

The World Economic Crisis. Jewish Experiences and Responses in Latvia

by *Paula Oppermann*

Abstract

The chapter explores the Jewish experience of the economic crisis in Latvia. Due to local socio-economic structures, Latvian Jews were overtly represented within economic sectors hit most severely by the crisis and therefore suffered differently than non-Jewish Latvians. Combining quantitative and qualitative research methods and sources in Latvian, Russian, German and Yiddish, the chapter presents examples for Jewish reactions to the crisis on a collective and individual level: the Jewish credit cooperative, the Jewish soup kitchen, and the activities of Mordehai Dubin, leader Latvia's Agudas Israel party. These show that although Jews in Latvia were a heterogeneous group, they often confronted the crisis with united efforts which were rooted in civil society and sometimes organized beyond ethnic borders. Nevertheless, Latvian nationalists and fascists used the crisis to stir hatred against Jews. Particularly the politics of Kārlis Ulmanis' authoritarian regime after 1934 hit the Jews often more severely than had the economic crisis.

Introduction

Historiography of the Great Depression and Jewish Life in Latvia

The Economic and Political Situation of Latvia and its Jewish Citizens before 1929

The Crisis in Latvia and its Effect on the Jews

Jewish Reactions

International Cooperation: The Financial Sector

Collective Reactions: The Soup Kitchens

Individual Reactions: Mordehai Dubin

The crisis after the crisis. Ulmanis' Nationalist Politics

Nationalization

Open Antisemitism

Conclusion

Introduction¹

In February 1932, the Jewish Telegraph Agency published an appeal from the Jewish Emergency Relief Committee, which informed readers that “tragic times have suddenly come upon Latvian Jewry.” The appeal stated that the crisis was claiming new victims every day, with hundreds of Jewish families having been completely ruined and thousands of Jewish souls in Riga having no access to basic necessities.² At this time, the global economic crisis had reached its peak in the small country in the North of Europe. All sectors of Latvian economy and society were affected by the crash of the stock market of 1929, and in many ways the Latvian experiences resemble that of other countries of the globalized world: stocks and bonds lost value, companies and banks went bankrupt, thousands of people lost their jobs. The emergency call quoted above suggests that Latvia’s Jewish citizens were not spared from the disaster. Yet did Jews encounter more or different challenges than their non-Jewish neighbors? Did the economic hardship influence the inter-ethnic relationships in the country? And how did Latvia’s Jewish citizens react to the challenges they were facing? These are the questions this chapter aims to tackle.

In order to understand how the crisis affected Latvia’s Jews, scholarly research on the topic and contemporary statistical data will be analyzed parallel to oral history interviews. The sources reflect the specific situation Jews in Latvia found themselves in and what the crisis meant both for the Jewish community as a whole and for individuals. Selected examples will reveal that although Jews in Latvia were

¹ I would like to thank Ilja Ļenskis and Aivars Stranga for sharing their knowledge, suggesting sources, and giving me the idea to look into the history of the Jewish soup kitchens.

² “Alarming Distress Among Jewish Population of Latvia,” *Daily News Bulletin* 13, no.37, February 9, 1932, 4.

a heterogeneous group, their experiences of the crisis equaled among each other and at the same time differed from those of non-Jews.

The chapter's main question is how Latvia's Jews reacted to the crisis and its results. Scholars have not yet addressed this, and the chapter can only serve as a starting point for further research into the topic. In order to provide both a general and detailed overview, the chapter provides examples of collective and individual responses to the events. The former are embodied by two initiatives: the Jewish credit cooperative and its attempts to gain loans from abroad to provide support for its customers, and the Jewish soup kitchen in Riga. Neither the Jewish self-help in the financial sector nor Jewish charity activity has yet been investigated, and particularly the example of the soup kitchen can serve further research on the situation of Europe's Jewish working class and the overall role of charity organizations in the interwar period and in times of crises.

The chapter aims to give a voice to Jews as agents rather than objects of historical events. A vociferous voice in Latvia in the interwar period was Mordehai Dubin, leader of the conservative Agudas Israel party. His speeches in parliament and his letters reflect that perhaps more than any other public figure, Dubin went a great length to help Jews who were suffering due to the crisis. He is an example that political, religious or cultural differences within a community can retreat into the background in a state of emergency.

Historiography of the Great Depression and Jewish Life in Latvia

Scholars have not yet directly addressed the question of how Jews in Latvia were affected by the crisis and how they reacted, but covered aspects connected to these questions. Their analyses either focused on the impact of the crisis on Latvia as a whole, or on Jewish life in Latvia in the interwar period. The former topic was already discussed by contemporaries. In 1933, economist Aleksander Rafailowitsch³ published a PhD thesis entitled "Die Staatswirtschaft Lettlands"

³ Aleksander Rafailowitsch (1910-1996), also known as Alex Rafaeli. Born in Riga, he was one of the co-founders of Latvia's Zionist Betar movement in 1925. After his studies and PhD in Germany he emigrated to Palestine in 1933. During World War II he fought in the US Army and after the war he was active for the Irgun. Later he settled as a businessman in Israel; Werner Röder and

written at the University of Heidelberg.⁴ In his study, he observed the historical roots of the state's dominant position in and de facto rule over the economy in Latvia since World War I which increased during the crisis. Later historians, among them economist and historian of economy Arnolds Aizsilnieks, agreed that the state intervening in the economy was particularly present in the Latvian case. Aizsilnieks' study on Latvia's economic history, which he wrote in exile in Sweden in the 1960s and which encompasses the period from the end of the first to the end of the Second World War, is applied by researchers to the present day.⁵ Like Rafailowitsch, Aizsilnieks observed that the government of the Latvian Republic had supported certain sectors, agriculture in particular, industry to a certain extent, but rarely the trading sector. Rafailowitsch realized that particularly politicians who demanded a stronger monopoly of the state frequently depicted the trade sector as detrimental.⁶ He did not mention antisemitic resentments within this argument, but historians recently revealed nationalist politicians like he referred to openly declared capitalism as being "alien" to Latvians.⁷

Few historians have addressed the ethnic dimension of the economic crisis. Aivars Stranga researched the history of the Jews in the Baltics as well as Latvia's economic history.⁸ Much of his work focused on the period of the authoritarian rule in Latvia, which began in May 1934—a time when Latvia had mostly recovered from the crisis. Yet his studies provide essential insights into the alignment of anti-democratic developments and economic instability, and about the political and economic history of the 1930s. Furthermore, as will be elaborated, the impact of the crisis on Latvia's Jews can only be explained when considering the years following the Great Depression.

Sybille Claus, eds., *Biographisches Handbuch der deutschsprachigen Emigration nach 1933* (Munich: Saur, 1999), 582.

⁴ Alexander Rafailowitsch, *Die Staatswirtschaft Lettlands* (Riga: Universal, 1933).

⁵ Arnolds Aizsilnieks, *Latvijas saimniecības vēsture 1914-1945*, Daugavas apgāga Latvijas vēstures sērija 5 (Stockholm: Daugava, 1968).

⁶ Rafailowitsch, *Die Staatswirtschaft Lettlands*, 10.

⁷ Ieva Zaķe, "Latvian Nationalist Intellectuals and the Crisis of Democracy in the Inter-War Period," *Nationalities Papers* 33, no. 1 (March 2005): 97-117.

⁸ See especially Aivars Stranga, *Kārļa Ulmaņa autoritārā režīma saimnieciskā politika 1934-1940* (Riga: Latvijas Universitāte LU Akadēmiskais apgads, 2017); Aivars Stranga, *Ebreji un diktatūras Baltijā: 1926-1940*, 2, papildinātais izdevums (Rīga: Latvijas Universitātes Jūdaikas Studiju Centrs, 2002).

Historians have researched political, cultural and religious aspects of Jewish life in Latvia in the interwar period, but only few focus on questions of economy. An exception is a chapter by economist Benjamin Sieff entitled “Jews in the Economic Life of Latvia,” published in a Yizkor Bukh.⁹ In the interwar period, Sieff had worked for several banks, published about economic questions in the press, and acted as advisor to Jewish deputies.¹⁰ In the chapter, he discussed Jewish participation in trade, the banking sector, and industry in the time before the war. He devoted only a small section to the crisis, in which he described the difficulties Jewish banks encountered and concluded that the Latvian government attempted to use the crisis “to eliminate the Jewish banks.”¹¹ Sieff’s inside-knowledge on the political and economic questions as a contemporary make his study a pivotal starting point for further research.

