“Who Is A Jew?”
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In my paper I will discuss the story of assimilated, acculturated, and baptized Jews, a small group among the numerous political, cultural, and national identities that formed the population of the Warsaw Ghetto. Unwilling to integrate into the Jewish community and unable to merge with the Polish one, they formed a group of their own, remaining throughout the interwar period in a state of suspension, on the border of national and cultural identities. In 1940, with the closure of the Jewish Residential Quarter in Warsaw, their identity was chosen for them.

Whether assimilation, understood by Todd Endelman as a process encompassing acculturation, integration, emancipation, and secularization, could ever take place in interwar Poland is still far from resolved in the scholarship. Undoubtedly, the influence of the very strong traditional Polish Jewish community and the rise of antisemitism throughout central eastern Europe did hinder this process to the extent that it could never take the shape that it did in western Europe. It would be farfetched to say, however, that the process of assimilation taking place in Polish lands throughout the nineteenth century was utterly stopped in its tracks. On the contrary, as will be demonstrated, the interwar Polish Jewish community included a group that, while retaining an awareness of their Jewish origin, increasingly identified with their Polish rather than Jewish environment. Yet, as they never could merge with the outside community to the extent to which it took place in the West, the historian Aleksander Hertz famously referred to them as the “caste” of assimilated Jews: a group suspended between the Polish and Jewish communities.¹

For the purpose of this paper this group will be defined as predominantly identifying with Polish culture and language, even though some of them also cultivated certain aspects of their Jewish identity.² It will therefore include people already born into assimilated families, in some cases baptized at birth, as well as those who as adults made a conscious decision to break their ties with the traditional Jewish community for various reasons, including career advancement or intermarriage. There were also those for whom
assimilation or acculturation was a lifelong process, a result of their education in Polish schools and immersion in a mixed Polish-Jewish environment. It can be claimed that the only way to define “Jewish Polishness” in the turbulent surroundings of interwar and wartime Poland is to see it as an expression of constant changes in various components of self-identity. My paper will show this journey through the example of two young women, inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto, who both described their experiences in their letters sent to the “Aryan” side of Warsaw between 1940 and 1942.

The first young woman was Wanda Lubelska. She was born in 1923 and came from a well-to-do family living in the modern, middle-class district of Żoliborz. Her mother was a violinist, her father was a high-level bank employee. She attended a Polish high school, where she excelled in mathematics and art and was an active member of the Polish scouting movement. The second young woman’s name was Hala Szwambaum. We do not know much about her prewar life. Only that she was born in 1921, so was two years older than Wanda, and also lived in Żoliborz. As is evident through her letters, she came from a similar background.

Both young women were representative of a new generation of Warsaw Jews. They were educated in elite Polish schools, studying a syllabus imbued with patriotism, they spoke Polish as their first language, and in their letters did not exhibit any familiarity with the traditional life of the Polish-Jewish community. Writing about the Warsaw environment of assimilated Jews, Todd Endelman described it as a heterogenous mix of converted and unconverted (but indifferent) Jews, with a sprinkling of unconventional Poles. Recipients of letters on which I base my paper support this claim. Halina Grabowska, whom Wanda corresponded with, was an activist in the scouts movement and member of the Polish underground. Hala Szwambaum on the other hand wrote to her former school teacher, Stefania Lillental, who, also of Jewish origin, remained with her young son in hiding on the “Aryan” side. The two women would first exchange letters when meeting at the ghetto walls and later passed them through acquaintances who were able to enter and leave the ghetto.

What did it mean for assimilated Jews to leave their prewar neighborhoods, understood as both a physical environment and also a mixed Polish-Jewish community, and enter the new, Jewish one? As we meet both women when they are already in the ghetto, we do not know how and why their families made the decision to move there and whether they had any opportunity of staying on the “Aryan” side or even leaving Warsaw. Most likely, as was the case with those assimilated families who did leave their recollections, the
sheer speed of events between the announcement of the ghettoization decree on October 12 and the end of resettlement on November 15, 1940 did not give them much time for reflection. As a result, only a small number of Jews, mainly from intellectual or artistic circles, decided at that stage to risk an illegal existence with forged papers bearing “Aryan” names: live “on the surface,” go into hiding in Warsaw, or leave the city. These were mainly people who were very strongly linked to the Polish environment, most often by marriage. The rest, irrespective of their national and cultural identity, began their lives as citizens of the “closed quarter.”

