Seeking Peace in the Wake of War

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Wieviorka, Olivier, et al.
Amsterdam University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66546.

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To Stay or to Go?

Reconfigurations of Jewish Life in Post-War Poland, 1944-1947

Audrey Kichelewski

We are now at crossroads. It is a major historical moment which commands upon us major historical missions. One of these missions is to continue to build the golden chain [die Goldene kayt] between the past and the new future.¹

Writing in the main Yiddish newspaper of post-war Poland in 1946, the historian Filip Friedman, whose pioneering work in collecting evidence and testimonies of the Holocaust in order to enable survivors to live their lives, already perceived and voiced the doubts and dilemmas of Polish Jews in the aftermath of the war. Yet, while a survivor who strongly advocated for the continuity of a Jewish presence in post-war Poland, he left the country only a few months later, in 1947, moving first to Germany then to the United States, a more suitable place for him to accomplish his mission of maintaining the ‘golden chain’.

One of the major keys to understanding the situation of Polish Jewry in the aftermath of the Holocaust resides in shifting the focus from the long-standing historiographical assumption of an inevitable exodus² to a story of complex Polish-Jewish encounters and experiences. This story shapes the forms and contents of the reconfiguration of Jewish life in post-war Poland as well as explaining individual choices made by survivors: to stay or to go.

Jewish survivors found themselves in a paradoxical situation in post-war Poland. On the one hand, their fate was hardly a priority in a country ravaged by war and uncertain about its political future. Almost 6 million Polish citizens (more than half Jewish) had died, 30 per cent of Poland’s

¹ Excerpt from the article ‘Our historical moment’, Dos Naye Lebn, 27 (1946), p. 2.
pre-war population. This demographic decline affected above all urban communities, where the intelligentsia and Jews tended to live. Entire cities lay in ruins, starting with the capital city, Warsaw, almost totally destroyed after the repression of two successive insurrections: the ghetto (April 1943) and the city (August 1944). Poland’s borders changed after the war, shifting westwards through the loss of nearly half of its eastern territories to the Soviet Union; Poland’s population also changed after the forced displacement or removal of Germans, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians. Combined with the death of 90 per cent of the 3.5 million Polish Jews, most of the country’s pre-war minorities were gone after 1947. Lastly, the political climate was very violent and uncertain, with a quasi civil war going on between supporters of the London government in exile and the new pro-communist regime installed in Lublin by the Red Army since July 1944. In this context, the priority for ordinary Poles was their daily survival in a time of great scarcity. In a society where migrants were to be counted in millions on the roads and where social links were severely damaged by the war and forced migrations, the reappearance of a handful of psychologically damaged and physically wrecked Jews would seemingly be no cause for attention.

And yet, that was not the case. The negative stereotypes attributed to Jews since the Middle Ages, firmly grounded and elaborated during the interwar period, reactivated under both Soviet and Nazi occupation, had not disappeared with the annihilation of the Polish Jewish population. These stereotypes led, at least, to frequent hostile attitudes towards Jewish survivors and returnees from the Soviet Union, such as verbal attacks and administrative or professional discrimination. Combined with the climate of political violence (with the imposition of a regime seen as foreign and dangerous, hence as Jewish), and a precarious economic situation in which Jewish survivors’ legitimate property claims became an intolerable threat, anti-Jewish prejudice had at times more dramatic consequences. Between

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5 Joanna B. Michlic, *Poland’s Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).
1944 and 1947 hundreds, if not thousands, of Polish Jews were killed by their fellow citizens across the country. The ‘Jewish question’ was hence raised again, despite the tiny number of Jewish survivors (240,000 at its peak in July 1946) and the official support granted to them by the new regime, thereby wishing to gain legitimacy among the Western democracies. Yet, this same regime showed an ambiguous helplessness towards the post-war persecution of Jews and certainly did not consider their wartime suffering as noteworthy.

Faced by this situation, Jewish survivors had to choose between pursuing their lives outside Poland – and many other ideological and psychological parameters were involved in this choice – and accepting this new place in Polish society, granting them equal rights for the first time in Polish history, yet demanding the acceptance of radical changes in Jewish identity and way of life. The best way to understand the dilemmas that shaped ephemeral Jewish post-war reconstruction in Poland is through a closer analysis of those forgotten voices of the past, the Jewish voices of the survivors, but also those of the people who looked at them, from below, in the everyday interactions with their Polish counterparts, and from above, starting with the local administration up to the higher members of the nomenklatura. Encompassing the Jewish perspective, as well as that of Polish society and of the authorities, provides an enriched, complex and non-teleological vision of post-war reconstruction.