A more recent exploration on ethnicity and economy was provided by Helena Šimkuva.¹² Šimkuva did not address the economic crisis directly, but provided important information about distribution of economy, spheres and money among the minorities, and examined how these differed between the Republican and the authoritarian period. Also Aivars Stranga emphasized in his study on Jews and the authoritarian regimes in the Baltics how the regime change of 1934 in Latvia had severe impacts on the Jewish economic life.¹³ An analysis of the Jewish experiences, and even more so, the Jewish responses to the Great Depression in Latvia, however, is still missing.

⁹ The English translation was used for this chapter: Benjamin Sieff, “Jews in the Economic Life of Latvia,” in *The Jews in Latvia*, ed. Mendel Bobe (Tel Aviv: Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel, 1971), 230-243.

¹⁰ Mendel Bobe, *Ebreji Latvijā* (Rīga: Šamir, 2006), 348-349.

¹¹ Sieff, “Jews in the Economic Life of Latvia,” 233.

¹² Helēna Šimkuva, “Letten, Russen, Juden und Deutsche in der Wirtschaft Lettlands zwischen 1920-1940,” in *Nationale und ethnische Konflikte in Estland und Lettland während der Zwischenkriegszeit: neun Beiträge zum 16. Baltischen Seminar 2004*, ed. Detlef Henning (Lüneburg: Verl. Carl-Schirren-Gesellschaft, 2009), 169-198.

¹³ Stranga, *Ebreji un diktatūras Baltijā*.

The Economic and Political Situation of Latvia and its Jewish Citizens before 1929

The Republic of Latvia was one of the new states emerging from the collapse of empires at the end of World War I. And as in many of these new states, the country's leaders introduced a modern, liberal constitution with equal rights and suffrage for all citizens. The minorities enjoyed cultural autonomy and were represented in various parties in parliament.¹⁴ The region of what had become Latvia had traditionally been very diverse. Of the nearly 2 million inhabitants, 75% identified as Latvian, 11% as Russian, 5% as Jews, 3% as Germans and 3% as Poles.¹⁵ The history of these inhabitants had not been without conflict. Since the Middle Ages, German-speaking landowners ruled over a Latvian peasant majority, and during the eighteenth century a Russian-speaking upper class gained influence in parts of the region.

Jewish life in Latvia began in the late Middle Ages and was shaped by the distinct circumstances of different localities. The eastern region Latgale had in the late medieval and early modern period been part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Jews there lived mostly in small towns or the rural areas. They were often poorer and more religious than those living in the western region Kurzeme, whose ancestors mostly came from Poland and Lithuania and, most of all, the German-speaking lands. Many of the former spoke Yiddish, the latter often used German in everyday life. German and Jewish upper classes tended to mingle in business and private circles of the cities. Interaction between ethnic Latvians and Jews happened to a large part in the rural areas, among Latvian farmers and Jewish small traders and artisans.¹⁶

¹⁴ David J. Smith, "Inter-War Multiculturalism Revisited: Cultural Autonomy in 1920s Latvia," in *From Recognition to Restoration: Latvia's History as a Nation-State*, eds. David J. Galbreath, Geoffrey Swain, and David J. Smith (Boston: Brill-Rodopi, 2010), 31-43.

¹⁵ Result of the last census in the interwar period 1935; Pēteris Veģis, "1935. Gada tautas skaitīšana Latvijā," in *Nacionālā Enciklopēdija*, ed. Latvijas Nacionālā Bibliotēka. Accessed January 12, 2024, <https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/64731>. The census distinguished between religious affiliation and nationality. The numbers for those identifying as Jewish and those adhering to the Jewish religion are almost identical; Marģers Skujenieks, *Latvijas Statistikas Atlāss* (Rīga: Valsts Statistiskā pārvalde, 1938), 8-9.

¹⁶ Svetlana Bogojavlenska, *Die jüdische Gesellschaft in Kurland und Riga: 1795-1915* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012), 259.

After World War I the proportions of Latvia's economy developed, industries that had been destroyed during the war were rebuilt. In 1920, 80% of all citizens were employed in agriculture, in 1930, the number was down to 66%. While there were 6,6% employed in industry in 1920, there were 13,5% in 1930.¹⁷ This development resulted in a higher grade of urbanization. While in 1897, approximately 29% of the population lived in cities, in 1930 the number rose to 35%.¹⁸ The rural-urban divide was also to an extent an ethnic one: of the approximately 90,000 Jewish people in Latvia, 94% lived in cities, and 47% of all Jews lived in Riga.¹⁹ The rest lived foremost in the East of Latvia, where in a few towns, Jews and Russians outnumbered their Latvian neighbors. The attitude towards each other amongst these groups has been focus of discussions among scholars. It remains a question of perception and differs within regions, time, and socio-economic contexts.²⁰ Latvia's Jewish community was heterogeneous linguistically and regarding religion, and also politically, as will be discussed below. There were also considerable economic differences, but as in other countries, Jews in Latvia were highly represented in trade and industry. This was a result of historical as well as continuing limitations: while there was no legal quota in independent Latvia, Jews were rarely accepted into jobs in agriculture, transport, and the civil service. The statistics show that 24% of 46,000 owners of all enterprises in Latvia were Jews. These statistics do not, however, differentiate between small traders and owners of large factories.²¹ The latter participated actively in the economic growth and stabilization of the Republic and were visible for their contemporaries. This led to a perception that all Jews were doing exceedingly well financially, although particularly in the Eastern provinces, many lived in poverty.²²

¹⁷ Skujenieks, *Latvijas Statistikas Atlāss*, 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9. Calculated based on the 1935 census and numbers provided.

²⁰ For a more detailed analysis see Paula Oppermann, "Everyday Antisemitism in Interwar Latvia," *S: I. M. O. N. Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation* 8, no. 3 (December 2021): 48-64.

²¹ Skujenieks, *Latvijas Statistikas Atlāss*, 56.

²² An example is an analysis of one of the leading experts on economy, Alfrēds Ceihners (1899-1987). In 1930 he provided a balanced overview of statistics regarding the different ethnic groups, but eventually came to the conclusion that Jews were in the "best" economic position in Latvia, Alfrēds Ceihners, "Galveno tautību loma Latvijas saimnieciskā dzīvē," *Ekonomists*, April 15, 1930.

The 1920s were a period of economic and political stabilization for Latvia. A new currency, the Lats, which was tied to the gold standard, was introduced. The financial system was based on principles of the liberal market and taxation. The largest revenue for the state budget came from taxation on alcohol, tobacco and its products, yeast, fruit, tea, matches, and petroleum products. The assembled taxes were used for defense purposes, public education, as well as the health-care, and the cultural sector.²³ The government was particularly keen on supporting the agricultural sector. Agriculture was the living basis for the Latvian speaking majority population and thus also a political factor for the government that was, alongside with liberalization and democracy, keen to make Latvia a state foremost for its largest ethnic group.²⁴ This agenda mostly targeted the Baltic Germans who had held a dominant position in the cultural, economic and political sphere for centuries. Yet the process always affected Jews, too, and in many cases, the debates about these issues were filled with specifically antisemitic statements.²⁵ The ethnicizing politics were embodied in the land reform which the parliament conducted from October 1920 to June 1937. As a result of World War I, nearly 20% of the land had been destroyed, thousands of unemployed and landless peasants had to be fed. In the process, land larger than 100 hectares was expropriated without restitution and handed to the landless peasants. The main beneficiaries were the ethnic Latvians. While before the reform, nearly 50% of the land was owned by the Baltic German, Polish or Russian landowners, nearly 80% of the expropriated land was turned into hands of ethnic Latvians. In total numbers, the Baltic Germans were most severely affected by the reform. The sizes of the

²³ Valentīna Andrējeva, "Finanšu politika Latvijā," in *Nacionālā Enciklopēdija*, ed. Latvijas Nacionālā Bibliotēka. Accessed August 11, 2024, <https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/23450-finanšu-politika-Latvija>.