As the surviving correspondence between Hala and Stefania dates from 1941, the first reflections of the ghetto reach us through the eyes of Wanda. In December 1940, two weeks after the closure of the ghetto, Wanda wrote to her friend: “You cannot have any idea of what is happening here. It has to be seen to be understood. There is nothing left out of me. I don’t know how long it will last, for now I have lost all hope and the will to do anything. Only now do I see and understand what someone feels who is torn out of their environment and thrown into an alien, unknown one.”

Shocked reactions to life in the ghetto—its noise, overcrowding, surrounding poverty, and enclosure—appear in almost all diaries irrespective of their authors’ backgrounds, yet the girls’ letters exhibit other problems that were specific to their community. One of them is a lack of familiarity with their new surroundings. If Wanda’s family was similar to others from the same background, we can assume that she had very little knowledge of the topography of the traditional, rather impoverished Jewish part of Warsaw, where the ghetto was established. It is not unlikely that her parents made a point of keeping her away from it, immersing her instead in the Polish or assimilated Jewish environment. Another clear issue was language. As comes across clearly from the letters, both girls spoke Polish as their first language and were studying a number of foreign languages. However, at the moment the Jewish quarter was closed, Yiddish was the language most often heard on the ghetto streets, despite the fact that a growing number of Warsaw’s Jews possessed a good knowledge of Polish.

Prewar Warsaw represented the largest Yiddish-speaking community in Europe, and the everyday life of the ghetto reflected this. Yiddish was the language “of the street” as well as of a group of intelligentsia gathered around the Aleynhilf [self-help in Yiddish] and most famously members of the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto. The latter group used Yiddish as part of a new secular culture created in the ghetto, which they hoped would
form the basis a postwar Jewish society in either the Diaspora or in Palestine. According to activists, Yiddish, as the true language of the ghetto, had every right to replace Polish, a language associated with the snobbery of the assimilated classes and identified with “ignorance, disdain and ill-will towards the common man and his needs, and with a lack of understanding, in the literal sense of the word, of the Yiddish-speaking masses.”

However, assimilated Jews were often brought up in an environment that equated Yiddish with a low status and lack of culture, in which the language was little more than unintelligible jargon. Being the “official” language of the ghetto, Yiddish came to symbolize the alienation assimilated Jews felt in the new society that they were plunged into. Polish was therefore sentimentally regarded as one of the few links to a prewar life, and they sought to preserve it wherever possible. Unsurprisingly, in one of her first letters sent from the ghetto, Wanda described “keeping her accent intact” as something of the uttermost importance for her family, and she complained about the manner in which the ghetto society spoke Polish. She wrote: “I wanted so much to see a familiar face from Żoliborz and speak to someone in a humane way, that you can’t even imagine. Here as you know (because I already told you) everyone is ‘singing’ in a horrible manner, and myself, and in particular my mother, want to keep my Polish accent intact. Now, as they are locking us in, it may be difficult.”

The issue of speaking Polish correctly is just one example of how, despite physical separation, Poles and the “Aryan” side of Warsaw were omnipresent in the life of the ghetto-assimilated community. Describing her emotional state in the ghetto, one of its assimilated inhabitants wrote: “I was never ‘Here’ [in the ghetto], I was always ‘There’ [on the “Aryan” side].” Similar sentiments are expressed by both women. In February 1941, three months after the closure of the ghetto, Wanda wrote: “You ask me if I am curious as to what is happening ‘there.’ You’d better not ask me, because I think about your life ‘there’ all the time, what you’re doing, what you’re discussing, what our friends do. Life here is so dark in its everyday grayness, that you have to keep your thoughts away from it to cope with it.”

