The POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw—Part 1

Jewish life in Poland before World War II

Clara Weiss
9 January 2017

The core exhibition at the recently opened POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw has now marked its second anniversary. After many years of preparation, the POLIN museum opened in 2014. It is one of the largest Jewish museums in the world and was named European Museum of the Year in 2016.

The museum's launch was one of the most significant and controversial political developments in Poland in recent years. The fate of Polish Jewry continues to weigh like a nightmare on the society. Prior to the Second World War, Poland had a Jewish population of approximately 3.5 million people—by the end of the war, only some 300,000 Polish Jews remained alive. Entire small towns and villages had been liquidated in the Nazi genocide and 25 to 40 percent of the population of major cities such as Warsaw, ?ód? and Bia?ystok had been murdered.

Amid a wave of anti-Semitic pogroms in Poland, tens of thousands of Jews left the country over the next few years, mostly for Israel and North America. In the 1950s and later in the wake of the student protests of 1968, the Polish Stalinist regime forced tens of thousands more Jews into emigration. Today, the most generous estimates put the Jewish population in Poland at 25,000, with merely 5,000 or so people openly identifying as Jewish. To this day, the political and historical issues bound up with the fate of Poland's Jews play a critical role in Polish society and politics.

The POLIN museum is located in Muranów, formerly Warsaw's Jewish district, which was partially transformed into the Warsaw Ghetto and later destroyed by the Nazis in 1943. After the ghetto's obliteration, the area was the site of Warsaw's concentration camp. The museum faces the famous memorial, by Nathan Rapaport, commemorating the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The museum building's architects, Rainer Mahlamäki and Ilmari Lahdelma, have received numerous awards for their work.

This article will discuss some of the key features of the POLIN museum's core exhibition, as well as point to some of its biggest strengths and weaknesses.

The Middle Ages

In the gallery devoted to the Middle Ages, the exhibition outlines the major lines of historical development. The organisers are also to be credited with explaining objectively the economic and political basis for the relatively advantageous position of the Jews in Poland without striking a wrong note in a country where anti-Semitic prejudices about "rich Jews" are actively encouraged by various political forces and the Catholic Church.

In the 6th century, Jews from Western Europe, most of them merchants, settled in the medieval towns of Poland and Bohemia (now in the Czech Republic). The exhibition explores the development of Jewish settlement with a long wall of beautifully painted murals depicting the most significant Polish towns—among them Cracow and Poznan—that became trading centers and soon had significant Jewish settlements.

Many of these Jews came from Germany and helped introduce German town law in Poland's medieval towns. Yiddish, a language based on medieval German, originates from this period.

The Statute of Kalisz (the General Charter of Jewish Liberties) in 1264 served as the basis for the relatively privileged position of the Jewish population in Poland in the centuries to come. Under the Statute, a substantial degree of political and legal autonomy was granted to the Jewish economy. Moreover, the measure made punishable by law various forms of criminal and aggressive activities directed against Jews, such as robbing them, accusing them of blood libel or attacking synagogues.

These rights as well as economic privileges were maintained in the Grand Duchy of Poland and Lithuania, formed in 1287, which transformed Poland into part of the largest European state at the time.

The wave of Jewish emigration into the Eastern European territories increased significantly, following the terrible epidemic of bubonic plague, the "black death", in Western Europe, which peaked in the years 1346-53. The various governments in the West, along with Church officials, responded to the mass death toll (in the millions) and resulting economic and social devastation by placing the responsibility for the epidemic at the feet of the Jews.

Many of the latter fled to Poland because the country was known to be comparatively tolerant in its religious policies, and also because it was one of the European regions spared the horrors of the plague. This also greatly contributed to Poland's relatively rapid economic development during this period.

In the 16th century, the Polish state underwent an unprecedented period of economic prosperity, based largely on exporting grain. The decent economic position of the Jews was bound up with the power of the land-owning nobles, who attained unprecedented heights of wealth and influence during this time, placing them in a position where they could, unlike any other nobility in Europe, elect their own king.

For some time, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became one of the more progressive states in Europe. The period from the mid-15th to mid-16th century is also known as the century of the "Paradisus Iudeaecorum" (Jewish Paradise). It witnessed the first publications of books in Yiddish by the Helicz brothers in 1534-35 and a general flourishing of culture.

Partitioned Poland

The situation for Polish Jews and for Poland as a whole dramatically changed at the time of the bourgeois revolutions in America and France. After a prolonged period of economic and political decline, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was partitioned three times among Prussia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and tsarist Russia, in 1772, 1791 and 1795, virtually disappearing from the map of Europe for well over a century. The exhibition documents in some detail how the lives of the Jews in these countries varied greatly, depending on the economic development and the degree of the anti-Semitic legislation in the partitioning states.