²⁴ This attitude of a nationalizing state was examined by Rogers Brubaker and can also be detected in the activities of the newly established Lithuanian state, as discussed by Klaus Richter in his chapter of this issue; Rogers Brubaker, "National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External Homelands in the New Europe," *Daedalus* 124, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 107-132.

²⁵ With the example of the University of Latvia, Per Bolin demonstrates how in the interwar period the Latvian government tried to limit the influence and opportunities of ethnic minorities to create a Latvian elite. While these measures affected all minorities and were particularly propagated against the German Baltic community, Bolin also revealed antisemitic incidents in this process; Per Bolin, *Between National and Academic Agendas. Ethnic Politics and "National Disciplines" at the University of Latvia, 1919-1940* (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2012), see especially chapter 5, 129-172.

holdings created, however, reveal an imbalance among the ethnic groups: while German land continued to be of the size of 30-100 hectares, Latvian mostly from 30-50, and Russian from five to ten, Jews did not own land larger than one hectare.²⁶ The fact that about 200 Jewish veterans of the Latvian War of Independence were given land within the reform did not change the imbalance.²⁷ Overall, the reform was a success: Latvia was increasingly able to provide its population with domestic crop and by 1932-33—thus in the middle of the economic crisis—could end importing food.²⁸ While the government focused on supporting the agrarian sector, in reality, trade, particularly export, was pivotal for Latvia's economic growth.²⁹ Jewish merchants played an integral role here as they could rely on pre-war networks. Sometimes using their own money, Jewish firms increased the international business, particularly with England.³⁰ Among the most successful export goods were flax and timber. Furthermore, the textile industry was mostly in Jewish hands, and foreign brands opened shops in Latvia, often employing Jewish managers. Other businesses were tobacco, canned food, rubber shoes and flour, all of which were above mentioned as goods that underlay particularly high taxation. Thus, to Sieff's emphasis that "the importance of the Jewish industrial enterprises to the Latvian national economy was twofold: They developed exports and reduced the import of finished articles,"³¹ it can be added that they also increased the state income in form of taxes. Furthermore, the growth of these industries meant employment for thousands of workers.

²⁶ Šimkuva, "Letten, Russen, Juden und Deutsche," 170-173.

²⁷ "Latvian Government Gives Land to 235 Jews Who Fought for Latvian Independence," *J.T.A. Bulletin*, September 10, 1931, 5.

²⁸ Šimkuva, "Letten, Russen, Juden und Deutsche," 178.

²⁹ Rafailowitsch, *Die Staatswirtschaft Lettlands*, 7; Sieff, "Jews in the Economic Life of Latvia," 130.

³⁰ Sieff, "Jews in the Economic Life of Latvia," 231.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 235.

The Crisis in Latvia and its Effect on the Jews

In the second half of 1930 Latvia was hit by the international crisis with rapid fall of prices, particularly for export goods from agriculture, timber, linen and butter.³² While the crisis caused misery in most of the globalized world, Latvia's citizens faced particular difficulties triggered by their government's decisions, most strikingly, its protectionism: they restricted import of goods that could be produced domestically.³³ This paired with the collapse of export. While in 1929, Latvia's exports amounted to 636 million Lats, in 1933 it was 173 million.³⁴ Companies stopped their production and thousands of people lost their jobs: the number of unemployed tripled from 11,5 thousand in 1928 to more than 35 thousand in January 1932, the peak of the crisis.³⁵ In 1932, Latvia was among the countries with the compared lowest income and highest living costs in all of Europe.³⁶

Trying to rebalance the deficits, the government introduced a state monopoly on sugar, imposed special crisis taxes, increased urban real estate income tax rates by 50%, and strengthened debt collection measures.³⁷ In December 1930, the Latvian national bank decided to severely reduce or close loans to credit institutions and trade companies. The board justified this as a measure to limit the outflow of foreign currency. The measure, supported by the government, did not do much good. Instead of increasing discount rates as banks in other countries did, the Bank of Latvia caused insecurity and the outflow of foreign capital. The credit restriction affected institutions differently, mostly private credit institutions and commercial enterprises. Thousands of people, in fear that they would not have access to their money, flooded the banks to claim their deposits. Many banks were

³² Aizsilnieks, *Latvijas Saimniecības Vēsture*, 440.

³³ Ibid., 457.

³⁴ Viesturs Sprūde, "1929. gada 24. Oktobrī. Pasaules ekonomiskās krīzes sākums," la.lv (online news portal of *Latvijas Avīze*), October 24, 2019. Accessed January 13, 2024, <https://www.la.lv/1929-gada-24-oktobri>.

³⁵ Arturs Žvinklis, "Latvija: 1929-1938. Tā tas bija, tā notika," *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, June 27, 2008. Accessed August 27, 2024, <https://www.vestnesis.lv/ta/id/177297>.

³⁶ Aivars Stranga, *Kārļa Ulmaņa autoritārā režīma saimnieciskā politika: 1934-1940* (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2020), 40-42.

³⁷ Andrējeva, "Finanšu politika Latvijā."

unable to pay and closed their counters.³⁸ On top of this, the National Bank of Latvia rejected short-term loans to some private banks. As a result, the private banks decided to not pay more than 5% to depositors.³⁹ Limited access to money meant bankruptcy to many businesses, peaking in 1932.⁴⁰

Instead of propagating to aid the industries, some Latvian politicians went as far as to demand to reduce support for economies that were not effective. Nationalist politicians claimed that a handful of “foreigners” (*cittautiešie*) allegedly owned the majority of the industry and shipped their profits abroad.⁴¹ They applied xenophobic statements to justify a state monopoly and emphasized regularly their skepticism towards capitalism as something foreign to the Latvian people that had to be limited best as possible.⁴²

Despite the racist overtones, some of the state’s measures—unintentionally—supported Jewish businesses. The four sectors hit mostly by the crisis were the textile, timber, chemical and clothing industry.⁴³ Being aware of the importance of these sectors, the government introduced protectionist measures to support the enterprises, particularly in the textile industry. This sector was largely in Jewish hands, which led right-wing nationalists to claim that the Jews were benefitting from the crisis. The fact that these businesses were often large companies with international connections, and the law on increased taxes hit mostly the large enterprises,⁴⁴ was not of their concern.⁴⁵ By the end of 1934, many smaller businesses producing for the domestic market were benefitting from the state protectionism, but those in the export sector—often in Jewish hands—continued to struggle.⁴⁶

In 1931 Britain lowered the exchange rate of its Sterling. Attempting to stimulate exports and maintain a balanced foreign trade, many countries followed. Not so

³⁸ According to some reports, on 15 July alone, people tried to cash in five million Lats; Aizsilnieks, *Latvijas Saimniecības Vēsture*, 444-445.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 445. A decision retroactively legalized by the government.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 448.

⁴¹ Stranga, *Kārļa Ulmaņa autoritārā režīma saimnieciskā politika*, 47-48.

⁴² Aizsilnieks, *Latvijas Saimniecības Vēsture*, 587.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 526.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 559.

⁴⁵ Aivars Stranga, “Kārļa Ulmaņa režīms un ebreji” (Riga, Museum Jews in Latvia, 20 October 2020). Accessed January 13, 2024 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtAPwdayo2w>.

⁴⁶ Stranga, *Kārļa Ulmaņa autoritārā režīma saimnieciskā politika*, 46.

Latvia, where the government decided instead to limit imports and to foster control of foreign trade, thereby restricting currency outflow. As a result, the Lats remained a stable currency, but due to its high value, Latvia became isolated in international trade.⁴⁷ When sold in foreign currency, the price of the goods converted into Lats did often not even cover the production costs in Latvia.⁴⁸ Again, Jews, active in export of goods, were particularly affected by this measure. In order to illustrate what this meant in everyday life, it is useful to examine statements of those who lived through these times.