**Surviving the Holocaust**

[Jews who had survived the war in Poland] came [...] to gaze on walking miracles – whole Jewish families, complete with fathers, mothers, and children. In Poland, on liberation day, hardly more than a hundred Jewish families stood intact. But here were Jewish families by hundreds.

This report written by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee or AJDC, a relief organization headquartered in New York, clearly shows how diverse the population of Jewish survivors was. While a very small number

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of them survived the war in Polish occupied territory, most of them (170,000) owed their lives to the fact that they had been evacuated far into the Soviet Union from the eastern Polish territories between 1939 and 1941.8

There were hence different categories of Jewish survivors. Very few remained alive from the concentration and labour camps and the subsequent ‘death marches’. Regina Fingier, survivor of the Warsaw ghetto and the Majdanek camp, remembered the day when the camp into which she had been driven by the Germans was liberated: ‘Finally, 18 January 1945 marked the splendid and decisive moment of the liberation of Częstochowa from German occupation. We are free. We got rid of the burden of five years of slavery and persecution.’9

Those survivors, whose number is estimated at a mere 36,000, were not only deprived of food, clothes, goods; they were also physically wrecked. ‘My hand was paralysed after I received a gunshot in Auschwitz, I wasn’t able to work’,10 recalled Halina Birenbaum, aged fifteen when she was liberated from Neustadt-Glewe camp, where she ended up after surviving the Warsaw ghetto, Majdanek and Auschwitz. The 60,000 or so survivors who spent the war hiding in forests, caves and attics were hardly in better condition. Only those who managed to hide under a false identity or who joined the underground forces could possibly think of something else than survival when they were free again. Coming back to life meant in some cases retrieving one’s true identity (although many kept their ‘Aryan’ names after the war) and looking for relatives: ‘I was a free man again; I could get back to my real name, Josek Rosenberg. I felt time had come to start looking for my daughter Henia’,11 wrote the person known as Józef Nowak since 1940.

The repatriates from the Soviet Union were generally in much better mental and physical condition. Yet, they were only a fraction of the 350,000 Jews – out of 1.5 million – evacuated before the Nazi invasion of 1941. Many had perished during transport, life in camps, gulags or fighting in the Soviet Army. Their way back home, through an organized repatriation of Polish citizens between 1945 and 1946, was not a pleasant trip. Leo Kantor, 6 years old at the time, recalls:

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9 Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute (hereafter AJHI), 301/161, testimony of Regina Fingier, p. 13.
I remember the fright and lack of comfort of this journey. [...] In the wagons, near the stove whose pipes escaped from the rook, babies were born, old people wailed, cries and domestic arguments could be heard. [...] Bags full of dry bread and sort of biscuits were our basic food. Children were washed in small worn out tubs. To relieve oneself, one jumped out of the wagon, some ran holding up their pants while the locomotive whistled departure.¹²

Despite their differences on wartime experience, the vast majority of Jewish survivors shared near total material deprivation. Most of them had to abandon all their property during their flight or deportation while those who had managed to keep a few valuables soon had to sell or trade them for food or temporary shelter. Moreover, their homes had been either destroyed during the war or taken over by their Polish neighbours, often reluctant to give them back. Sabina Rachel Kałowska, hiding under a false identity and helped by her non-Jewish husband-to-be, recalled her difficult return to her hometown near Kielce: the new owners of her house threatened to kill her while other neighbours refused to give back even her Passover dishes, claiming they bought them from the Germans.¹³ Many other testimonies contain similar experiences.

More dramatic even than material bareness was the terrible physical condition of most Jewish survivors, who suffered from hunger and numerous diseases. An inspection of Jewish shelter homes in the spring of 1945 established that 60 per cent were unfit for work and one-third suffered from tuberculosis.¹⁴ Another report was even more alarming: ‘16,000 Jews now living in Poland suffer from illness or disability. 60 per cent have tuberculosis.’¹⁵ Granted, the overall health conditions in post-war Poland were very poor — chronic plagues and high mortality rates prevailed, especially among Polish children. Yet, the percentage of the sick and disabled among Jews was much closer to that among Polish former camp inmates

¹⁴ Report quoted in Aleksiun, Dokąd dalej, p. 73.
than among the general population.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, the Jewish population recovered much more slowly: a report of an AJDC representative in Warsaw dated 1947 stated that still more than a third of them could not work because of illness, disability, age or an inability to go out.\textsuperscript{17}