If Jews in Poland-Lithuania had enjoyed the greatest freedoms and privileges on the continent in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, now they turned into one of Europe's most oppressed populations. Unlike in the western portion of the continent, where the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars led to the introduction of civic rights for the Jewish population, the belated economic development in Eastern Europe and the social and political impotence of its bourgeoisie meant that Jews were deprived of their most elementary rights and assimilated to a much lesser degree than in Western Europe.

In a relatively brief—but very informative—section on the impact of industrialization on Jewish society, the exhibition also documents the growing social differentiation among the Jews. While a relatively small layer of wealthy businessmen emerged, especially in the textile industry in ?ód?, called the "Polish Manchester", substantial portions of the Jewish population were proletarianized and impoverished.

This was the case not only in ?ód?, then located in the Russian empire, but also in Galicia, a region around the city Lviv (now Ukraine), where large oil deposits were discovered in the 19th century.

The exhibition introduces some of the major figures in Polish Jewish history who represented these diverging social tendencies, such as the textile magnate Izrael Pozna?ski, on the one hand, and the Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, on the other.

The uprooting of traditional Jewish *shtetl* life, the mass poverty and the upsurge of violent anti-Semitism from 1880 onward prompted millions of Jews to leave Eastern Europe for North America. Of the several million Jews who emigrated from Poland in the years 1881 to 1913, 85 percent left for the United States.

The early 20th century and the inter-war period

Some of the greatest problems, but also the greatest strengths of the exhibition arise in relation to its sections on early 20th century Jewish life in Poland before the Holocaust.

Jewish political, cultural and social life in inter-war Poland is depicted with remarkable complexity and thoroughness, reflecting the substantial amount of scholarly interest this life has attracted in recent decades. In several of the POLIN museum's rooms, the visitor is introduced not only to the extensive—and largely unknown—Yiddish press of the 1920s and 1930s, but also to the divisions between those Jews striving to become assimilated into Polish society, those oriented toward emigration to Israel and Zionism and still others engaged in fostering Yiddish culture.

This impressive flourishing of Jewish culture and political engagement was for years lost to oblivion largely due to the extermination of most of the bearers of that culture by the Nazis. The exhibition also addresses the different educational initiatives and school networks established by various Jewish parties and movements in the inter-war period.

Noticeably absent in this gallery, however, is an exploration or even a mention of the extraordinary impact of the 1917 October Revolution on political and cultural life in Poland, including that of its Jewish population. This is all the more striking because the exhibition explores the rise of Zionism in Russia in the wake of pogroms in 1881-82, events which shattered the hopes of both the Russian and Polish Jewish intelligentsia that they might be assimilated into tsarist society. The museum also presents the First Russian Revolution of 1905 as the watershed event that it was.

In the context of the revolutionary struggles of the working class throughout the Russian empire, anti-Semitism became a central weapon in the hands of reaction. In Congress Poland—the Kingdom of Poland created by the Congress of Vienna in 1815 as part of the Russian empire and a center of many of the most violent revolutionary struggles during 1905—some 700 pogroms took place in 1905-07 that left some 3,000 dead. (See also: Anti-Semitism and the Russian Revolution: Part one)

However, the presentation of the close connection between developments in Russia and Poland suddenly breaks off with the establishment of the Second Polish Republic and the end of the Polish-Soviet war in 1920. As a result, the visitor is confronted with a considerable amount of valuable material largely torn out of a wider historical context and presented in a rather eclectic manner. This was done despite the fact that the principal curator of this section of the exhibition, Samuel Kassow, has himself addressed the impact of the 1917 revolution on Polish-Jewish culture in some of his works.

The discussion of the broad spectrum of Jewish politics in inter-war Poland focuses primarily on the center and right-wing Zionist tendencies, with little mention of socialist Zionist groups such as the Left Poalei Tsiyon (LPZ) or the Hashomer Hatzair; the Aguda, the religious Jewish party which closely collaborated with the Polish government for much of the Second Polish Republic; and the Jewish Labor Bund, the social-democratic Polish-Jewish party.

The Russian Revolution inspired the working class and intelligentsia throughout Europe and internationally. It had a particular impact, however, on the peoples of Eastern Europe, who had faced direct and brutal oppression by tsarism. The granting of civic rights to Jews in the Soviet Union and the principled struggle of the Red Army leadership in the Civil War against anti-Semitism proved politically inspiring for significant layers of the Jewish working class and intelligentsia.

