

*Prussian Jews: Between Nationalism and Tradition.
The “strange case” of Posen/Poznań, 1800-1918*

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Abstract

The peculiarity of the Jewish community of the city of Posen (Poznań) has been acknowledged in several studies. This pertains on the one hand to its sheer size, as until the end of the nineteenth century Jews accounted almost constantly for between 15 and 20 percent of the overall population—by far above the average of any other German district; on the other hand, it pertains to its composition, since so-called Ostjuden constituted a considerable share of the minority. These were mainly unassimilated orthodox Polish Jews, a unique feature for any German State and later for the German Reich, which forced the new authorities (Posen was assigned to Prussia in the late eighteenth century) to enforce specific integration measures.

This article shows how, as a consequence, the Jewish inhabitants of the area were drawn into a conflict of nationalisms and had to keep the balance between two conflicting cultures, that of the new ruling power, Germany, which sought to “germanize” them, and the traditional Polish culture. Against this background, and for fear of losing their financial independence as well as their cultural and religious identity, more than 30,000 Jews left the region from 1848 up to the end of the nineteenth century and emigrated to the United States or elsewhere.

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Introduction

The “fascination” surrounding the Jewish minority of Posen (Polish: Poznań) during the nineteenth century has not yet faded away, and is deeply rooted within the extraordinary character of its religious, social and political background.¹ To begin with, why Posen? With the “Second Partition” of Poland (1793) the whole Posen area fell to Prussia and was from then on and until 1807 part of the region of South Prussia. During the Napoleonic Wars the region belonged to the administrative unit “Grand Duchy of Warsaw.” With the Congress of Vienna in 1815, large parts of the area became the Prussian province of Posen, which existed until 1918. A rather considerable Jewish minority had been living there ever since the late fourteenth century, but by the end of World War I most of its members would have left their homeland.

This article aims to provide a critical overview of the research on this topic. It shall shed light on the uniqueness of Posen Jewry, characterized by a mixture of German-Prussian and Polish culture, and discuss the transformation of the sense

¹ See on this, among others, Eliezer Sariel, “‘In the East Lie My Roots; My Branches in the West.’ The Distinctiveness of the Jews of Posen in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book [LBIYB]* 18 (2013): 175-192; Cornelia Östreich, “*Des rauhen Winters ungeachtet.*” *Die Auswanderung Posener Juden nach Amerika im 19. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz Verlag, 1997); Sophia Kemlein, *Die Posener Juden 1815-1848. Entwicklungsprozesse einer polnischen Judenheit unter preußischer Herrschaft* (Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz Verlag, 1997); Thomas Serrier, *Eine Grenzregion zwischen Deutschen und Polen. Provinz Posen, Ostmark, Wielkopolska. Eine Grenzregion zwischen Deutschen und Polen, 1848-1914* (Marburg: Herder Institut Verlag, 2005); Julian Bartys, “Grand Duchy of Poznan under Prussian Rule: Changes in the Economic Position of the Jewish Population 1815-1848,” *LBIYB* 17 (1972): 191-204; Rafal Witkowski, *Jewish Inhabitants of Krotoszyn (Krotoschin) in the 19th and twentieth Century* (Poznan: Biograf, 2004); William W. Hagen, *Germans Poles and Jews: The Nationality Conflict in the Prussian East 1772-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), notably 67-72; Krystyna Sikorska-Dziegielewska, “The Emancipation of Jews in the Opinion of the Inhabitants of the Grand Duchy of Poznan,” *Polish Western Affairs* 34 (1993): 41-66; Krzysztof A. Makowski, *Siła mitu. Żydzi w Poznańskim w dobie zaborów w piśmiennictwie historycznym* (Poznań: Wydawn, 2004).

of national belonging among Jews in that area, as well as efforts to shape national understanding against the background of the major migration flows that started in the early 1800s, which here take center stage.² As for methodology, I rely mostly on primary sources in German, and to a much lesser extent on documents in Yiddish or Polish. On the one hand, this is because the former are more numerous and more easily accessible; on the other hand, it follows from fact that most of the documents in Polish, Yiddish and even Hebrew, are available in German and/or English translation in secondary sources, which are fully taken into account. There is yet another reason for this: my choice ultimately grew from the realization that the Jews of Poznań mostly tended to orientate themselves towards the German *Kultur* and language, as the present paper shall show.

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, so-called German-Jewish city migrants came mainly from two regions, Southern Germany and Prussia—and in the latter case especially from Poznań (Posen) and Wrocław (Breslau). A considerable number of Prussian migrants first moved to Berlin, with some remaining there and others using the Prussian capital city merely as a transit point to move onward to North America. The immigrants brought with them endogenous values, political convictions and religious beliefs often perceived as