Survivors were not only physically wrecked but also psychologically broken, a twofold fragility often ignored and misunderstood. Noach Lasman, a labour camp inmate who hid in a self-made cave, heard from a military doctor examining him upon his enlistment in the Polish army at the end of the war:

– 40 kilos! Like four big geese. Did you have a chronic disease?
– Never.
– My boy, with such a low weight, I cannot take you. You should go back home and ask your mum to cook you a decent meal!\textsuperscript{18}

Indeed, most of the reports on the condition of Jews in 1945 insist on the link between their material and moral distress, as do many testimonies. Contrary to what one usually imagines happens to civilians after an armed conflict, the end of the war did not bring any moment of happiness, or reunion of families or even relief to Jews; it was rather the time to count the dead. Most eloquent in voicing those feeling are the testimonies collected immediately after the war by the Jewish Historical Commissions.\textsuperscript{19} Maria Klein, who saw her husband and 15-year-old son dying in front of her, realized: ‘It is only now that I fully feel my sorrow, all illusions, all hopes have vanished. None of my relatives who perished or were killed in the most brutal way will ever come back.’\textsuperscript{20}

Happiness about being liberated was often short-lived and tinged with sadness: ‘I was dancing for joy in the streets. But I remained depressed’, remembered survivor Józef Malczyk.\textsuperscript{21} Others even asked themselves what the point of living on was: ‘I came back to Przemyśl, to my relatives.‘

\textsuperscript{20} AJHI, 301/12.
\textsuperscript{21} AJHI, 301/873.
Unfortunately, none of them was there and I wonder why I stuck so desperately to life? What for?’ wrote Anna Mous, who hid in the forest after escaping the Przemyśl ghetto in 1942. Irrespective of their wartime experience, readjustment to ‘normal life’ after years of persecutions was a daunting challenge. Those engaged in armed resistance found the freedom for which they had fought useless now that no one could enjoy it, especially as the survivors were not welcome: ‘No one is waiting for us to enjoy this freedom. This freedom is the cemetery of our relatives on the one hand and this ever burning fire of hatred against us which remains after Hitler.’

Sadness and solitude often raised questions about their own survival: why them and not their relatives? Moral dilemmas were frequent: was not their survival a kind of treason to the fate to which they had been assigned? Getting back to life meant, in the first place, looking for relatives. Listening to special radio broadcasts, reading notices in newspapers and writing letters to Jewish local committees was a routine activity. By the first semester of 1946, the Warsaw Jewish committee received 4,709 letters from Poland and abroad but was able to answer only 657. Survivors also often tried to go back to their hometowns, hoping to get some information about their families. It is only when they realized their loneliness that they reflected upon it: ‘I walk, I stop, I wander like a ghost, I look for a single living soul’, Moses Goldblat told the Silesian Jewish Historical Commission, where he eventually found a substitute for his lost family: because ‘there are more of them, I cuddle up my fellow men’.

This post-liberation search for food, shelter, comfort and family is an integral part of the post-war story of Polish Jews. It weighed heavily upon subsequent individual trajectories and on the answers given to the major survivors’ dilemma: to stay or to go, a question that not only arose from those post-war experiences, but was also grounded in Poland’s political and economical situation.

22 AJHI, 301/317.
23 AJHI, 301/161, Regina Fingier, 13.
24 AJHI, Central Committee of Polish Jews (hereafter CKŻP), Organisational Department, File 303/29.
25 AJHI, 301/2093.
Escaping Violence for a Better Future

Among the Jewish population, positive attitudes towards emigration are nurtured. An important part of the Jewish population is not completely convinced that democratic Poland will be able to eradicate the bad seed of fascism and the scum of anti-Semitism that remains after five years of Nazi occupation.26

Marian Rubinstein, author of this report by the Office for the Jewish Minority, created as early as December 1944 within the Ministry of Public Administration in order to handle the Jewish survivors, himself Jewish and close to the Communist Party, clearly showed how worried the Jewish community was about the rise of violence against Jews. Yet he rather aimed at prompting reaction from his superiors, claiming that inaction from the Polish authorities would only reinforce an emigration deemed harmful for a country that badly needed manpower for its reconstruction. Hence, he pointed out the reality of a massive exodus of Jewish survivors that had started even before the peak of violence in 1945 and 1946, culminating with the pogroms in cities like Rzeszów, Kraków and Kielce.

