

'On the Edge of Destruction: Poland between the Wars' 1918-39

Between the late 18th century and 1939, Poland and Polish Jewry were in a decline. Whilst most of Western Europe and its Jews were embraced by the Enlightenment, emancipation and increasing affluence, Eastern Europe became more backward with pogroms, blood libels, and a resurgence of anti-Jewish hatred.

After World War One Poland was re-established, but not as a nation state but as a 'State of Nationalities,' in which lived 4 million Ukrainians and 3.3 million Jews (1931 Census). Poland contained the second largest Jewish community in the world.

The Jewish community was one third traditional Orthodox, 80% Yiddish speaking and its economic condition was poor and depressed. In the main it was unassimilated and unacculturated with major differences between the old and young.

The 'Jewish Question' was a major issue in Poland. The Jews were viewed as being by their very nature alien, different and foreign. The Minorities Treaty of 1919 had two articles concerning Jews, one concerning Jewish schools and the other that Jews could not be forced to work on Shabbos. But far from helping the Jews it was seen as interference in Polish sovereignty by the victorious allies. It was viewed by the Poles as national humiliation placed upon them by... International Jewry.

International protection for the Jews was an illusion. The mantra was always "*Poland for the Poles*"

Jews with their differences and high visibility were not, as were other minorities, mainly confined to a single area of Poland. Jews were 10% of the population spread throughout all 17 provinces and in many cities were as much as a quarter to a third of the population. In Warsaw there were 368,000 Jews, in Lodz 202,500, Lvov 107,000 and Krakow 56,000

Anti-Semitism lived alongside Polish nationalism. It grew from being on the fringes of Polish society to being state policy. Even Prime Minister Pilsudski, beloved by the Jews, moved towards a more anti-Semitic position, hosted Goebbels and made a ten year non-aggression pact with Germany.

The Jewish response was divided between philosophies of 'here' and 'there'. Those who believed their future was in Poland, which included such diverse groups as Socialists, Marxists and the Orthodox and those who believed they had no future in Poland and must move to the land of Israel, USA or other places.

Jewish culture in a variety of guises continued. The Yiddish press, theatre and literature flourished, YIVO was founded, schools established and Hebrew taught. The network of *yeshivos* expanded.

It was evident at the beginning of the 20th century that whilst boys received an education, girls remained uneducated. Polish law insisted

that girls should be educated, but the orthodox Jewish world had no such provision. Thus many girls went to state or Catholic schools.

Such exposure to new and 'foreign' ideas often meant a loosening of the bonds, if not total abandonment of traditional Orthodoxy. An idea of Jewish girls' schools had been mooted in 1903 and rejected.

Beis Yaakov schools were founded by Sarah Schenirer to combat assimilation among her contemporaries. With the blessing of the Belzer Rebbe she opened a kindergarten to get the girls at an early age. Interestingly whilst the Rebbe supported her enterprise, he forbade his *chassidim* from allowing their children to attend the schools

The first school was founded in Krakow in 1917. Supported by Ger Chassidim and the Chafetz Chaim, the movement to educate girls within Orthodoxy was adopted by Agudas Yisroel:

"what influenced the rapid development of Beis Yaakov most, in such a short span of time, was the idealism of Sarah Schenirer and her girls"

On the eve of WWII there were around 250 Beis Yaakov schools, educating more than 40,000 girls

Sarah Schenirer died in 1935.

One of her supporters, Rabbi Meir Shapira, was famous for founding two institutions.

Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin (Yochel) was a *yeshiva* of a different type. There were entrance exams, and candidates were the finest of minds. It opened in 1930 with Rabbi Shapira as Rosh Yeshiva. Its library contained 20,000 volumes. By 1933 around 200 *talmidim* learnt there. The building still stands today.

In 1923 Rabbi Shapira proposed to an Agudah conference the idea of studying "one *daf* per day of Talmud". A proclamation was made:

"Orthodox Jewry throughout the world takes upon itself to study exactly one daf each day, beginning with tractate Brachos on Rosh Hashanah 5684 (1923)."

Rabbi Shapira became known as "the inventor of Daf Yomi."

He died in 1934, aged 47. Daf Yomi still continues today.

But such outstanding religious revival did not see the noose of unimaginable horror encroaching so that no Jew would be sure of his future:

"I am a Jew and a Pole... I love Poland...but I do not love that Poland which hates me for no apparent reason, that Poland which tears at my heart and soul, which drives me into a state of apathy, melancholy and dark depression...Poland...brands me a Jew who has to be driven out...I am already lost"

"There is only one way out from our situation, to emigrate. This is easier said than done...often I ask myself: perhaps I am not needed, why do I live"