² On the Jewish minority in Prussia and, in general, in Germany, see among others: Ulrich Wyrwa, *Juden in der Toskana und in Preußen im Vergleich. Aufklärung und Emanzipation in Florenz, Livorno, Berlin und Königsberg* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Irene Diekman, ed., *Jüdisches Brandenburg. Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2008); Sebastian Panwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Freunde 1792-1935. Berliner Juden zwischen Aufklärung und Hochfinanz* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2007); Andrea Ajzensztejn, *Die jüdische Gemeinschaft in Königsberg. Von der Niederlassung bis zur rechtlichen Gleichstellung* (Hamburg: Kovac, 2004); *Juden in Berlin*, eds. Andreas Nachama, Julius H. Schoeps, and Hermann Simon (Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 2001); Till van Rahden, *Juden und andere Breslauer: Die Beziehungen zwischen Juden, Protestanten und Katholiken in einer deutschen Großstadt von 1860 bis 1925* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2000); Erika Herzfeld, *Juden in Brandenburg-Preußen* (Potsdam: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2001); Steven Mark Lowenstein, *The Berlin Jewish Community: Enlightenment, Family and Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); *Juden im wilhelminischen Deutschland 1890-1914*, eds. Werner Mosse and Arnold Paucker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1976); Albert A. Bruer, *Geschichte der Juden in Preußen (1750-1820)* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag, 1991); *Jewish Emancipation Reconsidered: The French and the German Models*, eds. Michael Brenner, Vicki Caron, and Uri R. Kaufmann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Reinhard Rürup, ed., *Juden in Deutschland zwischen Assimilation und Verfolgung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1983).

“backwards” and “different” by metropolitan Jews. Such a negative connotation would continue even after their emigration to larger North American conurbations, including New York City, Chicago and Philadelphia.³ Prussian Jews, who were insultingly called “Hinterberliner” or “Pollacks,” had indeed a hard time integrating, as well as being accepted in the respective Jewish communities in the country of destination.⁴ There were also abuses and acts of violence against them, as the following excerpt from the annual report (1850) of the German Society of the City of New York describes:

The immigration from Germany during the elapsed year shows only a slight increase over the previous year. According to the lists kept by our agency, 55,615 German immigrants arrived at the local port from January 1 to December 31 [...]; out of a total of 220,600 people who were not American citizens! The Commissioners of Emigration, established by the State of New York two years ago, to which, by virtue of their office, the Mayor of the City of NY, the Mayor of Brooklyn, the President of the

³ On this topic see, among others: Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Marc Lee Raphael, ed., *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion and Class in New York City, 1845-1880* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Jeffrey S. Gurock, *When Harlem was Jewish, 1870-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870-1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1945); Tobias Brinkmann, *Von der Gemeinde zur "Community": Jüdische Einwanderer in Chicago 1840-1900* (Osnabrück: Rasch, 2002); Harry D. Boonin, *The Jewish Quarter of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Jewish Walking Tours of Philadelphia, 1999); Ulla Kribernegg, *"Nach Amerika nämlich!" Jüdische Migrationen in die Amerikas im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012); *Jüdische Emigration zwischen Assimilation und Verfolgung, Akkulturation und jüdischer Identität*, eds. Claus-Dieter Khron et al. (München: edition text + kritik, 2001); Arthur Hertzberg, *Shalom, Amerika! Die Geschichte der Juden in der Neuen Welt* (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992); Naomi W. Cohen, *Encounter with Emancipation. The German Jews in the United States 1830-1914* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984); Avraham Barkai, *Branching Out: German-Jewish Immigration to the United States 1820-1914*, (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1994), 53-55.

⁴ Tobias Brinkmann, *Migration und Transnationalität* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012), 24-25.

German Society and the President of the Irish Society belong, goes hand in hand with us [...] to suppress abuses and fraud against immigrants.⁵

The “strange case” of Posen/Poznań

Compared to other large German cities⁶, until the end of the nineteenth century Posen had by far the highest percentage of Jewish inhabitants, amounting almost constantly to between 15 and 20 percent.⁷ This was not its sole peculiarity though. One part of the Posen Jews were “Ostjuden,” that is to say orthodox Jews⁸—an anomaly for German States and later for the German Reich.

The social composition sketched above posed problems to authorities in Posen and its province, and it still raises questions today, such as, for example, “who” were these “Ostjuden” and which national culture did they belong to? What role did the substantial Jewish minority of Posen play in politics and the economy?

⁵ “Auszug aus dem Jahresbericht der Deutschen Gesellschaft der Stadt New York, New York 22.02.1850,” Aktenbestand Swiezawy, file 2256, Stadtarchiv Breslau, Zweigstelle Liegnitz. “Die Einwanderung von Deutschland während des verflossenen Jahres zeigt eine nur geringe Zunahme über die des vorigen. Zuzufolge der in unserer Agentur geführten Listen kamen vom 1. Januar bis 31. Dezember im hiesigen Hafen 55.615 deutsche Einwanderer an [...] von insgesamt 220.600 Personen, die nicht amerikanische Bürger waren! Die vom Staate New York vor zwei Jahren eingesetzte Commission zum Schutze der Einwanderer (Commissioners of Emigration), zu welcher, kraft ihres Amtes, der Mayor der Stadt NY, der Mayor von Brooklyn, der Präsident der Deutschen Gesellschaft und der Präsident der Irländischen Gesellschaft gehören, geht mit uns Hand in Hand [...] um Mißbräuche und Betrügereien gegen die Einwanderer zu unterdrücken.”

⁶ The percentage of the Jewish population exceeded two per cent only in two States, Hessen-Darmstadt and Hessen-Kassel, as well as in the district of Western Prussia, and did not surpass 4,5 percent in any case. See on this Stefi Jersch-Wenzel, “Population Shifts and Occupational Structure,” in *German-Jewish History in Modern Times*, ed. Michael A. Meyer, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 54.