To be sure, Poland’s Jewish population increased during the immediate post-war years, while survivors freed from camps, coming out of hiding or returning from the USSR enlisted in local Jewish committees in order to get vital assistance. Whereas in May 1945, only 42,662 Jews were registered, they amounted to 243,926 a year later.27 This increase was most largely due to the organized repatriation of 136,579 Jews from the Soviet Union in the spring and summer of 1946. These figures are approximate, as some Jews feared registration or left the country immediately without enlisting, while others, moving from town to town, registered several times. Yet, at the same time, the flow of departure had already begun, a development that is also very difficult to evaluate as it was mostly illegal. Estimations can, however, be made through the major illegal emigration channel, the Zionist Coordination or Brichah. Founded by survivors in Vilna in 1944 and aiming at evacuating the Jewish population from Central and Eastern Europe to Palestine, Brichah managed to smuggle 51,000 Jews out of Poland by June

Data from the displaced person camps of occupied Germany and Austria gives a total of 110,000 Polish Jews in April 1946, meaning that tens of thousands more had fled by other possible means.

In June 1946, when the Jewish population in Poland reached its post-war height of 240,000, some 70,000 to 100,000 had already gone, often without previous registration. The Kielce pogrom of 4 July 1946 would only reinforce the exodus. During the second half of 1946, almost 100,000 Jews left Poland, three-quarters of them through Brichah. In 1947, the tide ebbed with only 15,000 departures. Yet, within less than three years, more than half of the Jewish survivors had left their home country. How can this exodus be understood?

Among the various push-and-pull factors already mentioned, lying in the wartime experience and the painful return to life among survivors – loss of home, families, landmarks and the refusal to live in the cemetery of their relatives – more political and contextual factors were at stake: the renewed attractiveness of a Jewish state-to-be strongly encouraged by Zionist activists combined with episodes of anti-Jewish violence that Polish authorities watched without doing much, if not considering it as a fruitful incentive helping to get them rid of the embarrassing ‘Jewish problem’.

Concerning the first issue, the importance of Brichah as the major emigration channel would prima facie infer that Zionism had gained popularity among Jewish survivors. Indeed, wartime experience and hard living conditions in post-war Poland reinforced a feeling of national consciousness among many survivors, confirmed in numerous testimonies. A young recruit in a kibbutz in Gdańsk was asked in September 1945 about her motivations:

Until recently, I thought that the Jews should assimilate because they aren’t able to have their own country. Now, after surviving this horrible war [...] in which they [...] demonstrated that they can defend their honour with dignity at the cost of their lives, I have changed my mind. I think that the Jews should yearn for their own country in which Jews from all over the world could find their home.

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30 Quoted in Natalia Aleksiun, Dokąd dalej, p. 133.
Sociologist Irena Hurwic-Nowakowska, who studied the Polish Jewish community in 1947-1950, confirmed the attractiveness of Zionism among survivors irrespective of their social status or degree of assimilation, although she noticed that those who, for professional reasons, were victims of the new Communist regime (mostly the intelligentsia, craftsmen and the self-employed) mainly voiced pro-Zionist opinion as a way of opposing the regime. Furthermore, supporting Zionism did not necessarily mean wanting to emigrate.31 Hence, however attractive Zionism may have been as an idea, relentless propaganda efforts still had to be made by Zionist organizations in Poland to enrol candidates for a journey that was long and unsafe. Young people were the main target. By the summer of 1945, there were already some eighteen kibbutzim throughout Poland, where Zionist youth organizations prepared some 1,500 young people to their future lives in Erets-Israel, but mostly provided them with food, shelter and a sense of home. This meant that for many survivors, enlisting in Zionist organizations was simply a way to get some help or to leave the country; it was not necessarily a conscious, ideological choice but rather a pragmatic one.

A probably more significant push factor was the climate of violence experienced by Jewish survivors returning home. As a result of pogroms, armed underground resistance activities, train assaults killing Jewish repatriates, isolated and collective attacks, at least 650-750 Jews died and twice as many were wounded.32 To be sure, this violence took place in a general atmosphere of upheaval: deportations and expulsions of German and Ukrainian minorities as well as the ongoing civil war between supporters of the former Home Army and pro-Communist forces killed many more on a daily basis. Yet, compared to the overall population of Jewish survivors, and considering that defenceless women and children made up a significant part of the victims, those 200 to 300 assaults in less than two years are striking. This eruption of violence had various reasons: the reactivation of old anti-Jewish stereotypes such as the charge of blood libel; disputes over property in a context of severe economic shortages; anti-Semitic accusations of Judeo-Communism; the wartime brutalization of minds combined with

31 This research could only be published decades afterwards, partially in Poland in 1965, later in full abroad: Irena Hurwic-Nowakowska, A Social Analysis of Postwar Polish Jewry (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Centre for Jewish History, 1986).