For many of the inhabitants of the ghetto, both assimilated and not, prewar Warsaw became the symbol of their lost life, presented in clear contrast to the reality of the ghetto. Talking about her wish to go to the “Aryan” side, Hala wrote: “During recent months I have been thinking of you the way prisoners or emigrants think of their close ones who stayed behind in their native land. I wish I could walk out of here and go to you, to Warsaw.” In another letter she explained how “Krakowskie Przedmieście [a Warsaw street] is as far away
as the Champs Elysees or the Piazza San Marco.” Even though for the vast majority of ghetto inhabitants the sentiment toward prewar Warsaw did not extend to “Aryan” Warsaw under Nazi occupation, seen as an increasingly dangerous place, Wanda, who ventured to the “Aryan” side to meet up with her school friends, still referred to her brief escapes as “time spent in paradise.”

Among assimilated and acculturated ghetto inhabitants, in particular those coming from families who at least partially recognized their Jewish roots, were those whose Jewish identity was strengthened or even reestablished in the ghetto. This kind of development can be for instance witnessed in Hala’s letters. Even though she was brought up in a clearly assimilated community, her letters hint at the antisemitism that she might have encountered when at school. At the end of 1941, Hala reflected in a letter to a former teacher on the lack of contact with her former school friends: “I sometimes think that I grew up on a different planet—that’s how differently our lives developed and made different people out of us. And it’s not even five years since we left the same nest, from the care of the same people and the same ideas. We had much in common, even similar marks in the final exams. We have the same mother tongue; we were shaped by the same books, the same school bench, the same city. Now, each of us thinks differently as if we grew up in different hemispheres and there is even some enmity between us. I can’t help feeling that they are all happy with the fate that has befallen us.”

In the ghetto, even though she remained socially linked to her prewar acquaintances, she also made a number of new friends from varied backgrounds, one of whom she began dating. In her letters we witness a gradual, yet perceptible, integration with the wider Jewish society based on a shared common fate. With passing time, she increasingly referred to herself in her letters as Jewish, calling herself in October 1941 a “woman on a reservation of the vanishing Semitic tribe in Central Europe.”

We do not come across such reflections in the letters of Wanda, perhaps because she was born into a family that was more fully assimilated into the Polish culture and national identity. Even in the ghetto, the group Wanda’s family belonged to remained within a closed circle comprised of those of a similar background. The testimony of many of them offers proof that the division between the two parts of society remained as deep as before the war. When in her letters Wanda complained about the Jewish youth in the ghetto, comparing them unfavorably to her Polish friends, her negative feelings were no doubt to a large degree reciprocated. It can be safely stated that the vast majority of the ghetto population had a decisively negative attitude toward
assimilated Jews and in particular the 2000-strong baptized community, whose members, among them prominent intellectuals, scholars, lawyers, physicians, and top-ranking officials, almost immediately reached the top layers of ghetto life, creating the feeling of a mutually supportive Catholic “clique.”

In many documents preserved in the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto, converted, assimilated, and highly acculturated Jews are put in one category, viewing assimilation as an apostasy and the last step before baptism. In the eyes of many of the ghetto inhabitants the vast majority of the assimilated community remained in the “grey zone” of moral responsibility, as their prewar professional standing, financial situation, and especially contacts on the “Aryan” side created the impression that they were in a much more fortunate position than others around them. In many cases there were grounds for such a view. In the best situation were those members of the assimilated community who were well-off before the war and were not cut off from their prewar assets, which could be adequate to sustain them through two years of living in the ghetto and which in some cases even allowed them to keep up the pretence of the prewar way of living.

Among this group were the most prominent members of the assimilated and acculturated community, members and employees of the Jewish Council, the Judenrat, described by its enemies as a “nest of disgusting assimilation.” As a result of its overblown bureaucratic structure, the Judenrat became a crucial job provider for the educated, assimilated strata of the ghetto, though those with adequate contacts were also able to find employment in other branches of the ghetto administration. Members of the assimilated intelligentsia, officers from the Polish Army, and lawyers were also definitely overrepresented among recruits to the ghetto police—the Jewish Order Service, led by a convert and prewar Polish State Police officer Józef Szeryński.