⁷ Over 90 percent of the Jewish minority of the “metropolitan region” Posen lived in cities. They accounted for approximately 6 percent of the overall population, and at the same time for about 20 percent of the urban area. See Sariel, “‘In the East Lie My Roots’,” 178.

⁸ The Jews of the Posen area lived up until the end of the eighteenth century and the territorial acquisition by Prussia in traditional “Polish” fashion. That meant observing Halakha rules; the men constantly studying the Torah in religious schools; rabbis still exerting high political as well as social power; using Yiddish as the common spoken language and dressing according to orthodox canons.

Why did so many from that minority choose to leave their country of origin? Finally, did the minority have any place in the newly born German Reich from 1871 onwards?

Archival records

In order to deal with these topics a wide range of archival files were surveyed, among others the Posen municipal archives.⁹ This has already provided revealing insights into Prussian Jewry immediately before and during the waves of emigration, especially into how discrimination and Antisemitism were to be found also within the Jewish minority and influenced its understanding of the nation. At the beginning of the twentieth century the widening rift between the Silesian Jewish community and the Prussian authorities—which ultimately led many to emigrate—was noticeable¹⁰. The main point of contention was the “right to exist” of the Jews in the Silesian province and in general in Germany, which was—according to Chief Rabbi Jakob Guttmann of Breslau—allegedly endangered by “science itself”:¹¹

The state government may be convinced that the German Jewish community is as founded on the Bible, as on the consciousness of being an integrating part of the German people. Then Rabbi Dr. Guttmann

⁹ In the State Archive of the Polish region (voivodship) of Wielkopolska in Posen/Poznań (Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu—from now on CAP) the following archival documents on Jewish life in the Prussian province of Posen were analyzed: the fonds “Juden- und Judensachen 1797-1869”; “Judensachen im Allgemeinen 1888-1913”; “Korporations- und Kassenwesen der Juden 1880-1916”; “A. betr. die Juden-Verfolgung 1880-1896”; “Die Verhältnisse der Juden 1843-1884”; “Juden und Synagogen Gemeindesachen 1849-1880”; “A. gen. betr. 1/ Aufenthalt ausländischer Juden, 2/ Jüdische Korporationen 1847-1915”; “Bürgerliche und Gewerbsverhältnisse der Juden 1836-1882.”

¹⁰ Vgl. Judensachen im Allgemeinen, file 53/318/0/-/654; file 53/318/0/-/655; file 53/318/0/-/656; file 53/338/0/-/255; file 53/294/0/3.68/5085, CAP, Poznań.

¹¹ “Die Juden in der Ostmark,” Polizei-Registratur zu Posen, file 53/418/0/7-224, 2, CAP, Poznań. “Die Staatsregierung möge überzeugt sein, dass die deutsche Judenschaft ebenso wie auf der Biebel so auf dem Bewusstsein fuße, ein integrierender Teil des deutschen Volkes zu sein [...]. Dann sprach Rabbiner Dr. Guttmann (Breslau) über die Versöhnung im Judentum, wobei er sich dagegen wandte, dass dem Judentum heute im Namen der Wissenschaft die Existenzberechtigung abgesprochen und dass es zurückversetzt werde.”

(Breslau) spoke about reconciliation in Judaism, in which he objected to the fact that Judaism today is denied the right to exist in the name of science and that it is being relegated backwards.

The prompt reaction of the chief president of the province of Posen and chairman of the settlement commission for the districts of Posen and West Prussia, Robert von Zedlitz-Trützschler, left no doubt that the “emigration” of Jews was unfortunate. Yet, not because of the sheer loss in the native population, but rather because thereby a “bulwark of Germanity” had gone lost in the struggle against the spread of Slavic peoples:

This emigration is primarily detrimental to the Germans, for it is certain that, when Prussia took over the Polish parts of the country, the Jews formed the overwhelming majority of the German-speaking population, that they remained loyal to German culture in the midst of Slavic peoples, and that precisely for this reason they were recognized by the authorities as the pillars of Germanism [...].¹²

This would prove, as will be illustrated below, a sheer statement of propaganda.

Poznań becomes Posen

With the “Second Partition” of Poland, the citizens of Poznań, including its Jewish minority, came under Prussian jurisdiction.¹³ Poznań Jews brought with them

¹² Robert von Zedlitz-Trützschler, ebenda: “Diese Abwanderung ist Schaden in erster Linie für das Deutschtum, denn es stehe fest, dass bei der Übernahme der polnischen Landesteile durch Preußen die Juden die überwiegende Mehrzahl der deutschsprechenden Bevölkerung gebildet haben, dass sie inmitten slawischer Völker ihrer Anhänglichkeit an die deutsche Kultur stets treu blieben und dass sie gerade deshalb von den Behörden als Stütze des Deutschtums anerkannt wurden [...]”

¹³ Under the new circumstances Poznan’s Jewish citizens therefore could, and actually had to, communicate in their own language—besides Yiddish, most of them spoke in fact German. Moreover, ever since the education reform of 1833, they received—despite opposition on the part of the orthodox religious leadership—mandatory schooling in German. In this way, many of them

their orthodox-Polish traditions, for instance maintaining the Polish rite by reviving even among their newly gained fellow German believers more traditional religious scholarship, and adding a more artisanal component to their predominantly commercial occupational profile. They thus introduced the “Ostjude” type into German society for the first time—what Jack Wertheimer very expressively described as the “unwanted element” within Germanness.¹⁴

Around 70,000 Polish Jews lived then in Prussia, a very high number, which posed a problem to the State. Integrating and making all of them full German citizens was never an option. This was not only at odds with the religious orientation of the new rulers, which, as it is well known, favored the Protestant faith; the general skepticism was also reinforced by the utter “otherness” of Eastern Jews, with their peculiar sets of traditions and beliefs.¹⁵ Moreover, Prussian institutions were concerned about immigration of unassimilated Jewry. Since Posen played a central role in this regard, Prussian police and politicians soon developed an ambiguous strategy towards Posen Jews.