Nazi propaganda that permitted the killing of returning Jews who reminded Poles of their wartime guilt by inaction, approval and sometimes even complicity in persecution.

Furthermore, this physical violence was the culmination of a much more pernicious, widespread resentment against Jewish survivors that expressed itself variously through prejudice against children, discrimination at work, administrative quibbles and other verbal threats – which undoubtedly gave them a strong impetus for departure. Lastly, this omnipresent hostility was even more painful to bear for Jewish survivors as they could not count on the Polish authorities to defend them.

Despite repeated warnings and pleas for action voiced by representatives of the Jewish community in numerous reports to different organs of the Polish authorities, the latter were very slow to react. Only after the Kraków pogrom of August 1945, in which five people died and dozens were wounded, did the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party put on its agenda the ‘issue of pogroms’. None of the twenty-five perpetrators of the pogroms who were prosecuted stayed in prison for more than two years, most of them being granted amnesty several months later. The sole public trial came only after the Kielce pogrom a year later, condemning nine perpetrators to the death penalty. Public condemnation of violence and instructions given to local police to ‘fight vigorously to protect the life and property of the Jewish population’ went unheeded. To be sure, the new regime did not yet have enough authority to enforce the law, but it certainly did not have much to gain in terms of political support if it strove to protect a minority which, in general opinion, was held to be the main associate of the highly mistrusted rule it was imposing on Polish society.

Moreover, the government’s inaction in preventing anti-Jewish violence served an unspoken policy of ethnic cleansing that would result in transforming the country into a monolithic, Catholic and Polish nation in a compromise that simultaneously suited the Communists, the ethno-nationalist political forces and the powerful Church. The same applied to...
its rather liberal attitude towards Jewish emigration from Poland. Although officially advocating and acting in order to allow only legal emigration – hence giving itself a better image among the Western democracies – Poland’s new government turned a blind eye to the massive exodus that was going on and it was not until months after the Kielce pogrom, when the bulk of the Jewish population had already left, that it started controlling emigration more efficiently.

The dramatic spark of anti-Jewish violence certainly intensified deep ethnic divisions and worsened the already very negative image of the Jewish minority rather than welcoming it in a new Polish citizenship. On a short-term basis, Jews living in the countryside moved to bigger cities in search of protection; Jewish institutions tried to organize self-defence committees, gathering up to 2,500 armed men to guard Jewish sites; individuals chose to keep their ‘Aryan’ identity, thinking they would be more secure as a result. But these could only be temporary choices. The Jewish minority needed to imagine other ways to secure their place within Polish society. Whereas Jews refused either to keep hiding or to accept to be forgotten as victims while entering the new ideological framework, many still strove to restore some kind of Jewish life, required by the immediate necessity of handling an anxious flock of helpless survivors but also because they truly believed in their duty of building a new Polish-Jewishness.

**Nusech Poyln: Rebuilding Jewish Life in the ‘Polish Way’**

What are Jews in Poland doing now?
One Jew – place advertisement in newspapers, looking for relatives.
Two Jews – create a company of actors and open a theatre.
Three Jews – create a political party.
Four Jews – head the Central Committee.
Five Jews – open a kibbutz.
Six Jews – rent a flat together.
And the remaining Jews are waiting for an exit visa...37

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This sarcastic joke by Moshe Nudelman, a Yiddish writer who left Poland for Argentina, exemplifies how colourful social and cultural Jewish life could be in the aftermath of the Holocaust, yet how unstable, precarious and even almost idealistic it could also be. Still, at the end of the war, most survivors registered in one of the 155 local Jewish committees that opened until 1946, in search of help but also in search of a home that would provide them with any kind of social, cultural and emotional comfort. More politically committed Jews enlisted in one of the eleven political parties or youth organizations; religious Jews could join any of the eighty religious congregations that had replaced the pre-war *kehila*. All told, more than thirty different institutions existed to take care of some 200,000 people, a significant figure that stemmed from pre-war traditional forms of Jewish organizational life rather than from the actual needs of a population on the move. It also closely followed the cultural pattern of the new Polish government based on a national coalition of political forces, which aimed at shaping and controlling every aspect of social, cultural and educational life.