However, the two sets of letters demonstrate to the contrary that the vast majority of assimilated and acculturated ghetto inhabitants fully shared the general fate of the impoverished intelligentsia, especially as the comparatively good living situation of even the most fortunate members of the assimilated community started to change from mid-1941. The girls’ fate confirms the view of historian Israel Gutman, himself a Warsaw Ghetto survivor, that from that point there was no longer a class system in the ghetto, only an overall slide towards poverty. In March 1941, Wanda’s father died of typhus. Her mother fell ill in the autumn of 1941 and though she recovered, her health remained very fragile. Care for the family was left to the children. Her younger brother took on the responsibility of the main provider for the family by becoming a rickshaw
driver—an occupation that was extremely taxing physically and provided only a meager income, which could barely keep the family fed. Wanda earned additional income by tutoring, cleaning apartments, and selling stockings.

Just as for the majority of the assimilated intelligentsia, an important source of money for assimilated families was their contacts outside the ghetto. While some of them may not have had significant assets that were left on the “Aryan” side, they were helped financially by their Polish friends and former colleagues. Through her contacts with friends outside the ghetto, Wanda became the driving force in selling the family’s belongings, ranging from her mother’s concert dresses to the library. Selling books proved particularly difficult for her to bear. In a letter to a friend she wrote: “All I ask of you is to please start from foreign language books, and in any case leave the encyclopedia for the end. Maybe by then the tables will have turned.”

Hala’s situation was marginally better, yet she too had given up paying for private French lessons in June 1941, though her teacher continued to give them to her for free. At that point she began working as a librarian, a job that required carrying heavy suitcases full of books between private apartments. Even though she admitted in her letters to physical exhaustion, she also wrote that since she could afford soups in the communal kitchens, she ate “almost adequately.” It was also most likely this job that allowed her to widen her social circles and that affected her view of the community surrounding her. Moreover, both young women were strongly affected by the general impoverishment around them. In the winter of 1942, Hala wrote of barefooted children on the ghetto streets, while Wanda described the fate of hopeless refugees wandering aimlessly through the closed quarter.

There is nothing in the letters of either of the young women that hints at their being affected by the changes in the perception of Poles taking place among the general ghetto population in 1942 as the situation in the ghetto worsened and contact with the “Aryan” side declined. For the vast majority of the ghetto population, whose relationship with Poles, unlike that of both young women, was restricted to economic relations, with no physical contact being possible, the principal source of information about the “other side” was tales and rumors, and these were mainly concerned with the spread of szmalcownikstwo [blackmailing]. Only those of the ghetto inhabitants who had enough money and contacts on the “Aryan” side to leave the ghetto were to face the reality of living in wartime Warsaw. As the young underground activist Vladka Meed noted, the painfully high cost of remaining in hiding and constant fear of denunciation meant that “the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia,
the erstwhile merchants and social figures, were transformed into distressed, bewildered paupers.”

For many members of the assimilated community it was the experience of hiding on the “Aryan” side that made them reconsider their affiliations to Poles. Fear of denunciations became a unifying factor shared between all of those in hiding, irrespective of their prewar status, background, or financial situation. Jendenrat clerk Stefan Ernest, commenting on the experience of thousands of mainly assimilated Jews living on the “Aryan” side of Warsaw, noted that “the only thing they share is a fear of informers, an anxious anticipation of the end—and the fact that they are Jewish.”

Wanda never became Jewish. Together with her mother and brother and with no money left, she was among the first to be sent to Treblinka. Her letters indicate that despite the growing persecution and increasingly threatening news reaching the quarter from other Jewish communities, the Gross-Aktion, the deportation of the Warsaw Ghetto inhabitants to Treblinka, caught her family, like countless others, unaware. We do not know how Hala survived the deportations, but we can surmise that she was helped by the young man whom she began dating in the ghetto. As she complained in one of the letters, she did not have enough money to get out of the ghetto and did not know anyone who would take her in. As her letters stop at the onset of the deportations, we can only guess that, like the majority of politically active young people who found themselves in the ghetto, she joined one of many Zionist pioneering youth groups.