For the most part they tended to be suspicious of any “Ostjude,” who could potentially turn out to be a threat to (German) national security, as several record entries prove. The following 1878 letter from the District President to the authorities of Koschmin, a municipality halfway between Posen and Breslau, is typical:

In Berlin it has been established that foreign Jews (especially from Poland or Galicia), who initially came to Germany as workers with the permission of the Military authorities, have soon turned to the effortless occupation of illicit trading and trading of bread-cards, as well as of hiding stolen good, robbing and cheating. In individual cases, I have also become aware

began taking active part in German cultural life. See on this Östreich, “*Des rauhen Winters ungeachtet*,” 30-31; Kemlein, *Die Posener Juden*, 50-52; Serrier, *Eine Grenzregion zwischen Deutschen und Polen*, 62-76.

¹⁴ Jack Wertheimer, “‘The Unwanted Element’: East European Jews in Imperial Germany,” *LBIYB* 26 (1981): 23-46; 23-25.

¹⁵ Manfred Jehle, “South Prussia and New East Prussia: Prussia’s Demographic Policy towards the Jews in Occupied Poland 1772-1806,” *LBIYB* 52 (2007): 23-48.

that such observations of the first kind have been made here at the border of the administrative district. Your Highborn, I humbly request, in case such former workers and other unreliable foreign Jews were present there or were to become known, to report to me immediately. I will then arrange for their further deportation [...].¹⁶

Such stigmatization weighed heavily on Poznań Jews, who could not avoid being drawn into the conflict of nationalities in their province. This meant for them keeping the balance between two cultures; standing between two nationalities and sets of mind. On top of this, the Jewish minority in Posen was subject to one of the most restrictive Jewish laws in Germany up to the mid-nineteenth century. This was related to the uprising of 1830-1831, after which the Prussian authorities had started viewing and treating minorities, Jews especially, differently (namely, as disposable allies).

As it is well known, leading Prussian politicians were adamant about tackling the nationality issue ensuing from territorial gains; they were, however, split into factions. The conservatives among them, strongly biased by traditional Christian beliefs, favored the continuation of a restrictive policy that would constrain any attempt to fully “naturalize” Jewish citizens. Liberals, on the other hand, opportunistically tended towards social and political integration, in an effort to come to terms with the Jewish “dilemma.”¹⁷

¹⁶ “Ausländische Juden”, Magistrat zu Koschmin, file 53/418/o/7-224 (1878), CAP, Poznań. “In Berlin ist festgestellt worden, dass ausländische Juden (besonders aus Polen oder Galizien), die zunächst mit Genehmigung der Mil. Behörden als Arbeiter in das Inland kamen, sich bald der mühelosen Beschäftigung des Schleich- und Brotkartenhandels, auch des Hehlens, Raubens und Betrügens zuwandten. In Einzelfällen ist auch mir bekannt geworden, dass hier in den Grenzkreisen des Regierungsbezirks solche Beobachtungen ersterer Art gemacht worden sind. Euer Hochgeboren ersuche ich ergebenst, falls derartige ehemals Arbeiter gewesene und sonstige unzuverlässige ausländische Juden dort vorhanden sein oder noch bekannt werden sollten, mir umgehend zu berichten. Ich werde wegen ihrer Abschiebung dann das weitere veranlassen.”

¹⁷ See on this Hagen, *Germans. Poles and Jews*, 67; Richard Blanke, *Prussian Poland in the German Empire* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1981).

In the aftermath of the revolt, a new law (Law of Equal Rights) was passed in 1833,¹⁸ which ostensibly adopted this friendly disposition, although it by no means amounted to full equality for the 70,000 Poznań Jews. In fact, only the assimilated and the wealthy among them could hope to make use of it, receive civil rights and be naturalized.¹⁹ A previous law, (*Judenedikt*) aimed at emancipating the Jewish minority, had already been issued in Prussia in 1812, yet it did not find application in all of its territories—and it meant in no way what it promised.

For instance, Posen Jews were in any case forbidden to move westwards into other German areas and suffered several constraints, such as the payment of extra “Jewish taxes,” or a ban on purchasing land.²⁰ The great majority of those who could not meet certain criteria were de facto merely tolerated. As statistics show, by the middle of the century only about 20-25 percent of the Jews in the Posen district had managed to fulfill the conditions needed to obtain full civil rights; most of them made immediate use of their new rights to leave the region and settle somewhere else.²¹

This had a disastrous effect—intentionally promoted by Prussian authorities—on the cohesion of the once cohesive Jewish community in the town and the province. By enabling the best-off to assimilate and even relocate elsewhere in the west of the country and abroad, thus reinforcing social differences among coreligionists, the State aimed at undercutting further the autonomy of the Jewish minority. The laws of the year 1833 were inspired by the same intent of the decrees passed in 1797, and fit into the same paradigm of restriction. Those decrees in fact denied the Jewish community—which was then mostly run by an “enlightened” rabbi—the possibility of acting as a recognized juridical body. As Eliezer Sariel puts it:

¹⁸ Bartys, “Grand Duchy of Poznan,” 145.