The beginnings of the organization of Jewish life in post-war Poland originated in the need to provide the survivors with vital assistance. Specific offices within the Polish administration first carried out this task, such as the Office for Assistance to the Jewish Population, headed by Bundist Shlomo Herszenhorn from August 1944. While Jews were the only minority in Poland for whom a particular institution was established, it came into existence in light of their specific needs rather than with the express purpose of developing specific policies for one single ethnic group. Later on, an Office for the Jewish Minority was created within the Department of Minorities in the Ministry of Public Administration. Contrary to those offices headed by individuals strategically or ideologically linked to the regime, the establishment of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland (CKŻP) in November 1944 proceeded from a different inspiration, as it was a body of chosen Jewish representatives of the political parties. It stemmed from the desire to unite local groups of survivors and hence facilitate the distribution of assistance to the Jewish population.38 This body, providing essential help and accounting for the representation of Jewish interests among state administration, very soon became ‘the socio-political

representation of Polish Jews. According to its statutes, every Polish Jew living in Poland could be a member. Article 3 listed its fields of competence: ‘social help among Jewish population’, ‘rebuilding economic life’, ‘making the Jewish population more productive’, ‘assistance to children’, ‘organization of health care’, ‘legal assistance’, ‘assistance to the repatriates’, ‘helping [...] during emigration procedure’ and even ‘meet[ing] the religious need of the Jewish population in Poland’. The last issue was, however, eventually given to another institution newly created in February 1945: the Jewish Religious Congregations. In 1947, there were eighty local branches of these congregations, administrating thirty-eight synagogues, dozens of prayer houses and thirty-six religious schools. Both these religious and secular institutions started to function efficiently when they were granted financial support from abroad, primarily the AJDC, whose help amounted to $20 million in the years 1946-1949.

The primary goal of these institutions was to provide social help, as that is what survivors needed first and foremost. In Kraków, as early as summer 1945, dozens of shoes and litres of soup and milk were handed out every day by the local Jewish committee. In December 1945 in Gdańsk, 70 hot meals were served daily, a number that increased up to 160 three months later, while the Jewish population amounted only to 1,200. The specifically created Department of Social Help within the CKŻP made up 80 per cent of total expenses of the organization in 1946 and still accounted for 60 per cent a year later. Social assistance also included medical care for the sick, the disabled and the elderly. Within the CKŻP, the pre-war Association for the Healthcare of Jewish Population or TOZ was reactivated in February 1946, administrating sixty dispensaries, seven health centres and several medical centres, sanatoria and rest homes.

42 AJHI, CKŻP, Presidium, vol. 24, Information about CKŻP for 1945, pp. 188-245.
43 AJHI, CKŻP, Presidium, vol. 5, Minutes of Sixth Conference of General Secretaries of Jewish Committees, 31 December 1946.
45 On this institution in Poland, see Ignacy Einhorn, Towarzystwo Ochrony Zdrowia Ludności żydowskiej w Polsce w latach 1921-1950 (Toruń: Marszałek, 2008).
Special attention and priority was given to children, who need to be cared for and educated. As local committee in Gdańsk stated in 1946:

Given that the Jewish nation in Europe lost six sevenths of its population, maintaining alive and protecting every child is an issue addressed to all Jewish population. The Office for Child Protection does its best for every child to be properly fed, dressed and educated.46

More than a million Jewish children perished in the Holocaust. In Poland, only 5,000 children were registered by the CKŻP in the summer of 1945.47 All Jewish institutions strove at first to find children hiding in Polish families and orphanages, in order to give them back to their families, relatives abroad or simply to get them back to the Jewish community. The CKŻP opened a specific office responsible for searching for children while religious congregations had 34 day care centres in 1947 and were still devoting 23 per cent of their budget to the assistance of children in 1948.48 The Zionist Coordination Brichah was also looking after Jewish orphans, placing them in kibbutzim before sending them out of Poland. According to a confidential note from an AJDC representative in Poland in 1947, the Zionist organizations led the orphan care field, with 173 children’s homes and kibbutzim, housing 13,000 children.49 The same institutions also competed in children’s education. Leadership in this field went to CKŻP schools, which in 1947 managed to educate 30 per cent of the children in their secular network of schools – where they were taught in Polish and Yiddish – an additional 20 per cent was shared by religious schools and Zionist schools, which taught in Hebrew.50 The latter two declined rapidly with the emigration of both Zionist and orthodox families. This also meant that more than half of Jewish children at that time went to regular Polish schools.