Oral history interviews with Jewish citizens of Latvia who survived the Holocaust and the war reveal that while all citizens of Latvia suffered during the crisis, Jews faced additional challenges. It is noteworthy that despite the horrors experienced during World War II, several survivors who were interviewed in the 1990s and 2000s also addressed the dramatic effects the Great Depression in the 1930s had caused for them. One example is Ruvim Fridman, whose father had been a successful textile merchant in a small town in the East of Latvia. Fridman recalled that the crisis was “a tremendous shock” to his family. In order to balance the lost income, his father extended the business to a neighboring village, where he stayed during the week and only came home for Shabbat. Despite the efforts, they lost both stores. They moved to Riga where his father started to work for an uncle who owned a large wholesale textile establishment. Fridman’s father could make a living as a salesman, but the economic losses effected the family, and particularly the mother. She had been used to living in a large house with servants in the countryside and suddenly found herself in a lower status and without friends in a large city.⁴⁹ In Riga, Fridman and his siblings encountered antisemitism for the first time. While their hometown had been home to a Jewish majority, Riga was much more culturally diverse, and he recalled being chased and kicked by Latvian kids on his way to school.⁵⁰

Other survivors recalled similar experiences. Zelda-Rivka Hait was born in the town of Kuldīga in the western province Kurzeme in 1920. Her parents owned

⁴⁷ Aizsilnieks, *Latvijas Saimniecības Vēsture*, 452.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 584.

⁴⁹ Ruvim Fridman, interview by Leo Rechter, September 5, 1995, interview 6348, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation. Accessed December 12, 2023, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/6348?from=search&seg=4>, Segment 20-22.

⁵⁰ Fridman, Interview, Segments 29-30.

two delicatessen shops in the town. The children had to help with the business and they were quite well-off until the crisis hit. She remembered “We lost everything and we were out in the street.” Hait, only eleven herself, gave private lessons to Latvian children.⁵¹ The family did not recover well from the crisis. In the following years, Hait regularly had to work to pay tuition fees and in 1938, when she finished school and decided to study in Riga, she was “penniless,” and made ends meet by giving English lessons and doing needlework for other people.⁵²

These examples reveal that Jews were effected differently than their non-Jewish neighbors. Structural factors led to this special vulnerability: Jews worked more often than non-Jews in sectors that were more drastically hit by the crisis. And not only their professional background made it more difficult for them to take jobs that were more in need like for example in agriculture; since the majority of Latvia’s Jews lived in the cities, they had neither resources nor social connections in remote rural areas. This made a fresh start difficult.⁵³

Jewish Reactions

Despite or because of the additional challenges Jews were facing, they united in organized campaigns to face them. The banking sector and cooperatives are examples that, lacking support from their own government, Jews turned towards their “brothers in faith” abroad. Also within Latvia, however, the community provided help for the Jewish citizens. Its campaigns were also coordinated in cooperation with non-Jews and often resulted from activities taken by individuals.

⁵¹ Zeldá-Rivka Hait, interview by Nina Elazar-Wolff, February 25, 1997, interview 26792, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation. Accessed December 12, 2023, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/26792?from=search>, Segment 5.

⁵² Hait, Interview, Segment 20.

⁵³ “Latvian Government Takes over Riga Employment Exchanges,” *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, November 14, 1932.

International Cooperation: The Financial Sector

As in other countries, the crash in Latvia meant a crash of the banks, and Jewish banks were affected, too. Jewish banks had since the inauguration of the Republic played an integral role in the new state. From 1922 to 1924, 60% of Latvia's private banks were owned by Jews.⁵⁴ Several leading managers of these banks had ties to the political establishment, some held functions in ministries or state institutions. Jewish banks and credit cooperatives united in the *Žīdu kreditkooperatīvu savienība* (Union of Jewish Credit Cooperatives).⁵⁵ This can be seen as a reaction to national laws implemented by the government which favored state-owned banks and credit cooperatives: private credit cooperatives were not allowed the same activities, they were only granted smaller amounts of credit at the national bank while having to pay relatively high interest rates which led to the operations making little profit. Finally, due to their small amount of credit, they had to rely on more expensive, small loans. These limitations targeted all non-state cooperatives, and therefore, also the Jewish ones were affected.⁵⁶

The balance of the Jewish Credit Cooperative Union from 1928 to 1940 reveals that the Jewish enterprises had been under increasing pressure already before the crisis (Fig.1).⁵⁷ This was in part due to a severe flood which led to a bad harvest in 1928, forcing thousands of formerly economically stable families to take loans.⁵⁸ The cooperative then gave out loans relatively easily and as a result had to get loans itself from the American Joint Reconstruction Foundation (AJRF).⁵⁹ While AJRF representatives criticized this easy giving-out of loans, they continued to support the institutions as long as they showed initiative to tackle their issues—

⁵⁴ Sieff, "Jews in the Economic Life of Latvia," 231.

⁵⁵ *Žīdu kreditkooperatīvu savienības statūti*, LVVA F. 6549, A. 1, L. 1, p. 1-8, Latvian State Historical Archive.

⁵⁶ Memorandum des Verbandes der jüdischen Kreditkooperative in Lettland an die American Joint Reconstruction Foundation, 1929, LVVA F. 6549, A. 1, L. 17, 36-38.

⁵⁷ "Žīdu kreditkooperatīvu savienības biedri un to kopbilances galveno posteņu kustība par savienības pastāvēšanas laiku no 1923.g. līdz 1.9.1940" (n.d.), LVVA F. 654, A.1, L.15, 1.

⁵⁸ "American Joint Reconstruction Foundation an Verband der jüdischen Kreditgenossenschaften" (n.d.), LVVA F. 6549, A.1, L.26, p.5-6, LVVA.

⁵⁹ "Protokoll der VII. Generalversammlung der American Joint Reconstruction Foundation vom 16. Dezember 1931 im Great Central Hotel, London" (n.d.), LVVA F.7156, A.1, L.2, 1-21.

sometimes with hard measures for the individuals taking the loans.⁶⁰ Since the Latvian cooperatives showed initiative to return the loans, the AJRF continued its payments.⁶¹ And as a look at the statistics reflects, this support did not become superfluous after the crisis was officially over: before the loans could be returned, new ones became necessary in the second half of the 1930s. This phenomenon will be elaborated on below.

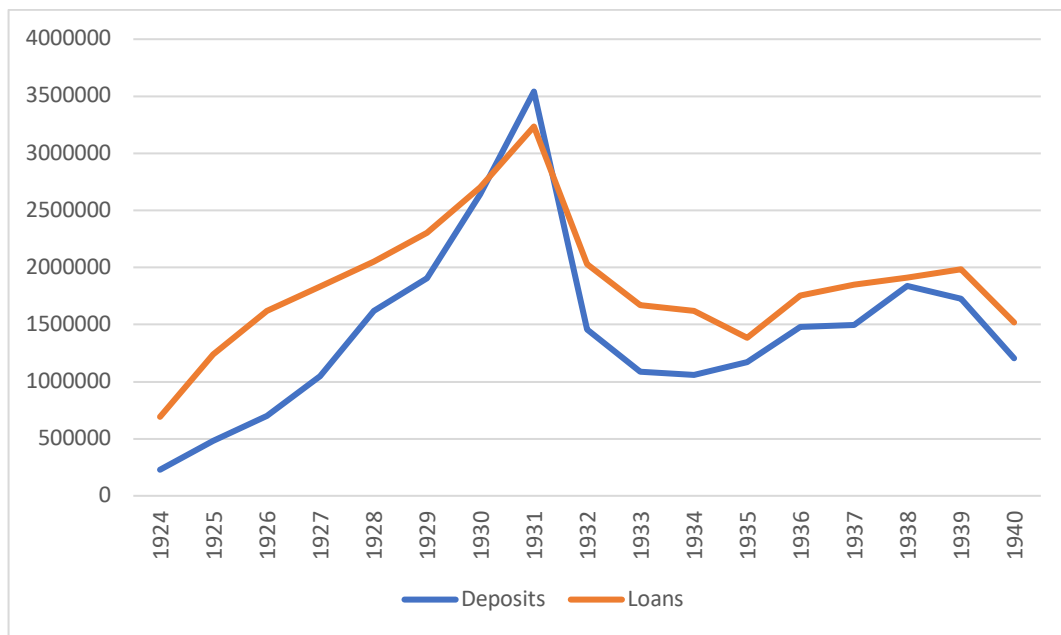


Fig. 1. Balance of the Jewish credit cooperative Union: Loans and Deposits

Collective Reactions: The Soup Kitchens

Soup kitchens had existed already before 1930, both run by the Latvian state and individual religious communities.⁶² Among them were Jewish enterprises, one of

⁶⁰ The council criticized that the Jewish banks in Latvia had given out too many loans which were then not returned; American Joint Reconstruction Foundation, minutes of meetings held in London 16 December 1931, Berlin Charlottenburg 8 February 1932, LVVA F. 7156, A.1, L.2, p.4-14.