¹⁹ Edward David Luft, ed., *The naturalized Jews of the Grand Duchy of Posen in 1834 and 1835. An alphabet. list of Jews naturalized in the Grand Duchy of Posen in 1834 and 1835 as publ. in Verzeichniss sämmtlicher naturalisirten Israeliten im Grossherzogthum Posen by Isidor Hirschberg in Bromberg in 1836* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

²⁰ Ibid., 199-204.

²¹ See on this Österreich, “*Des rauhen Winters ungeachtet*,” 42.

Initially these ordinances were not fully enforced; however, the loss of the community's exclusive position as a mediator between the individual and state, and the loss of its ability to enforce Jewish judgments, created an irreversible process of loosening the link between individuals and their community. The 1833 laws, which included increased state supervision over community affairs, continued to weaken the already-shaken strength of the Jewish community.²²

Between assimilation, loss of tradition and emigration

The “tolerated” Jews—those who could not fulfill the strict criteria laid down by the authorities —tried to meet the general demands the German state imposed upon them. This meant above all one thing: to assimilate as much as possible into the new society. To this end, two areas would act as a catalyst: religious and educational reform.

The traditional encompassing trend toward a more liberal form of Jewish religiosity, the so-called Reformjudentum, which started in the very first years of the nineteenth century in South Germany and gradually spread to all the German States, and later to the Reich and even North America, found within the Posen Jewry, at least at the beginning, no fertile ground. Things changed, at least partially, around the 1840s, as Jewish clerics from the area recognized the necessity to foster some form of acculturation among their coreligionists in order not to foment any more skepticism among German authorities. The support provided by a few Posen Jews to the Polish uprising against the Prussian occupation force in 1848 had in fact refueled German animosity towards the religious minority.²³

From the beginning of the 1840s onwards, more and more Jewish communities in the Posen district started leaning towards some form of Reform Judaism. This implied the recognition of the German language as an indispensable part of their

²² Sarel, “‘In the East Lie My Roots’,” 182.

²³ Kemlein, *Die Posener Juden*, 230-242.

religious life as well as the selection of academically trained rabbis.²⁴ Such measures had an immediate effect. In many cases, slight deviation from strict Halakha rules was thus permitted: the most surprising was indeed the preaching of sermons in German, firstly introduced by the rabbi of Wreschen, Dr. Julius Gebhardt.²⁵ Under the influence of Zecharias Frankel—one of the most impactful advocates of “moderate” Judaism—who was active as a rabbi in Dresden until the early 1850s and later for two decades in the nearby city of Breslau, several other Jewish clerics in the Posen province embraced more liberal religious policies and practices and pushed forward a process of “Germanization.”²⁶

And yet, notwithstanding all this ferment and the strive for modernity and change, evidence shows that most Jewish communities in the analyzed area maintained their adherence to traditional religious and social tenets. In short, those who belonged to lower social strata remained traditionalists, and “counter-revolutionary,” strongly rooted conservative rabbinic doctrine,²⁷ as well as the inflow of orthodox Ostjuden from tsarist Russia and the Habsburg Empire, also buttressed this general trend.

The reform of the education system, enforced in 1833, was reconfirmed in 1847 with the passing of a new Jewish Act. The regulations laid down there determined that every child in Prussia should attend a state school. Conservative Jews did circumvent the law though, and kept sending their children to traditional religious schools up until at least the late 1830s. Prussian authorities carried out a thorough change in policy in the same period and started carrying out in-depth controls in schools, requiring that all of them abide by the rules.

This bore fruits immediately. By the year 1840, almost all Jewish children (around 95 percent) studied in a state-supervised school. That meant using German as the classroom language as well as having secular programs, which included topics such

²⁴ Sarel, “‘In the East Lie My Roots’,” 183-185.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁶ Kemlein, *Die Posener Juden*, 218-221.

²⁷ Prominent conservative rabbinic figures, such as Rabbi Akiva Eger, Rabbi Eliyahu Guttmacher or Rabbi Meir Leibush, were active in Posen over the course of the nineteenth century. See Kemlein, *Die Posener Juden*, 242-248.

as geography, mathematics or science. This represented a clear difference, compared to only some years prior, and a huge progress compared to the number of Jewish children attending secular schools in the nearby Polish regions.²⁸ This “liberal” trend also had tangible repercussions on general language skills. By the middle of the century, German had become very common, along with the traditional Yiddish dialect spoken by the local minority. By the beginning of the second half of the century, German had already surpassed Polish in private usage rate among the Jews in Posen, and its usage increased even more rapidly with the constitution of the German Reich in 1871.²⁹

The widening gap between Posen Jews—who, as described above, opened up to German liberal influences over the course of the nineteenth century—and their Polish coreligionists, was nonetheless a cause of great concern for orthodox rabbis and their fellow believers, who still represented a majority in the area. According to important conservative Jewish clerics of the time, the German influence had been of major detriment to Jews all over the Posen province, as it was responsible for “religious deterioration” and abandonment of the simplest halakhic rules.³⁰

Universities and Zionism

The polarizing effect of “Germanization” in the Posen district was somewhat intensified by, firstly, emancipation and the acquisition of full civil rights together with the other Jews of the North German Confederation in 1869 and all German coreligionists in 1871, and, secondly, by the gradual emergence of Zionist ideas over the last quarter of the century. This became very evident within the student body of the time.