Another important action undertaken by Jewish institutions concerned cultural life. This should not been surprising as even in the darkest hours of

48 AAN, Minister of Public Administration (MAP), 1101, Organizing Committee of Jewish Congregations to GUS, 18 March 1947; ibid., Organizing Committee of Jewish Congregations to MAP, 29 September 1948.
the persecution, Jews in ghettos and camps continued to write, paint, stage plays or recite poetry. The first cultural event occurred in liberated Lublin in December 1944: a concert of Jewish songs that made a deep impression on the audience, as Yiddish theatre director Jonas Turkow remembered: ‘All rejoiced in the great miracle by which the Jewish songs, the Jewish lyrics still live and outlived the enemies.’51 Yet survivors were initially mostly concerned with looking for relatives and, for this purpose, the media first had to be re-established, which would become major cultural production and circulation networks. Radio broadcast in Yiddish were aired several times a week on Polish national radio for survivors to place missing persons appeals and giving news about Jewish life in Poland and abroad.52 But the more popular media was the press: 78 different titles in Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew had a total circulation of 400,000, which is quite remarkable when compared to pre-war figures – 370 titles with a circulation of 790,000 – for a population reduced by 90 per cent.53 This literature included the various political parties’ newspapers as well as publications dedicated to children, local life, literature, and history.

A wide range of institutions were created or reactivated in order to promote a renewed Jewish cultural life. Most of them, although formally independent, were to a certain extent at least financially reliant on the CKŻP. Among them were notably the Association of Yiddish Writers and Journalists, the Association of Yiddish Stage Artists, a filmmaking company called Kinor, the Jewish Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts, and a publishing house called Yiddish Buch.54 Because of the dramatic war losses, the membership of those various institutions had, of course, been considerably reduced: while there were 269 Yiddish writers registered in the pre-war association, merely around 40 enlisted in 1946; only roughly 50 actors had survived among the 400 members of the pre-war Yiddish actors’ union. Their achievements proved, however, quite remarkable. For instance, the Yiddish theatre, apart from touring shows, had two permanent Yiddish programmes set up after the war in the cities of Wrocław and Łódź. The latter sold 28,000 tickets in 1947 but the audience was probably larger as

51 Jonas Turkow, Nokh der bafrayung (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1959), 77.
52 AJHI, CKŻP, Department of Culture and Propaganda 303, vol. 13, files 68-112.
54 On those institutions, see the relevant articles in Elvira Grözinger and Magdalena Ruta, eds, Under the Red Banner: Yiddish Culture in the Communist Countries in the Postwar Era (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008).
many came by invitation. The audience in Lower Silesia amounted to 60,000 for the 115 performances of the local Jewish theatre. It can thus be inferred that almost every Jewish member of a Jewish institution went at least once to the theatre. Another example of the efforts made to promote the Yiddish language were the 350 titles issued by Yiddish Buch between 1947 and 1967, although actual Yiddish-speaking potential readers were scant, a fact that reveals its role as a showcase rather than as genuine mirror of a thriving Yiddish readership.

And yet, the most rewarded efforts undertaken by Jewish institutions for the readjustment of survivors to the new social reality are probably to be seen in their professional lives, though their situation at the end of war was very difficult. The majority was physically unable to work, some faced discrimination in hiring, while the ‘traditional’ Jewish professions – trade and craft – were not considered ‘productive’ by the new regime, hence they were scorned. The ‘productivization’ of the Jewish population was a major assignment given to the CKŻP. A specific section was devoted to assistance in providing survivors with jobs, professional training and loans for the creation of individual or, preferably, collective businesses: Jewish cooperatives. The cooperative movement, dating back from the beginning of the century in Poland, brought together mostly craftsmen in traditional Jewish sectors – tailors, shoemakers, furriers. The first cooperative societies emerged in Łódź and Kraków in 1945, promoted by the Bund party, which had supported this form of work organization before the war. The CKŻP quickly took over the centralization of these cooperatives, labelled Jewish simply because the majority of the workers were CKŻP members. In February 1946, it established a Central Union of Cooperatives named Solidarność, which both supplied workshops with raw material and helped in selling their products. Their number increased quickly, from 20 in 1945 to a peak of 232 in 1949, hiring at that time more than 15,000 people, half of whom were Jews. Lower Silesia, which had the largest population, also gathered 60 per cent of the ‘Jewish’ cooperatives and two-thirds of its workers. As summarized

