczne.

The Gimnazja were elitist, with high academic standards, all co-educational. There was a strong emphasis on Polishness, which meant appreciation of Polish culture, love of Polish literature, understanding of Polish values. Interestingly, the effects of this upbringing was not assimilationist. The example of Poles fight for freedom and independence during the 125 years of partition, served as a model for Jews striving for nationhood and statehood. No wonder that a majority of Gimnazja students were committed Zionist.

CONCLUSION

This conference would be futile if we would not draw from it some conclusions.

500 years of settlement-what do we have to show for it? In comparison, my adopted country, Australia, is about to celebrate 200 years of European settlement. Over that period of two centuries, Jews were coming to Australia as migrants. They were penniless, often with a small bag of clothing as all their possessions. Coming into an English speaking country without the knowledge of the language — speaking between themselves only Yiddish. They came into a Christian country with their own religion and traditions. Their food was different — they loved onions and herrings. The men were often wearing beards — not clean shaven as the rest of the population.

They were greeted on arrival as free and equal, they were called „mate” and given a good word of encouragement. They were given a chance. They lived as Jews and built Synagogues and schools to remain Jews. And they built and developed Australia together with their Christian neighbours. They built factories, warehouses, shops, they became lawyers, doctors, teachers, scientists and philosophers. They were writers, directors, painters, and actors, judges, soldiers and governors. They are creating cultural and material wealth for Australia and for themselves.

In the 200 years the Jew was an *enormous asset* to the Australian nation. This was the same Jew as the one in Bialystok. And yet, all that was left of the Jew in Bialystok was ruin, destruction and pain.

What went wrong? Where did you, Poles, go wrong?

The answer is easy to find. Just look at your history and think how you treated us!

You didn't treat us as free and equal;

You did not give us a chance;

You did not want us to be your „mates”;

You did not give us words of encouragement;

The Jewish Bialystok can not be resurrected.

Let us hope that the lesson of Bialystok is understood.

DISCUSSION

PARTICIPANTS QUESTIONS/REMARKS (Q) AND THE SPEAKERS ANSWERS (A)

- 1.Q. The Speaker omitted to mention about the contribution made by ELEMENTARY STATE SCHOOL System SZKOŁY POWSZECHNE to the education of Jewish children.
- A The Szkoły Powszechne were viewed by Jewish parents with some misgivings. The State Schools were perceived to be tools of assimilation, rather than fulfilling the needs and aspirations of a dynamic minority. Regardless of the fact that State School tuition was free,

most Jewish parents opted, at great financial sacrifice, for schools within Jewish network. This, of course, applied only to Bialystok and towns with a larger Jewish population. Interestingly, in some cases when a Jewish boy attended a State School, after the last lesson of the day, say 2p.m., the child would go for an additional few hours to a Heder. This would ensure a child's knowledge of the basis of Judaism and support his Jewish identity.

2.Q. The Speaker exaggerated by saying that there were no illiterate Jews. A census has shown up to 56⁰/₀ illiteracy rate.

A. Jews in Bialystok spoke one, or more, of the following 4 languages, Yidish, Polish, Russian and Hebrew. If a Jew was illiterate in Polish, then he was literate in at least one of the other 3 languages.

3.Q. A number of participants strongly criticised the concluding paragraph of the paper. It is not possible, they said, to compare achievement of Jews in Poland and Australia. Some critics, went so far as to suggest that the „Conclusion” should be withdrawn.

A. During this conference the subject of anti-Semitism could not have been avoided. Most speakers were touching delicately on the hurt and pain that anti-Semitism was causing the Jews.

I wanted to draw the conference's attention to the fact that anti-Semitism was also hurting and damaging the interests of the Polish nation. The 3,5 million of Jews in Poland were a great HUMAN RESOURCE. Similar Jew, arriving to a country like Australia, were greeted as welcome, free and equal citizens. This positive attitude towards the Jews, was the catalyst to their successes in cultural, professional and economic life of the country. It is a historical fact that the Jews' individual achievements contributed greatly to the development of Australia.

Contrary, the anti-Semitism in Poland was obstructing and even excluding Jewish participation in cultural, professional and economic life. This obstruction or exclusion of Jews has greatly impoverished Polish culture, professions, and economy. The anti-Semitism directed against Jews, impoverished the Polish nation.

The 3,5 million of potentially talented achievers represented a great asset. Unfortunately, this asset was squandered. It was a loss to the Jews and to Poland.

Toni Murkies

Szkoły żydowskie w Białymstoku w okresie międzywojennym

W Białymstoku, gdzie społeczność żydowska stanowiła przeważającą część mieszkańców w okresie międzywojennym, dzieci żydowskie miały możliwość wyboru kilka rodzajów szkół. Najbardziej ortodoksyjną szkołą był cheder, gdzie małamed (nauczyciel) nauczał w sposób tradycyjny, metodą pamięciową. Nauka odbywała się w języku hebrajskim. Zmodernizowaną odmianą tej szkoły był ortodoksyjno-syjonistyczny chorew cheder.

Istniały również szkoły o charakterze świeckim, programowo antyortodoksyjne i antysyjonistyczne, o tendencjach socjalistycznych. Nauka odbywała się w języku jidisz, nie uczono natomiast w tych szkołach hebrajskiego.

W mieście istniały dwa ogólnodostępne gimnazja dla młodzieży żydowskiej. W jednym językiem wykładowym był jidisz, w drugim hebrajski. W tym drugim nauczano również angielskiego, co było praktycznym przygotowaniem do wyjazdu do Palestyny. W latach 1921—1937 wyemigrowało do Palestyny 350—370 absolwentów tego gimnazjum (ok. 50% wszystkich absolwentów).

Tylko wykształcenie gimnazjalne umożliwiała wejście do inteligencji. Jedynie nieznaczna ilość Żydów była przyjmowana do 3 gimnazjów publicznych. Większość z tych, którzy pragnęli uzyskać polskie wykształcenie, miała do wyboru jedno z 4 gimnazjów prywatnych (Zeligmana, Druskina, Gutmana i Społeczne). Były to szkoły elitarne, koedukacyjne, nauka w nich stała na wysokim poziomie. W gimnazjach tych kształtowano rozumienie, nawet umiłowanie polskiej kultury, literatury i wartości narodowych. Tradycje polskich walk narodowowyzwoleńczych stanowiły dla Żydów wzorzec dążeń do uzyskania własnej państwowości, stąd żydowscy uczniowie gimnazjalni byli w większości gorącymi syjonistami.