⁶¹ Ibid., 9. From 1924 to 1931, Latvia received 118,979 \$ from the AJRF and repaid 73,111 \$.

⁶² For example, in 1929, the city council in Daugavpils decided to open a soup kitchen for 500 unemployed people, “D-pils pilsētas domes sēde 11. februārī š. g.,” *Latgales Ziņas*, February 15, 1929.

them the Ebreju lētu ēdienu namu biedrība (Jewish Association of Houses for Inexpensive Food, ELENB). It was formed as an organization which had a “charitable purpose: to provide free of charge and at a low cost kosher food to residents of Latvia in need.”⁶³ The association was founded in 1905 in Riga when many of the city’s inhabitants struggled financially. Since then, the association fed the hungry, not only of Riga. In 1915, when thousands Jews from the western provinces of Tsarist Russia were forced to move into its interior, the association provided them with food and shelter.⁶⁴ During the German occupation of Riga, the Army used the facilities to feed the city’s population, indifferent of nationality. Being therefore considered a German facility when Latvian troops re-entered Riga in 1919, the ELENB was looted and had to close. With the help of Riga’s Jewish community and the JOINT, the ELENB refurbished its interior and reopened on Rosh Hashana 1920.

Since then, the association cared for the poor of the city. Due to immigration of different kinds of Jews to the capital, the ELENB provided different rooms: “Rooms were set up for the poor, for impoverished and people in extreme need, and also for pupils, students and teachers, all separately.”⁶⁵ The meals were not all for free, there were different prices according to people’s needs.⁶⁶ In 1925, nearly half of the provided meals were in the price range of 36, 44 and 50 Santims, while about 30% were sold for 82 Santims to one Lats.⁶⁷ In 1929, the majority of meals (42,5%) were sold for 38-80 Santims.⁶⁸ Free meals were given to those who could provide food stamps.⁶⁹ Daily, approximately 1,000 free meals were handed out.⁷⁰ In 1933, 15,000 people (of which 8,500 were children) received free food. In early 1934, there were 31 soup kitchens which provided food for 10,620 people (of which 5,016 were children).⁷¹ In Riga, people went to the house of the ELENB in

⁶³ Rīgas ebreju lētu ēdienu namu biedrības statūti, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.4, 12.

⁶⁴ An den löbl. Joint Distribution Committee, Berlin, 26 June 1930, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.5, 88-93; 89-90.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Mitikn aun portziyes far 1925 yar, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.4, 104.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Tzal vun mitikn aun portziyes far 1929 yar, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.2, 3.

⁶⁹ Rīgas pilsētas valde, sociālas apgādības nodaļa Rīgas ebreju lētu ēdienu namu biedrībai, 9 November 1933, LVVA F. 3244, A.1, L.9, 57.

⁷⁰ Rīgas biržas bankai, 13 April 1934, LVVA F. 3244, A. 1, L.72, 53.

⁷¹ Stranga, *Kārļa Ulmaņa autoritārā režīma saimnieciskā politika*, 40.

Marštaļu street 18 (around the corner from the synagogue in Peitavas street) in the city center, but food was also handed out to take away for those who were very ill or old.⁷²

Already in the 1920s, the demand for the ELENB services had been higher than the soup kitchen could provide. During the crisis, the number of those in need grew, making it increasingly hard to serve everyone in the existing facilities (Fig. 2).⁷³ Since most of the poor Jews in Riga lived in the suburbs, they requested that the soup kitchen would be closer to their living and working places. The ELENB was located in the old town, which was a long walk from the poor districts like the Moscow Suburb in the East of Riga, where still many Jews lived. There were ideas to get a mobile food van, but for this, the kitchen needed to be enlarged to prepare more meals.⁷⁴ The ELENB bought the neighboring house in Marštaļu street to gain a bigger kitchen and larger rooms to provide food, but was not able to pay the whole price for the building. ELENB officials asked the JOINT for support of 15,000 \$,⁷⁵ but the JOINT refused.⁷⁶ There were other difficulties. The house on Marštaļu street housed not only the soup kitchen and its facilities, but also some shops. During the crisis, some of them could not afford the rent anymore which meant financial losses for the ELENB.⁷⁷

Next to support from large international organizations, the ELENB depended on donations from private persons and receiving products in reduced prices from companies.⁷⁸ The ELENB officials also tried to collect donations from non-

⁷² C.H. Birman, letter to the ELENB, 29 November 1929, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.5, 30, Mitikn aun portziyes far 1925 yar, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.4, 104.

⁷³ Rīgas ebreju lētu ēdienu namu biedrības sapulces protokols, 24 April 1924, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.4, 87. Data for chart retrieved from: mitikn aun portziyes far 1925 yar, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.4, 104, tsal vun mitikn aun portsiyes far 1932 yar, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.4, 49, tsal vun mitikn aun portsiyes far 1928 yar, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.4, 38, tsal vun mitikn aun portziyes far 1929 yar, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.2, 3. Information for later years could not yet be retrieved from the archive.

⁷⁴ An den löbl. Joint Distribution Committee, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.5, 88-93; 90.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 92.

⁷⁶ American Joint Distribution Committee, European Executive Office Berlin-Charlottenburg an den Verein jüdischer billiger Speisehäuser, 1 July 1930, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.5, 87.

⁷⁷ Linde un Šolomovič Modes un siku preču tirgotava an die Verwaltung Rigascher jüdischer Volksküche, 7 August 1930, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.5, 86.

⁷⁸ Rīgas ebreju draudzes valde, letter to Dr. med. J. Feiertag, 8 December 1935, Rīgas ebreju draudzes valde, letter to Dr. med. O. Press, 8 December 1935, LVVA F.5237, A.1, L.52, 22.

Jewish organizations and banks⁷⁹ as they also provided food and support to non-Jews.⁸⁰ Furthermore, theatre plays were organized in order to collect money.⁸¹ Every Santim was bitterly needed: in 1933, there was an outcry that the ELENB would have to close if there would not be more social support soon.⁸² It was then when its board turned to the Riga City Council. Emphasizing that the Association provided food to all in need beyond religion and nationality, the ELENB board described why they asked for help of the city for the first time: due to the crisis, there were not only more mouths to feed, but fewer hands giving donations.⁸³ While the available sources do not reflect whether the Council agreed, in other occasions the Jewish community had managed to receive financial aid or tax breaks from the government.⁸⁴ The City Council also included the soup kitchen of the Jewish society within their system of food ration coupons.⁸⁵

The lack of food and inability to serve all those in need was potentially the reason for violence as well. In January 1932, the ELENB and a Jewish bakery became targets of a mob of unemployed Jewish youngsters who raided the city. According to the Jewish Telegraph Agency, they were incited by local communists and the police arrested several of the rioters. The paper reported that violent outbursts became a frequent phenomenon at the time, but no other sources have so far been located to verify this.⁸⁶

⁷⁹ ELENB Rīgas biržas bankai 25 April 1934, LVVA F.3244, A. 1, L. 72, 52.

⁸⁰ An die Verwaltung (Entwurf), 11 October 1933, LVVA F.3244, A. 1, L.9, 24.

⁸¹ Protokoll der Kommissionssitzung zur Veranstaltung einer Theatervorstellung vom 19. Februar 1933, LVVA F. 3244, A. 1, L. 36, 2.

⁸² “Di bilike iydishe kikh vet zikh getzungen optzushteln ir tetikeyt, oyb di gezelshaft vet ir nit kumen tzu hilf,” *Avnt-Post*, September 28, 1933, “Iydishe Folks-kikhe hoybt an a gelt-zamlung af zaml-boigns,” *Frimorgn*, September 28, 1933.

⁸³ The ELENB asked for 6000 Lts., Rīgas Pilsētas Valdei, 8 November 1933, LVVA F. 3244, A. 1, L. 72, 44-45.