The inclusion and exclusion of Jewish students from the German corporate system at the end of the nineteenth century led to the establishment of separate Jewish

²⁸ Only about 10 percent of Jewish children in nearby Polish regions attended a state funded, secular school. Sarel, “‘In the East Lie My Roots,’” 188.

²⁹ Kemlein, *Die Posener Juden*, 239-240.

³⁰ German influence, according to orthodox rabbis and their believers, would put above all women in peril of losing track of basic Jewish laws. See on this Sarel, “‘In the East Lie My Roots,’” 189-190.

associations. As early as 1896, four of these formed the Kartell-Konvent der Verbindungen deutscher Studenten jüdischen Glaubens (K.C., Cartel Convention of the Associations of German Students of Jewish Faith), in whose very name the national self-image of the members is clear. The prominence given to a German patriotic attitude and the emphasis on the awareness of the solidarity between German Jews and the German fatherland in history, culture and law were obvious. One of the most influential non-Zionist Jewish Organizations in the nation, the Central-Verein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (CV, Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith) exemplified this as follows:

To the German citizens of the Jewish faith: At the end of the seventies, the unfortunate movement began in Germany whose ultimate goal was the social ostracism of the Jews and the restriction of their constitutional rights. It is not at least the Jews themselves who are to blame for the tremendous growth of this movement: their lack of esprit de corps and self-confidence, their indifference, above all the lack of timely, effective defense. Too late, the need for planned defense was recognized. The first step was taken by the men who met at the so-called Gneist-Rickert association. The publication of the *Antisemiten-Spiegel* and the weekly *Mitteilungen aus dem Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus* is its meritorious work. The *Committee for the Defense against Anti-Semitic Attacks* consists exclusively of Jews and has a quietly beneficial effect [...]. Those who are attacked should defend themselves! If we do not want to be protected Jews, but citizens, then we must wish that the representation of Jewish interests be led by the unification of all Jews [...]. We are an association of German citizens, we stand firmly on the ground of the German nationality and have no other community with the Jews of other countries than the Catholics and Protestants with the Catholics and Protestants of other countries. If so neither the political nor the religious divide us, it is the civic that unites us all [...]. It is necessary to provide evidence that Antisemitism is only a precursor of anarchism, threatening not only Judaism, but the whole country. If we maintain our position in the Fatherland by our own strength, we will not lack respect for our better-

minded fellow citizens; if we are denied our right, we will gain sympathy, and if hope deceives us—for our honor’s sake, we must not give up the fight! To promote this process is a matter of honor for every German Jew [...].³¹

However, the principles and aims of the CV, as well as of the K.C., described here did not convince all German Jewish students; especially those who sympathized with the Zionist movement rejected these positions. Consequently, organizations such as the Bund Jüdischer Corporationen (B.J.C., 1901), or the smaller Kartell Zionistischer Verbindungen (K.Z.V., 1906) were established, which published among others the relatively widely read newspaper *Der Jüdische Student*. Leading editorialists there described the “Jewish question” in these radical terms:

It may well have struck many people that anyone who discusses one side of Judaism describes it as the *essence* or *foundation* of Judaism, whether national, economic, cultural or otherwise, by choosing his inclination or study as the yardstick for the expansion of the Jewish question. Only the *Jewish race* has not yet been described as the basis of Judaism, although it is precisely this race that should make the most claim to it. For all those other questions are both cause and consequence of the existence of a race [...]. Crossbreeding between relatively healthy breeds is a different matter. From the outset, every cross should be rejected from the point of view of evolution [...]. For example, German-English give a better result than German-German and English-English, whereas Jewish-German give a worse result than Jewish-Jewish and German-German crossbreeds. However, under certain circumstances, if the breeds are related, the individual success can be more favorable [...]. Only this conglomerate of characteristics is peculiar to the Jewish race, to which the Jewish intellect, an immeasurable quantity, must be added, along with various others. So much can be said about it a priori, but with a certainty that it is Jewish and not Aryan or anything else, that the foreign culture in which we live harms

³¹ “Mahnruf des Central-Vereins deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens,” *Zeitschrift des Central-Vereins deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens*, Berlin June 18, 1896, 1-6; 1.

our intellectual peculiarity and thus one of the most essential foundations of our race. It must therefore seek to form a Jewish culture, insofar as this has not yet happened. Individual Jewish cultural moments are and have always been created, but they dissolve into nothing when the external impossibility of concentration, of condensation, arises. The formation of a cultural community, a full nation, complete in all respects is only possible with territorial and social concentration.³²

These two long quotations best describe the ambiguity and the torn identity of German Jews in the second half of the century in question. Such political, social and cultural distortions had been affecting Jews in the Posen area from the 1848 revolution onward and caused much confusion, panic and desperation. Despite all efforts to assimilate, and the pressure applied on institutions in order to gain more rights, the year 1848 and its immediate aftermath would prove disastrous for the Jewish community. Ironically enough, the civil rights warranted by the new Jewish Act of 1848—providing e.g. freedom of movement and opportunities for professional and/or social advancement—would strike a shattering blow to the religious minority. The outflow of Jewish population, which had begun already in the 1830s, intensified noticeably by the middle of the century. By then, the Jewish population had already shrunk from about 76,000 to barely 62,000.