57 On the history of Jewish cooperatives in the aftermath of WWII, see Michał Grynberg, Żydowska spółdzielczość pracy w Polsce w latach 1944-1948 (Warsaw: PWN, 1986).
58 Ibid., p. 89.
by JDC representative in Poland William Bein in 1948: ‘Cooperatives hire fifteen per cent of the Jewish population. They play a tremendous role as they not only provide educational training and bread-and-butter but they also spark confidence in life and secure feelings.’59 ‘Jewish’ cooperatives, as well as professional training was probably more rewarding in terms of the rebuilding of some kind of community links and atmosphere among Jewish survivors than in implementing a thorough transformation of their professional occupations. After all, Jewish employment continued to focus on craft, trade and office jobs and, in any case, the majority of Jews right after the war remained unable to work. Furthermore, the issue of ‘productivization’ was one of the few to gain consensus among the different political parties that cooperated within the CKŻP: while the Communists and the Bundists advocated ‘productive’ work because it brought Jews closer to the Polish working class, the Zionists saw this professional training as good preparation for a future life in Israel.

**Conclusion: Normalization Instead of Reconstruction?**

Such compromises surely fostered attempts for a reconstruction of Jewish social and cultural life in post-war Poland. This momentum was, however, soon to be lost, mainly because of the continuous flight out of the country of those who were most committed to idea of rebuilding Jewish life in Poland, but also because of the country’s political context. By 1947, the coalition supporting the new regime backed-up by Moscow had increased its power. This transformation strongly impacted the Jewish minority: a new Jewish man had to be moulded, faithful to his past yet resolutely forward-looking and adjusted to the new Socialist society. In this sense, it seems more appropriate to talk about the normalization of the Jewish survivors – adapting themselves, with the help of Jewish institutions, to new realities – than about the reconstruction of a world that had forever vanished and could never possibly be the same. This normalization was initially supported by leftist Jewish parties – Communists, Left Zionists and Bundists – working together in the CKŻP to assist, educate and readjust Jewish survivors to the new life of Communist Poland. The latter in turn had to adopt this paradigm, whether inside or outside this new Jewish community or, if not, either had to leave the country, which most did, or stay in internal exile.

59 AAN, Central Committee of the Polish Workers’ Party, Department of Organizations, 295/IX, vol. 408, p. 132.
A full range of options therefore existed for Jewish survivors in Poland in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Most would search for ‘normalcy’ out of the country, others by putting away feelings of belonging to any Jewish group. As for the Jewish life that was being built according to new principles, the consensus that existed for a short time proved fragile and fell victim to the Stalinization of the country. Communist Jews active in Jewish institutions steadily took over their leadership and enforced their vision. From 1948 on, political pluralism gradually vanished with the emigration of many activists of Orthodox and Zionist parties, as well as many Bundists who refused the forced merging of their party with the Communists. By the end of 1949, all Jewish institutions had ceased to be independent. Welfare and cultural organizations were merged and centralized in the tightly state-controlled Socio-Cultural Union of the Jews in Poland (TSKŻ) and contacts with international institutions, including their primary donor, the JDC, were cut off. The Jewish community and its leaders would from now on strictly have to comply with the regime’s ideology and its fluctuations, while even those who did not participate whatsoever in this model of organizational Jewish life and yearned for invisibility would still remain ‘the threatening Other’ within large segments of Polish society and would fall victim to negative stereotypes constantly updated and manipulated by the Communist regime.

Ultimately, the years 1944-1947 represent a major moment of reconfiguration in Jewish survivors’ lives in Poland after the Holocaust. They had to accommodate themselves in a regime that defined the criteria for belonging to the nation – excluding, for instance, such minorities as Germans and Ukrainians. Although Jews nominally met these standards, they were mostly still unconsciously excluded both by the state and by Polish society, which hardly accepted their survival. Anti-Jewish violence was the most dramatic confrontation with the new Poland, which undoubtedly triggered many individual decisions to leave. Yet, emigration was just one of the possible options survivors had in order to go back to ‘normal life’; after all,
the decision to leave is always a more difficult choice to make than deciding to stay. Normalizing one’s life could and did actually begin in Poland for most of the Jewish population: getting back to health, looking for relatives, finding a place to live, going back to school and to work. Jewish institutions certainly supported this normalization, although their aim of rebuilding Jewish life could not stand the harsh reality that the richness and diversity of pre-war Jewish life was gone.

‘No one will ever dictate to me where I shall live’ said Marek Edelman, leader of the Warsaw ghetto uprising who remained in Poland until his death in 2009.63 No one individual, for sure, yet in those years when life choices had to be made quickly, the socio-political frameworks built by authorities and Jewish representatives within Polish society weighed heavily on individual choices to stay in Poland or to go.