⁸⁴ Finanšu Ministrija, muitas departments tarifa nodaļa, Rīgas ebreju draudzes valdei, January 31, 1933, LVVA F.5237, A.1, L.51, 27.

⁸⁵ Rīgas Pilsētas Valde, sociālās apgādības nodaļa, ‘Rīgas ebreju lētu ēdienu namu biedrībai’, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.9, 51.

⁸⁶ “Jewish Unemployed in Riga Create Disturbances. Provoked by Communists. Large Number of Young Jews Arrested,” *J.T.A. Bulletin*, January 18, 1932.

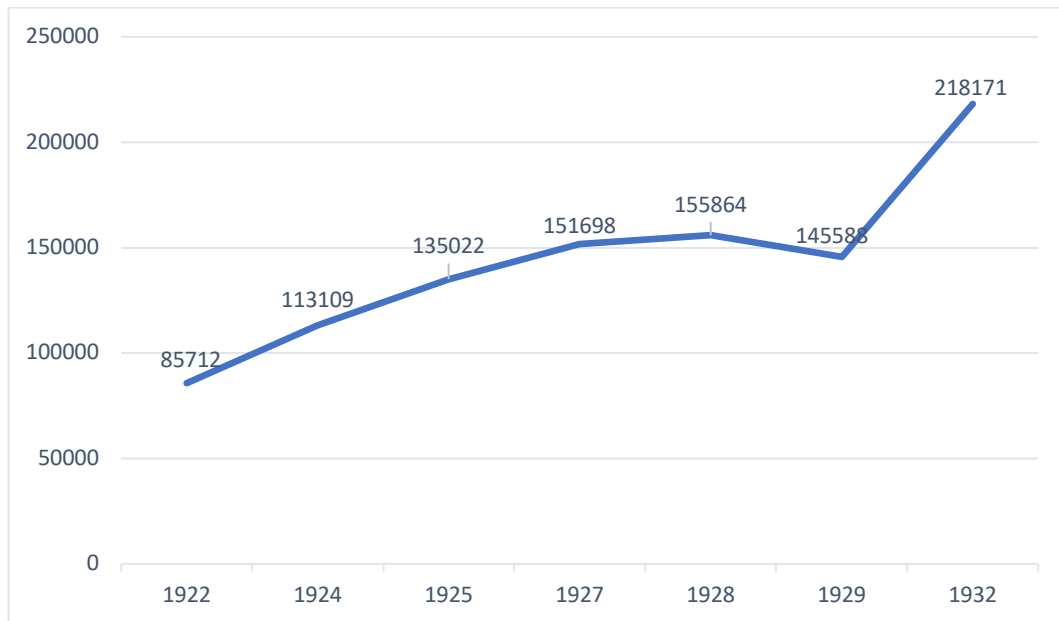


Fig. 2. Lunches provided by the ELENB

Based on the accessible sources it is not possible to say whether aid for the poor was a frequent phenomenon all over Latvia, but newspaper articles from individual communities reflect that meal services were also provided in the countryside. In December 1931, in the city of Ludza in the Eastern province Latgale, the city set up the Ludzas komiteja palīdzības sniegšanai trūcīgiem bērniem un pilsoņiem (Ludza Committee for Providing Assistance to Children and Citizens in Need).⁸⁷ Money came from the state, organizations and private donations not only from wealthy citizens, but was also collected at work places such as schools, the post office, even in the local prison. The committee provided food for children of unemployed or poor families, apparently 25% or 440 of the children in Ludza, 90 among them Jewish. From December 1931 to May 1932, the committee gave out 36,616 lunches, among them 11,437 to Jewish children, for 13 Santims each. The local newspaper reported that the Jews prepared the meals separately. Each child received 200 grams of bread and 80 grams of meat. They could take one-liter soup home—Ludza was located in the rural area of Latgale

⁸⁷ “Kā darbojusies Ludzas komiteja palīdzības sniegšanai trūcīgiem bērniem un pilsoņiem,” *Latgales Ziņas*, July 1, 1932.

and many children lived far away—or eat as much of it as they wanted at the canteen.

The canteen was run by the local women's committee and financed by the state.⁸⁸ This reveals that not only the state attempted to feed the poor, but also parts of civil society. The cooperation of Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors reflects a united effort beyond ethnic borders. At the same time, skepticism emerged. A newspaper noted that it was too easy to get the food: "In fact, there are quite a few parents here in Ludza who are not so poor at all [...] you only need to pretend to be unemployed, and the children have lunch in hand."⁸⁹ While this accuse was directed against all of those eating the cheap meals, there were also notions of antisemitism: in April 1933 contaminated meat was found in the soup kitchen. The local newspaper emphasized that the meat had come from a Jewish provider named Kaplan.⁹⁰

Individual Reactions: Mordehai Dubin

The Republic of Latvia provided its minorities with equal rights and cultural autonomy. Representatives of different ethnic groups participated in political parties and were members of parliament. With a share of about 5% of members in parliament, Latvia's Jewish community was represented proportionally to their share in the population.⁹¹ Some of the Jewish MPs did not align in a "Jewish party," but served parties like the Social Democrats.⁹² Then there were Jewish parties representing Zionism in its various shades, the Bund and the orthodox Agudas Israel, which was the strongest Jewish party in parliament during the Republican period. This was not because most Jews in Latvia were orthodox, but mostly came down to the extreme popularity of Agudas' leader, Mordehai Dubin.⁹³ Dubin was known for his strong aspirations to help Latvia's Jews in

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ "Ludzā viena ceturtdā daļa no visiem bērniem saņemts siltas pusdienas," *Latgales Ziņas*, January 20, 1933.

⁹⁰ "Vārds prokuratūrai," *Latgales Ziņas*, 28 April 1933, no.17.

⁹¹ Mendel Bobe, "Four Hundred Years of the Jews in Latvia. A Historical Survey," in *The Jews in Latvia*, ed. Bobe (Tel Aviv: Association of Latvian and Estonian Jews in Israel, 1971), 59.

⁹² Ibid., 62.

⁹³ Ibid., 83.

need and he frequently used his societal standing to do so. During the crisis, Dubin signed several requests to the University of Latvia to release individual Jewish students who found themselves “in difficult material circumstances” from paying fees.⁹⁴ In the Saeima (the Latvian Parliament), Dubin argued that Jews were particularly suffering because employers would prefer Latvian workers over Jews, and he warned that if the government was not to support the Jewish unemployed, these would turn towards revolutionary ideas.⁹⁵

Dubin also fought for the preservation of the Jewish School of Agriculture. The school had been established in the late 1920s and had ties to Zionist-socialist organizations. In two years, students worked on the school’s dairy production, in its orchards and fields. The school was run by the Jewish Association of Education and co-financed by the Ministry of Agriculture.⁹⁶ In a session of the Saeima in March 1932, members of parliament Jānis Šterns of the *Progresīvā apvienība* (Progressive Association) which despite its name represented conservative ideas, together with the leader of the centrist *Demokrātiskais centrs* (Democratic Centre) party Jānis Breikšs, demanded the withdrawal of financial support for the school. If Jews wanted to learn about agriculture, so Breikšs, they could attend Latvian schools. Thereupon Dubin criticized the hypocrisy to accuse Jews of only working in trade and then not supporting their agricultural school.⁹⁷ He was not successful; the Saeima decided to withdraw the support and the school closed at the end of the year.⁹⁸

Mordehai Dubin is an example that despite being a heterogeneous community, Latvia’s Jews showed a sense of unity, and some of their leaders stood up for them irrespective of political, religious or linguistic differences. Dubin’s “readiness to help people irrespective of party”⁹⁹ was not the only feature making him increasingly popular among Latvia’s Jews. He also had a friendly relationship to Kārlis Ulmanis, a feature that became essential after the coup in 1934. Ulmanis

⁹⁴ Mordehai Dubin, letters to the University of Latvia, January 1933, LVVA F.5237, A.1, L.51, 12-14.

⁹⁵ “Debatten zum Wohlfahrts- und Heeresetat,” *Rigasche Rundschau*, June 16, 1932.

⁹⁶ “Der jüdische Bildungsverein,” *Rigasche Rundschau*, March 13, 1931.