Despite the founding of the Reich in 1871 and the consequent gaining of full emancipation for all German Jews, Jewish population numbers in the Posen area kept plummeting: from about 45,000 in 1890, to around 26,000 in 1910, which accounted for 1.3 percent of the overall population, in line with the German overall average.³³

³² Richard Asch, "Zur jüdischen Rassenfrage," *Der Jüdische Student* II, März-Heft, no. 1 (1905).

³³ The Jewish migrants were mostly very young men, single or fathers. Most of them were craft workers or small merchants. Östreich, "Des rauhen Winters ungeachtet," 43-44 and 103.

Reasons for emigration

As we have seen, religious tradition continued to play a major role in the Posen area, despite the overall adaptation to new forms of living. Orthodox rabbis and their followers never ceased to complain about the ongoing loss of faith and gradual watering-down of old habits, for which the process of forced “Germanization” had been made responsible. This pushed many to leave the region and seek their fortunes elsewhere. Others though, even in the orthodox community, might have considered staying in their homeland as the only reasonable thing to do, since the German authorities were not as strict and intolerant as was generally assumed.

After gaining corporate status in 1847, the Jewish communities of the area had to cope with the main problem arising from this concession: their weakening as a trans-local, cohesive organization, with the related dilution of identity and faith. The ensuing result was highly distressing: whereas orthodox Jews in the province were able to keep their beliefs and cemented them over generations, their liberal/less-conservative coreligionists became more and more alienated from old habits, often grew estranged, and eventually converted to Christianity.³⁴

Yet, there are many more factors that must be taken into account. Just as conservative social strata within the Jewish minority chose to leave in order to maintain order and tradition, so too did others, particularly liberals, because they believed this would help them push their reforms more quickly and more easily than at home.

In this, the political component comes into view. Historians have established a connection between the partially failed European revolutions of the 1830s and late 1840s, and the mass migration waves of Jewish population from the continent

³⁴ Conversion rates in the Posen area skyrocketed starting from the 1850s, on the one hand due to the socio-cultural changes that were taking place in that period, and on the other to the particularly aggressive “Jewish mission” operating in the region. Östreich, “*Des rauhen Winters ungeachtet*,” 258.

towards the New World.³⁵ Yet, as seen above, the revolutions did not only bring setbacks, but also significant progress in the social and cultural sphere. This does not dismiss the political argument at all, but it relativizes it and calls for more differentiation, as it remains to be investigated whether a cohesive, somehow organized political protest can nevertheless be discerned. Elderly Jews, for instance, or the Orthodox faction were not affected.

During the 1848 revolution, Posen Jews had experienced pogrom-like repression and violence. This was at odds with their general pro-German stance, yet it was symptomatic of a tendency to overgeneralize and make Jews responsible for anti-state disturbances. Antisemitism was in this case a highly welcome scapegoat. This is still not nearly enough to account for the mass emigration that would start in those years. Why leave Prussia? Why leave the country that exerted, at least in theory, the least oppression on the Jewish minority?³⁶ The difference, in this case, was made by the concession of basic civil rights, such as freedom to choose one's profession, buy land and, last but not least, freedom of movement. This all aroused resentment and greatly contributed to the alienation of Jews in Posen and its province.

The peculiarity of the province of Posen within Prussia did the rest to make the ambiguous concessions offered to Jews seem highly deceitful. As Östreich, among others, points out, the Jewish community in the region felt doubly let down, once as Prussians, and then as Posen Jews. Notwithstanding the new Constitution of 1848, which, as described, guaranteed Posen Jews equality with their Prussian coreligionists as well as social and legal improvements, it could not stop mass migration abroad. After crushing the pro-Polish revolution in 1848, the Prussian government seemed indeed willing to make concessions to Polish nationalists to maintain peace and order in the border territories. Such readiness went so far as to make the eastern part of the Posen province ready for annexation into a future

³⁵ See, among others, Cohen, *Encounter with Emancipation*, 78-83; Barkai, *Branching out*, 36-40.

³⁶ Saxony and Hanover with their belated Jewish legislation, Bavaria with its "medieval" matriculation system, even several smaller states that maintained a cumbersome and harassing "Schutzjuden" system well into the nineteenth century: they all trailed behind Prussia as pertains to the emancipation of the Jewish minority.

refounded Polish state. Most Jews—the majority concentrated in the eastern part of the province—regarded this as the ultimate sign of disrespect: a sell-out to a less attractive neighbor, Poland, which the vast majority of them had turned their back on.³⁷

Conclusions

The consequences the restoration had on the lives of the Jewish minorities in the German states is widely known. The assumption that the Congress of Vienna led to an intensification of repression against minorities in the European territories, including Jews, and largely excluded them from the cultural and political formation of the “nation,” has nevertheless been the subject of heated discussion for several years. The at least formal discrimination against Jews in the European territories, which later led to open Antisemitism, is a fact. It remains to be verified, however, whether the connection between the latter and nationalism, as traditionally assumed by research into Antisemitism—not least due to the simultaneity of the (re)formation of the German nation and the emergence of Antisemitism—is just as “natural” and compelling. Thus, one of the most widely received, relevant scientific insights is the finding that the institutionally controlled processes for the cultural and political creation of the nation were undertaken “against the Jews.”³⁸ The formation of the German state nation—according to this narrative—driven by Prussia, for example, was thus largely based on the targeted exclusion of Jews and the “Jewish” from the leading power centers of Prussia-Germany. More recent, relevant research has revised this somewhat monolithic picture and speaks of a “construction of the nation with the Jews.”³⁹

The long period between the failed revolts of 1848 and the end of the nineteenth century was characterized by emancipatory efforts and abrupt relapses into anti-

³⁷ Österreich, “*Des rauhen Winters ungeachtet*,” 290-294.