As underground organizations conducted outreach activities aimed at the middle-class acculturated group in an effort to counteract their Polonization, she would not have been alone. As the memoirs of two Zionist youth leaders, Zivia Lubetkin and Yitzhak Zuckerman, demonstrate, the ghetto kibbutzim became a home not only for activists from around the country but also for people very far from the ideology, and indeed even for those who had never heard of it. Yet as the objectives of the youth organizations changed and military training supplanted the cultural activities, the few assimilated boys and girls who cooperated with the armed underground worked mainly as messengers—a task that required flawless Polish and “good” looks. We do not know if this was also Hala’s path. The only information we have is that she stayed in the ghetto until its last days and died alongside her boyfriend in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

The great educator Janusz Korczak wrote in his Warsaw Ghetto diary: “Long after the war, men will not be able to look each other in the eyes without posing the question: How did it happen that you survived? How did you...
do it.”25 These questions were especially difficult for the so-called “victims of privilege,” as the stories told by the assimilated ghetto inhabitants could not match those of the underground fighters. They were more likely to be tried for collaboration than regarded as heroes. They were remembered as the members of the Judenrat, members of the Jewish police, the crowds in cafes and ghetto theatres. As a result, those assimilated Jews who published their testimonies shortly after the war often chose to underline the Jewish aspect of their ghetto experience, writing as “Jewish Holocaust victims.”26 Others decided to remain Polish and only many years after the war, if at all, recounted their ghetto experiences.

The experience of the assimilated community, a community in exile, with their memory of various aspects of Polishness serving as a way of escapism and to some extent even spiritual resistance, became very much lost. It is only through documentation written then and there, such as the letters of Wanda Lubelska and Hala Szwambaum, that its voice and the complexity of their experience can be recovered.

NOTES


2 Historian Todd Endelman defines four changes in Jewish behavior and status that are usually encompassed by the term assimilation: acculturation (the acquisition of the cultural and social habits of the dominant non-Jewish group), integration (the entry of Jews into non-Jewish social circles and spheres of activity), emancipation (the acquisition of rights and privileges enjoyed by non-Jewish citizens/subjects of similar socioeconomic rank), and secularization (the rejection of religious beliefs and the obligations and practices that flow from these beliefs). See Todd Endelman, “Assimilation,” in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (ed. G.D. Hundert; vol.1; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 81.


4 Letters located in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw Archive, Kolekcja Bernarda Marka no. 546 (Listy Hali do Pani Stefanii).

9 “Dziesięć listów z warszawskiego getta,” Letter of November 25, 1940, 152.
15 Listy Hali do Pani Stefanii, Letter of November 23, 1941.
16 Listy Hali do Pani Stefanii, Letter of October 20, 1941.
17 “Dziesięć listów z warszawskiego getta,” Letter of February 23, 1941, 156.
18 The official newspaper of the ghetto, Gazeta Żydowska, claimed in May 1941 that as of January 1, 1941 there were 1540 Catholics, 148 Protestants, 30 Russian Orthodox, and 43 other Jews of non-Mosaic faith in the ghetto—altogether 1761 Christian Jews. Peter Dembowski, author of the only comprehensive study of the subject, estimates their number was closer to 5,000. Peter F. Dembowski, Christians in the Warsaw Ghetto: An Epitaph for the Unremembered (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 66. See also Havi Ben-Sasson, “Christians in the Ghetto: All Saint’s Church, Birth of the Holy Virgin Mary Church and the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto,” Yad Vashem Studies 31 (2003): 153–73.
19 Emanuel Ringelblum, Ksovim fun geto (vol. 1; Varshe: Yidish Bukh, 1961), 232.
21 See, for example, Helena Szereszewska, Memoirs from Occupied Warsaw 1940–1945 (trans. A. Mariańska; London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1997), 150.
22 Vladka Meed, On Both Sides of the Wall (trans. S. Meed; Tel Aviv: Beit Lohamei Hagetaot, 1972), 182.