⁹⁷ “Der Etat des Landwirtschaftsministeriums,” *Rigasche Rundschau*, March 11, 1932.

⁹⁸ The Jewish Educational Association started to give courses as a substitute, “Liquidation der jüdischen landwirtschaftlichen Schule,” *Libausche Zeitung*, November 25, 1932.

⁹⁹ S. Levenberg, “Introduction,” in *The Jews in Latvia*, ed. Bobe, 17.

banned all parties and repressed Jewish cultural and political life, but allowed Agudas Israel to continue its activities.

The crisis after the crisis. Ulmanis' Nationalist Politics

By 1933, Latvia was slowly beginning to recover from the massive economic disruptions caused by the collapse of the financial system of the USA and Europe. Unemployment rates were continuously shrinking—from 24,000 in 1932 to 10,000 in winter 1933—with agricultural and industrial production increasing their volume again.¹⁰⁰ This did not mean that the hardship was over. Living standards and salaries had fallen drastically in the previous two years, with some workers receiving half of their earnings of 1929, and still in 1934 a change was not to be seen, while prices were still skyrocketing. Latvia was said to be among the countries with the widest gap of income and expenses. The government continued to control and tax the import market, a protectionism that led to even higher prices at home.¹⁰¹

And yet, historian Dov Levin wrote in his standard work *Jewish History in Latvia* that “significant deterioration of the economic situation of Latvian Jews began with the 1934 coup”¹⁰² and not with the Great Depression—which he did not mention in the book. As noted above, also other historians emphasize the coups’ negative economic impacts on the Jewish community, and they agree that the main reason was Ulmanis’ “Latvianization” politics. The sources documenting the history of the aforementioned institutions and individuals suggest this, too.

Nationalization

A major pillar of Ulmanis’ ideology was that of cooperatives and nationalization. Legislations were introduced, allowing increased direct control of government’s agents in the cooperatives. In 1935, private credit cooperative unions—among

¹⁰⁰ Stranga, *Kārļa Ulmaņa saimnieciskā politika*, 39.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 40-42.

¹⁰² Dov Levin, *Ebreju vēsture Latvijā: no apmēšanās sākumiem līdz mūsu dienām* (Jerusalem: Ievads, Yad Vashem, 1988), 57.

them also the Jewish Credit Cooperative Union—lost their right to conduct audits in their cooperatives and their rights were transferred to the National Bank of Latvia.¹⁰³ This meant the end of activities for various unions. The measure did not single out Jewish unions, but is an example that Ulmanis favored nationalization and the creation of fewer, state controlled enterprises over a variety of different actors on the economic stage. In 1936 Ulmanis introduced a law which legalized to subsidize large cooperatives over small ones, leading already struggling smaller enterprises into bankruptcy. The newly established large cooperatives were provided with monopoly rights. Due to the historically grown composition of the economic sector, these corporatist ideas inevitably merged with ethnic divisions: taking over areas like export and parts of the textile industry, the cooperatives superseded businesses formerly owned by Jews. Furthermore, increased production led to a shortage of laborers in the industrial sector and a drain towards the cities from the countryside.¹⁰⁴ Thereby, Jewish workers in the city met increased numbers of non-Jewish competitors from the countryside.

Ulmanis introduced a so-called permits system which indirectly forced non-Latvian business owners to sell their property to Latvians or to the state.¹⁰⁵ Officially not antisemitic, in reality, these laws and restrictions favored those who were considered ethnic Latvians: non-Latvians had to cooperate with Latvian partners to keep their businesses. The owners were practically forced out of decision-making posts, or their businesses were confiscated altogether.¹⁰⁶

It was due to this remaining difficult situation that the AJRF council decided in December 1934 to grant the Latvian Jewish credit cooperatives a loan of 30,000 Lats.¹⁰⁷ The Jewish credit cooperative decided to continue within the legal boundaries, first and foremost keeping contact with the American Relief Foundation in order to secure funding from abroad.¹⁰⁸ The balance of the Jewish

¹⁰³ “Latvijas Tautas Bankas ziņojumi,” *Kooperatīvais Kredīts*, July 1, 1935.

¹⁰⁴ Stranga, *Kārļa Ulmaņa autoritārā režīma saimnieciskā politika*, 501.

¹⁰⁵ Bobe, “Four Hundred Years of the Jews in Latvia,” 72.

¹⁰⁶ “Report of Activities of the HJCEM,” Paris, June 6, 1932, LVVA F.5370, A.1, L.6, 276-296.

¹⁰⁷ Protokoll der am 16.12.1934 in Paris abgehaltenen Sitzung des Councils der AJRF, LVVA F.7156, A.1, L. 3, 2.

¹⁰⁸ Pārskats par žīdu kreditkooperatīvu savienības 1935/36 g. darbību, (n.d.), LVVA F.6549, A.1, L.1, 9-10.

credit cooperative Union reflects how the authoritarian government's laws impacted businesses which had not fully recovered from the crisis (Fig. 3).

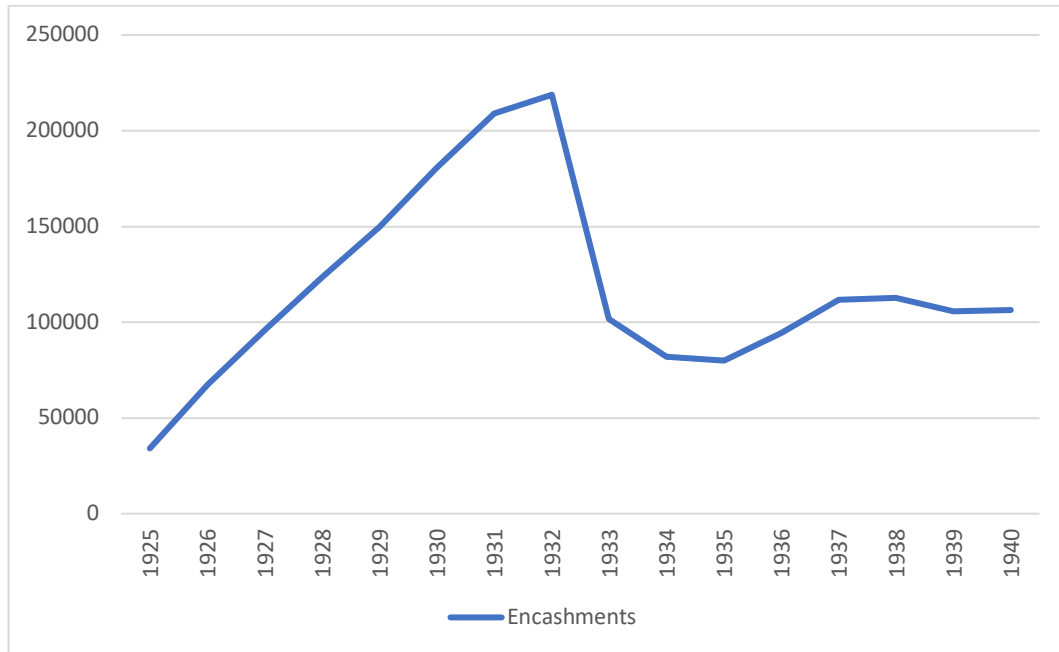


Fig. 3. Balance of the Jewish credit cooperative Union: Encashments

Open Antisemitism

The Latvianization of the economy was part of a program to homogenize the Latvian people and to gradually obliterate ethnic minorities. The fate of the ELENB reflects this. Since the economic situation in Latvia was still challenging for all citizens,¹⁰⁹ the ELENB continued to provide poor inhabitants of Riga with food. According to a letter written to a donor in 1937, they gave out on average 4,000 meals a month that year.¹¹⁰ They continued to be dependent on, and receive, donations from various institutions and enterprises.¹¹¹ And while

¹⁰⁹ Soup kitchens apparently continued to operate all over the country; “400 bērnu saņem siltas pusdienas,” *Latgales Vēstnesis*, January 4, 1937.

¹¹⁰ Rīgas ebreju lētu ēdienu namu biedrība, 17 December 1937, LVVA F.F.3244, A.I, L.72, 157.