While various forms of Jewish nationalism continued to play a significant role in Polish-Jewish politics, a wide spectrum of socialist-oriented parties, such as the Bund and the LPZ, gained an important hearing. The depth of the respect and admiration for the Russian Revolution animating wide layers of the Polish and Jewish population can be grasped by the ambiguous position of the Polish Jewish Labor Bund on the Soviet Union. Although the Bund had broken with the Bolsheviks as early as 1903, opposed the seizure of power by the working class under Bolshevik leadership in October 1917 and was critical of the Soviet government under first Lenin and then the Stalinist bureaucracy, it continued to defend the Soviet Union against outside aggression until 1939.

Moreover, the Polish Communist Party, established by the followers of Rosa Luxemburg and the Polish Socialist Party-Lewica (Left) in 1918, enjoyed considerable support among sections of the Jewish working class and intelligentsia and issued numerous Yiddish-language publications. It is therefore unfortunate and historically unjustifiable that the makers of the exhibition chose to all but ignore the Communist Party's very existence.

On Polish-Jewish culture, too, the Russian Revolution exerted major influence, including on many of the groups and tendencies mentioned in the exhibition. For instance, many writers of the Young Vilna group that the exhibition treats were members of the Communist Party. The Warsaw avant-garde group "Skamander", founded in 1918, drew inspiration from

the work of Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. In addition, the flourishing of Yiddish culture in inter-war Poland can hardly be understood if one ignores the influence on socialist-inclined Yiddishists in Poland of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union.

As a result of Lenin's far-sighted national policy, the single most important center of Jewish and in particular Yiddish-language culture and science emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Many Yiddish-speaking artists and scientists returned or emigrated to the USSR because of the favorable working conditions they found there. The cruel changes that came with the Stalinist terror in the 1930s and then the anti-Semitic purges of the late 1940s and early 1950s were all the more shocking and politically devastating because so many had put their faith in the Soviet Union and its government not only to protect the Jews, but also to encourage Jewish culture.

More generally, political life in the Second Polish Republic and growing anti-Semitism cannot be understood outside the context of the Russian Revolution. The Second Republic constituted, above all, a reactionary response of the Polish bourgeoisie to the 1917 revolution. It was formed as an independent nation-state in November 1919 following a crackdown by the Polish army—under Józef Pilsudski—on the workers' councils that emerged in response to the October Revolution and the outbreak of revolution in neighboring Germany in November 1918. The Polish republic's eastern borders were defined in the Polish-Soviet War of 1920, which established Poland's position as a bulwark of Western imperialism against the Soviet Union in the inter-war period. (See also: The Intermarium and the Russian Revolution)

Poland's constitution, formulated in opposition to the wave of revolutions in Europe, most notably in Russia and Germany, provided the legal foundations for a capitalist state. However, under the impact of 1917 and the revolutionary struggles that swept Europe, its makers also felt obliged to include, at least formally, numerous democratic rights such as the right of women to vote and equal civic rights for all ethnic and religious minorities, including the Jews. Pilsudski, who established his dictatorship in a coup in May 1926, enjoyed significant support from sections of the Polish-Jewish bourgeoisie and middle class, and was himself no anti-Semite.

This did not prevent, however, a rise of anti-Semitic tendencies throughout the inter-war period, which increasingly were fostered and encouraged by the Polish state. As the exhibition shows, by the mid-1930s, ghetto benches had been established in the universities, an anti-Jewish boycott occurred in 1936 and soon afterward a new wave of pogroms swept the country. One could have expected a bit more material, however, on the extent of the anti-Semitic violence of the 1930s, which saw, particularly from 1935 onward, regular attacks on Jews on the streets, the bombings of Jewish shops and brutal attacks on Jewish students at the universities.

Simultaneously, the Jewish population, substantial layers of which formed part of the lower petty bourgeoisie (petty traders, shoemakers, locksmiths, etc.), was hit especially hard by the Great Depression, which led to a sharp rise in unemployment and poverty in Poland. A vital role in the mobilization of right-wing elements—as in 1905 and also during the pogroms in Poland in 1918-21—was the anti-Semitic stereotype of the *?ydokomuna*, "the Jewish commune", i.e., the threat of Communism allegedly represented by the Jews. Surprisingly, this question gets relatively little attention in this part of the exhibition. The whipping up of anti-Semitism was targeted not just against the Jews, but against the labor movement as a whole and what the Polish bourgeoisie perceived as a growing threat of socialist revolution.

It is to the credit of the exhibition that it points out, if only briefly, the key role played by labor organizations in the struggle against anti-Semitism, a fact that is all too often ignored by historians of 20th century Poland. Thus, the gallery presents material about the Workers' Congress on Fighting Anti-Semitism, which was organized by the Bund, together with members of the Left Poalei Tsion, and with the support of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). Together the parties organized several workers' demonstrations against growing anti-Semitism, as well as workers' battalions that fought fascist gangs on the streets.

To be continued