³⁸ See on this, among others: Peter Alter, Claus-Ekkehard Bärsch, and Peter Berghoff, eds., *Die Konstruktion der Nation gegen die Juden* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1999).

³⁹ Ulrich Wyrwa, *Gesellschaftliche Konfliktfelder und die Entstehung des Antisemitismus. Das Deutsche Kaiserreich und das Liberale Italien im Vergleich* (Berlin: Metropol, 2015).

Jewish agitation patterns—among others the *Berliner Antisemitismusstreit* (Berlin antisemitism dispute) (1879-1881) and the “Dreyfus affair” (1895-1906). On the one hand, Jewish minorities experienced social advancement and—as we have seen—full recognition of civil rights, while on the other they continued to be excluded from important sectors of society. While Jews in the nineteenth century were regarded on the one hand as “foreign” and too conservative, and thus as anti-modern and illiberal, they embodied on the other hand a “degenerate” hybrid of capitalism and modernity. As string pullers of “stock exchanges and newspapers”—the abstract forms of power and modernity par excellence—they were accused of wanting to undermine every community, including the national collective, from within.⁴⁰

However, why did so many eventually leave Europe and specifically Posen? Overpopulation and underemployment, aggravated by the continuous political tensions that plagued the homeland (Poland and then Germany), definitely played a major role. Though Prussia tolerated the Jewish minorities at the eastern border, its authorities seemed at the same time to fear them and tended to impair their legal status. As Alan Levenson remarks:

A final paradox deserves notice: The Jews of Posen received equality with the rest of Prussian Jewry in 1850. But the Germanness of Posen’s Jews remained in doubt. When Heinrich von Treitschke brought Antisemitism into respectable circles in 1880, his most effective image was that of a swarm of “Polish pants-selling lads” flooding the Fatherland. Exactly because they enjoyed rights of residence not enjoyed by the Jews of Austrian Lemberg/Lvov or Russian Warsaw, the Jews of Posen provided antisemites with a paradigmatic example of why Germany’s *Judenfrage*

⁴⁰ On this, among others: Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, “Elemente des Antisemitismus” [1944/47], in *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*, Id., (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1992), 177-217; Klaus Holz, *Nationaler Antisemitismus. Wissenssoziologie einer Weltanschauung* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001); Marcel Stoetzler, *The State, the Nation, and the Jews: Liberalism and the Antisemitism Dispute in Bismarck’s Germany* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 36-39.

differed from the “Jewish Question” elsewhere, and why an influx of Jews would threaten German *Kultur*.⁴¹

Additional factors were, firstly, the alternating economic crisis, that caused hunger protests as well as large demonstrations, mostly starting from 1848; secondly, the disintegration of traditional religious structures, with orthodox Judaism being impaired by the introduction of mandatory German schooling in 1833; as well as, thirdly, the unfulfilled promises of social improvement. This was most evident on the occasion of revolutions (1830s and late 1840s), as Posen Jews would bitterly realize that both parties in the game, Poland and Prussia, were treating them as disposable bargaining assets.

However, obligatory secular education also had, as described, positive effects. In this manner, many non-orthodox Jews living in the area were able to catch up with the general trend of assimilation their coreligionists from urban regions had been advocating from the start of the nineteenth century. Turning their back on the homeland during the crisis, and seeking work and “freedom” elsewhere, was often the price to pay for modernity.

The Polish background of the Posen Jews represented a further reason for emigration. Torn between two worlds, the German and the Polish, turned out to be too heavy a burden on less-favored areas and their inhabitants. The social composition of the migrants did the rest. Mostly young, unmarried, male, lower class fortune-seekers left a homeland that had since the Prussian take-over become very much a hostile place. By the end of the 1860s, more than 30,000 Posen Jews had already left Europe and resettled in the United States. A further 20,000 would follow them before the end of the century.⁴²

The experience of the First World War played a crucial role for Jewish minorities, especially in the USA. While it cemented many people’s sense of belonging to their new American homeland, it stirred up doubts and resentment among others and

⁴¹ Alan Levenson, “The Posen Factor,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 17, no. 1 (1998), 72-80; 79.

⁴² Östreich, “*Des rauhen Winters ungeachtet*,” 346-347.

buttressed a patriotic and “cultural nostalgia” in favor of the lost fatherland.⁴³ With the end of the First World War, the question of the national and cultural self-location of Jewish migrants, including those from Posen, was by no means resolved. On the contrary, the conflict had blocked identity processes or confronted them with new challenges—a complex topic that remains a challenge for further research.

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⁴³ Ulrike Heikaus et al., eds., *Krieg!: 1914-1918. Juden zwischen den Fronten* (Berlin: Hentrich und Hentrich Verlag, 2014); Sarah Panter, *Jüdische Erfahrungen und Loyalitätskonflikte im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); David J. Fine, *Jewish integration in the German army in the First World War* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012).