¹¹¹ Rīgas ebreju lētu ēdienu namu biedrība, Rīgas Biržas Banka I, May 19, 1938, LVVA F.F.3244, A.I, L.72, lp.127, Rīgas ebreju draudzes valde, letter to Dr. med. J. Feiertag, December 8, 1935, LVVA

continuing to care for the poorest of society, the ELENB faced bullying from the government. In 1936, the Ministry of Interior demanded that the association removed the Yiddish lettering on the front of its building.¹¹² The ELENB refused to do so.¹¹³ In 1939, the Association changed the word *ebreju* in its title (Rīgas ebreju lētu ēdienu namu biedrība) to *žīdu*.¹¹⁴ The term *žīds* was rarely used by Jews as a self-description and leftists also preferred the word *ebrejs*, while fascists, nationalists as well as those considering themselves centrist used the term *žīds*. It can therefore be considered that the change of the name was not the result of Jewish demands. Despite the challenges, the association continued to operate until the Soviet regime closed it in November 1940.¹¹⁵

The demand to remove non-Latvian letters from public spaces stands in line with the government's re-naming of streets as an embodiment of Latvianization politics, as was the forced homogenization of the Jewish community. Ulmanis supported Jewish emigration, as he wanted the Jews to leave Latvia, but repressed Zionist organized activity as well as leftist Bund circles. He only cooperated with Dubin and Agudas Israel, as became obvious in the reform of the school system. Ulmanis de facto withdrew autonomy of minority schools, except for those under influence of Agudas Israel. This increased the influence of conservative, more religious ideas. Since Agudas Israel had never had majority among Jews, many parents sent their kids to Latvian schools instead, a step towards obliteration of Jewish language and culture.¹¹⁶

Latvianization politics as those mentioned above challenged all minorities in Latvia. Yet in some respect, Jews were singled out. While historians disagreed for a long time whether the Ulmanis regime can be considered antisemitic, Aivars Stranga provided evidence that latest in spring 1939, Ulmanis considered to introduce the first explicitly anti-Jewish law, a regulation for non-Jewish servants

F.5237, A.1, L.52, p.21, Rīgas ebreju draudzes valde, letter to Dr. med. O. Press, December 8, 1935, LVVA F.5237, A.1, L.52, 22.

¹¹² The ELENB refused, arguing that the lettering was hardly visible and there were no appropriate workers to remove it; Iekšlietu Ministrijā preses nodaļai, October 26, 1926, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L.72, 98.

¹¹³ Preses un biedrību nodaļa, Rīgas ebreju lētu ēdienu namu biedrībai, April 8, 1937, LVVA F.3244, A.1, L. 72, 122.

¹¹⁴ "Preses un biedrību depart. biedrību nodaļa," *Valdības Vēstnesis*, March 25, 1939.

¹¹⁵ "3459. LĒMUMS," *Vedomosti prezidijuma verxnogo soveta LSSR*, November 20, 1940.

¹¹⁶ Stranga, "Kārļa Ulmaņa režīms."

in Jewish households. Public campaigns started, openly incriminating Jewish employers of non-Jewish servants.¹¹⁷ The law was never introduced because Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union shortly after. Nevertheless, Stranga's finding is essential not only to prove Ulmanis' willingness to single out Jews within the minority groups. The fact that he would have started with a law with little economic impact but embodying the "concern" of "racial purity," reveals expressions of Völkisch ideas.

The regime was not the only agent in antisemitic attacks. Although banned by the government, members of the fascist Pērkonkrusts (Thunder Cross) party which was gaining momentum since the early 1930s openly harassed and physically attacked Jews, and the majority society either openly supported or ignored them.¹¹⁸ The fascist organization was founded (initially under the name Ugunskrusts (Fire Cross) in 1932, in the midst of the economic crisis, yet it is noteworthy that while the fascists constantly attacked Jews as "racial threats," "vermin," and "Bolsheviks," accusations against Jews as initiators of benefactors of the economic crisis were not frequent in their propaganda.

Facing social and cultural isolation and increasing economic pressure, more Jews decided to emigrate. Already during the crisis, some manufacturers had decided to move their businesses abroad. The best known example is the Laima confectionary business. The most popular chocolate in Latvia, founded by a group of foremost Jewish entrepreneurs, was nationalized in 1936. Two of its owners moved to Palestine already in 1933 and continued to operate a confectionary factory there.¹¹⁹ Also less wealthy businessmen eventually gave up because they could not compete with the large and subsidized cooperatives, a development again reflected in oral

¹¹⁷ Aivars Stranga, "Darba Centrāles darbība 1939.–1940. gadā," *Latvijas Universitātes Žurnāls. Vēsture* 1, no. 96 (2016): 31.

¹¹⁸ Paula Oppermann, "More than a Means to an End: Perkonkrusts's Antisemitism and Attacks on Democracy, 1932-1934," in *Defining Latvia: Recent Explorations in History, Culture, and Politics*, eds. Michael Loader, Siobhán Hearne, and Matthew Kott (Budapest-Vienna-New York: Central European University Press, 2022), 83-104.

¹¹⁹ Katja Wetzel, "Laima Chocolate - a Riga Icon. Latvia's Most Famous Confectioner and Its Jewish Origins," *Copernico. History and Cultural Heritage in Eastern Europe*, December 15, 2022. Accessed January 14, 2024, <https://www.copernico.eu/en/articles/laima-chocolate-riga-icon-latvias-most-famous-confectioner-and-its-jewish-origins>.

history interviews with survivors of the Shoah from Latvia.¹²⁰ Thus, while emigration had not been an option for many Jews from Latvia during the crisis years,¹²¹ now merchants and factory owners who could left the country.¹²²

Conclusion

This article analyzed formerly unused sources to investigate how the Great Depression effected the Jews in Latvia and whether the challenges they faced differed from those of their non-Jewish neighbors. It revealed that due to the socio-economic structure resulting from pre-modern antisemitic politics of the Tsarist Empire as much as from Völkisch nationalist aspirations common in Europe after World War I, Jews in Latvia were particularly affected because they were overtly represented within the sectors hit mostly by the crisis.

The article also aimed to investigate how Jews in Latvia reacted to the economic hardship they were facing. Based on examples of collective as well as individual efforts of aid-giving, the chapter illustrated that although Jews in Latvia were linguistically, politically and culturally heterogeneous, they confronted the crisis with united efforts. These efforts were rooted in civil society and were sometimes also organized beyond ethnic borders. At the same time, right-wing politicians took advantage of the crisis and applied existing stereotypes to polarize public opinion against the Jews. The radical right increasingly divided Latvian society, and Kārlis Ulmanis justified his coup d'état as a measure against the growing impact of fascism. The authoritarian regime which he then established was, however, racist and antisemitic in itself, a feature that impacted also his economic politics. Ulmanis' measures implemented to foster economic consolidation excluded Jews and as a result, their situation sometimes turned out to be worse than at the peak of the actual crisis.

¹²⁰ Julius Misle, interview by Ben Nachman, January 8, 1997, interview 24506, Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation. Accessed November 22, 2023, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/24506?from=search&seg=9>, Segment 12-13.

¹²¹ Report of Activities of the HJCEM, LVVA F.5370, A.1, L.6, 281.

¹²² Levin, *Ebreju vēsture Latvijā*, 57.

Paula Oppermann's research focusses on the history of fascism and antisemitism, the Holocaust and its commemoration in Latvia and Germany. She is currently a researcher at the Historical Commission Berlin working on the project "The Berlin Gestapo Reports 1933-1936. A Source Edition." She previously worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and as a curator at the Topography of Terror Documentation Centre. She studied History and Baltic Languages at the University of Greifswald and Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Uppsala University. She received her PhD at the University of Glasgow with a thesis about Latvia's fascist and antisemitic party Pērkonkrusts (Thunder Cross) which was awarded the Fritz Theodor Epstein Prize and the George L. Mosse First Book Prize. She presented her research at international conferences, was a Saul Kagan Fellow, and received fellowships at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute and the Institute for Contemporary History Munich.

Keywords: Charity organizations, Antisemitism, Protectionism, Oral history, JOINT

How to quote this article:

Paula Oppermann, "The World Economic Crisis. Jewish Experiences and Responses in Latvia," in "Jewish Experiences during the Great Depression in East Central Europe (1929-1934)," eds. Klaus Richter and Ulrich Wyrwa, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 26, no. 2 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15647